



Loving  
the  
Beast

*The*  
BEAST *of*  
CORNWALL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

**THE  
BEAST OF  
CORNWALL**

A BEAST'S LOVE  
BOOK I

*by*  
*Eva Devon*

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The Beast of Cornwall

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My family is my greatest gift. My sons and  
Mr. D sustain me through it all.

Christy and Louisa, thank you so very much.  
There aren't enough words to express my  
gratitude.

Cindy, thank you too!

Finally, for my light, my mom and dad, and  
Nancy who are always with me.

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## CHAPTER I

Cornwall

Lord Gabriel Morrowby, second son of the Duke of Wrathborne, descended into the mineshaft with his guide, Thomas Baker.

The darkness consumed them.

Only special lamps designed to light the way combated the shadows. Gabriel felt as if he was being swallowed up by the earth, though it was no loving mother's embrace.

No, this felt like something out of the pits of hell or the darkest stories in ancient tales of the abysses of the earth. At any moment, the boyhood part of him, raised on Greek myths, half expected some creature to come out and snatch him up and eat him.

But men had been going down the mines here in this part of the world for some time without being killed by strange beasts. No, the mines did a good enough job of that on their own, as did the avaricious men who sent them down. Down, down into the dank, dark earth—into the pits of it all to mine ore. To mine wealth for the masters up above.

He was, himself, for all intents and purposes, a master. He was the son of one of the greatest masters in the world, and he wanted to know *why*. What made his family powerful whilst others languished.

He wanted to know where the source of his wealth came from. The very thing which gave him the clothes on his back, the food at his table, the coach his father insisted he travel in, and his stallion, which was his pride and joy.

For Gabriel's life was a privileged one. Every bit of it was touched by wealth and ease. He had servants aplenty, and he'd been to the best schools. His mother was beautiful. Young

ladies of excellent lineage were lined up, longing for him to ask for their hand in marriage.

His life was for all intents and purposes ideal. He had been born to greatness and yet he could not shake the gnawing, intense feeling that something was greatly amiss. That all he had been given was like a house in which damp had got in. Beautiful on the outside but rotting within.

A rot that could no longer be ignored and would, one day, show him the truth of his existence.

It had bothered him a great deal, wondering where his wealth came from until, at last, he had demanded of his father that he should have the right to go down in the mines and see the history of their family's work.

He had done everything he could to make it sound as if he simply wanted to go and see the places where the earth's treasures were pulled up from below.

His father had been proud of him.

After all, the mines were essential to the family's power. His father, the duke, had made it clear that Gabriel should not dirty himself with low labor or stay down for long.

Mines were dangerous places.

Even his father knew that.

Gabriel did not think his father had ever been to one of the mines. His brother, the heir apparent to the dukedom, had not either, even though this was where the source of their power came from. That, of course, and the long-ago title bestowed upon the family by the king.

Now, as he felt himself going lower into the earth, accompanied by a brave, sooty-faced man who was strangely kind to him, he wondered at the price paid for his life. For his family's way of life.

The men of the mines were hard-looking. Some were younger than him, and yet they looked almost twice his age.

Was that what happened when one spent most of one's life belowground in the dark?

He wondered.

He wondered at the price paid for the profits seen up above. Because, he understood now, it wasn't just men who went down into the pits of the earth. It was also women and children.

For some of the tunnels were quite small and only children could get the wagons to go along, to pick up the treasures and take them out.

Gabriel's stomach twisted, and he turned to Tom Baker, an experienced miner. His lantern light was wavering as drifts of air came to and fro in the long tunnel.

"What do you think of it, my lord?" Tom inquired.

"It is a marvel," he said honestly, though it was a dismaying marvel. "How do you do it every day?"

Tom's brow furrowed. "I don't know, my lord. I've been doing it since I was four years old. I don't think on it really. It's as natural to me as mother's milk once was."

"I see," Gabriel breathed, his gaze traveling over the rough-hewn tunnel, shored up in places with wood framework. And if he was honest, he *couldn't* truly see, but he understood that Tom knew this life so well that he didn't consider it odd.

But Gabriel? Bloody hell, Gabriel felt... He could not put it into words.

When he turned down the next corridor, as they pressed along the damp rocks and the tight way, he felt as if he was being compressed and constricted. His mind was playing with him, filling him with fears of suffocation. Of entombment.

The tunnel was small and growing narrower as they progressed.

Gabriel swallowed.

"You all right, my lord?" Baker asked him patiently.



“I have never been anyplace so confining,” he admitted as he dug his fingers into his palms.

“Take a breath,” Baker suggested kindly. “We don’t want you to lose your wits down here.”

“Do people lose their wits?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Baker replied. “Some can’t handle it. The dark does something to them and the tight space... And of course there’s always the fear of a collapse.”

“A collapse,” he echoed.

Baker nodded as he lifted his lamp and the golden glow glistened along the damp walls. “Yes, the tunnel coming down.”

A shiver ran through him. “Does it happen often?”

Baker frowned. “More than any of us would like. You never know when it might happen. I mean, everyone’s got their day, don’t they?” Baker shrugged. “I could be killed up top in a storm if I was a seaman. Really, it’s not different...”

But there was an edge to Baker’s voice, belying his words. A muscle tightened in the man’s jaw before he added, “We try not to let ourselves think about it too much.”

Gabriel gave a tight nod. Death was a consistent fellow, in that he came whenever he felt like it. No one could escape that hand. Still, this seemed far riskier than it should be. He looked at the beams propping up the tunnels. They looked, well, far from strong enough.

“What do you need to do a better job?” he asked.

“Shorter hours,” Baker said with a laugh. “Except the lads need money. So nobody wants to work shorter hours. When we get tired, things get tricky. We make bad decisions. Nobody wants to admit it, of course, but it’s the truth, my lord. And of course, sometimes the conditions in the tunnel...” He paused as if searching for diplomatic words. “They get a bit run down. Nobody wants to pause to make fixes because if you must take time to make fixes, you’re not mining, are you?”

And then the profits slow down, and the masters up top... Well, they don't like that, do they?"

"No," Gabriel replied softly, a strange feeling snaking through him. "I imagine that they don't. But surely long-term productivity is better if we make repairs."

"People aren't really concerned with what's ahead too much," Baker said with resignation. "That's what I find. They just think about right now, really. The wealth they can get, the treasure they can get. That's the masters. And for the workers? The next pint of ale at the public house. A pretty girl. That's all they can afford to think on. Though some of the lads, of course, they've got quite a few children, and they can only think of feeding their babies. Pay packets matter."

"Thank you for your observations." And he was grateful.

Within his life, he'd never had to suffer. He'd never had to make certain that children were fed. And he never would. Even if his father were to cast him out, he was going to inherit his mother's fortune. A vast sum from her family's farms. He was indeed privileged, but Baker somehow seemed more self-assured than him.

"Do you not find this all strange?" he asked bluntly.

"What do you mean, my lord?" Baker gave him a patient smile. "It's the way it's always been. There's them that have and them that don't. Usually, nothing about those groups changes. And that's the truth."

He nodded, realizing that pushing harder might not actually be a kindness to Tom, not if real change wasn't possible. So, he changed his line of questioning. "Are you one who is looking for a pretty lass or are you..."

"Oh no." Baker laughed. "I've got my brother that I need to look after. You see, our father died in a mining shaft accident some years ago. And our mother, well, her lungs weren't very good. She died of the damp, you see. Our cottage is not very well repaired—" Baker's eyes rounded with alarm. "Oh, I'm sorry, my lord. I didn't mean to—"

“Your cottage is on our land, isn’t it?” he asked Baker, his throat tightening.

“Yes, my lord, it is,” Baker allowed. “We asked, of course, for the roof to be patched, but the land agent... Well, he wasn’t overly keen on it.”

Gabriel suddenly felt stunned by this opportunity to speak to people. Real people. People who lived on his land. Well, not *his* land, but his father’s land, and one day his brother’s land. He was finding out what their lives were like.

It was coming as an onslaught. He wondered why Baker felt he could tell him these things, but of course he was the first lord to show any interest in any of them. Perhaps that was why.

“I’ll have a word with my father,” he said firmly. “That’s not right. You’re paying rent. You should be able to live soundly.”

“Thank you,” Baker said and pulled his forelock. “Means a great deal, it does, my lord. My little brother will be coming down in the mines soon, and a warm home would be most welcome.”

“How old is he?” Gabriel asked.

“Barely six,” Baker replied factually. “He should have come down a year ago, but what with the death of my father, we thought it’d be kinder to let him have a pause. He’s at the village school doing his best, but we won’t be able to afford the lack of wages much longer. He needs to come down. Besides it’s his birthright, this place.”

“The tunnels?” Gabriel asked, feeling sick.

“Indeed. All the men in my family? This is where we work.”

He nodded, unable to reply.

It was quite a statement. And he contemplated the idea of darkness and tunnels being one’s birthright, instead of mansions and manors and land and horses.

He stared at the young man who'd brought him down and said sincerely, "Thank you for showing me all this. It's important for me to understand."

Baker inclined his head, though his expression was more grim than it had been. "I don't know if you'll ever understand, my lord, though I can see you want to."

A rumble filled the air. Baker's eyes suddenly widened. "My lord, is it possible that you are bad luck?"

"What do you mean?" he queried.

But before another word could be spoken, there was a groan in the earth as if it was old, and sighing, and giving up its last creak of pain.

Baker grabbed him. "Run, my lord! Run back towards the central shaft."

They began running quickly, stumbling over rocks and damp traces of earth. But then the beams Gabriel had noticed that were cracked began to shift. And just as they hit the central mine shaft, the place where they could be pulled up again to the daylight above them, darkness came.

Rocks thundered down, and the tunnel imploded.

A scream of agony tore through Gabriel as he felt his flesh rend and his bones break.

Baker's hand grabbed for him, but he lost sight of it in the darkness and the whirl of dust.

Baker let out a scream of pain.

Dirt and grit filled Gabriel's mouth and eyes and nose. For a moment, he could not breathe.

After what seemed like an age, the rocks settled, and he realized that the lantern had gone out.

He called, "Tom, are you there?"

"Aye, my lord." But the voice was faint. "Something's got me," he said. "It's on my chest. I can feel it. It's far too heavy."

“You just need to hold on,” he insisted, even as dread clawed at him. “Someone will come for us.”

The pain ripping through his own body was unbelievable. He could barely speak. White flashed before his eyes, and he could feel his bones shifting underneath the rocks.

“I don’t think so, my lord. Not in time... Not for me,” Tom whispered. “Will you look after my brother? I don’t think I will be able to anymore.”

“No, Tom,” he said firmly. “*You* will look after him. I’ll ensure it. Don’t you dare—”

“It’s all right, my lord. Death comes when it wants. You can’t fight him.”

“I’m going to fight him,” Gabriel gritted as he willed Tom to live and death to stay back. “I’m going to fight him every day.”

“You’ll lose, my lord,” Baker murmured. “We always do. In the end.”

“Maybe so,” Gabriel countered, wishing he could reach out to take Tom’s hand. But the man was separated by rubble, and neither of them seemed able to move. “But we can live a damn fine life while trying.”

“You do that then, my lord,” Baker rasped. “For me too. Live a fine life for me.”

Much to his shock, hot tears slid down Gabriel’s face. He had not cried since he was a small boy. But with Tom slipping away, his voice growing ever fainter here in the darkness, Gabriel knew he would never be able to look at his house the same way again. He’d never ride his stallion the same way again. He would never be able eat food off his father’s golden plates again.

Because the price for all of it was this.

The price for all of it was death.

## CHAPTER 2

Seven Years Later

Wales

*H*eather Meadows was lonely.

She stood at the window of her cottage in Snowdonia, looking out on the beautiful mountains of Wales that had once given her such joy. Now, she felt such a bitter ache that she could hardly bear it.

She was not yet thirty years of age, but somehow she felt old. Alone with the candlelight flickering, the fire banked, the cold coming in, her loneliness grew, threatening to swallow her whole.

Dark night had taken the land already, and the blue light of the moon danced over the landscape.

She did not know what she was going to do with all her hours, and every hour stretched and stretched beyond measure. Especially in winter.

Once her life had been full of joy and the small cottage had been full of laughter, of chatter, of so much love.

She pushed herself back from the window and the bone-chilling cold slipping in through the glass.

Snow was already beginning to fall. Its light, fluffy flakes were hypnotic in the moonlight.

Once, oh, once, how she would have loved to see those flakes coming down. For it would have meant rushing out into the crisp air, with mittens and cloak on, twirling about and sticking out her tongue to try to catch a flake. She had thrown herself into the joys of childhood.

Her son's childhood.

She had eschewed all the staunch rigidity of adulthood because she had wanted her son to be so full of joy. And he had been. Every moment had been joyous. Well, not every moment. Even she knew that was a lie. He had cried, and he had fussed, and he had thrown tantrums. He had cut teeth. There had been many nights where he did not sleep, so she did not sleep.

But oh, how full of joy her life had been.

Now that joy was gone, and she was left with two beautifully appointed, but small, empty rooms downstairs and bedrooms upstairs in which she rattled around like a ball in a box, going back and forth in search of ghosts.

But there were no ghosts.

There were no people either.

Her husband had died serving king and country at war, and then, a year later, a virulent fever had taken her son. Her small, beautiful son. And the agonizing ache of it was all too much to endure. She supposed she could go north to live with her sister. But the very idea of it... Of the pitying looks every day.

No, no. She did not wish to be reminded daily of the grief which tore at her heart, the pain which she was certain she could never overcome. And in truth, there were days that she thought about going out into the snow, into the night of the mountains of Snowdonia, and just allowing herself to lay down and go to sleep in the frigid cold and never get up again.

Her son would hate that.

So would her husband.

And though its whisper called to her, she shoved it aside.

In her mind, she could see her little boy's face urging her on, even though she longed to go and meet him.

But she could not. She had been left here, and she had to believe there was a reason.

She had not been taken by the fever. It had possessed her, but left her alive, whilst it had taken the child that she loved and left him a husk. . . his soul taken.

It seemed completely unfair and unjust. But life was not for justice. She knew that in the very marrow of her bones. But nor could she face the idea of another winter alone in Snowdonia.

Once these hills had been ringing with laughter and joy, snowmen had been built, snowballs thrown, tromping and crunching through the drifting white mounds had taken place. A bliss had filled her heart, and days, and life.

Her son's ruddy cheeks and white breath in the frosty air had filled her days. Oh, how her life had been wonderful. It was but a shallow mockery now.

She supposed she was lucky, for she was not abjectly poor. She had just enough money to get by, even though she had no position. Even so, that amount of money allowed her to live in solitude. And she knew if she continued to live like this, if she continued to live in complete solitude, she would go mad.

Slowly, she trailed her fingertips over the table. A table she had polished already three times this day. She was beginning to do things over and over. The repetitive action of sweeping the floor, tidying up, putting things away that had already been put away, were beginning to lose their power to distract her.

What was she going to do? She did not know. She had no friends. Well, she had largely driven them away. So many people simply no longer knew what to say to her, since her grief was so intense.

As a matter of fact, when she went down to the village, people avoided her. She could not blame them as they scuttled by, their parcels in hand, their gazes shifting to the side.

No one wished to catch her bad luck, or at least that's how it seemed.

But what could she do now?



She had to find some sort of purpose. Once she had been a maid, then a chambermaid, and the assistant to a housekeeper. She had thought that would be her life, and then she had met John, a gardener and a lovely man, and he had taken her away.

They had formed a life here—a wonderful life, a simple life—that had been ripped away from her. And now she could not face it. She turned back to the window where the single candle flame guttered away, tossing its light through the dark. The blue moonlight was transforming to pitch darkness, pierced only by stars.

And oh, how her heart called out for some relief.

Something which would get her through her days.

Her eyes shifted to the newssheet atop the table. There was a section... Perhaps it was the only thing she could do. The only thing which might give her repose.

She had already read the notice.

She opened the newssheet as wide as it would go and flipped to the particular page she had seen.

“Wanted. A housekeeper in Cornwall. Must be capable and able to operate on one’s own. It is a small but significant house. Aside from servants, only two people dwell in it. The main quality sought is an ability to get the management done without too much guidance from the master of the house. Please write to this address forthwith.”

She lifted her gaze. Could that do it? Fill the position of housekeeper? It was what she had thought her life would always be. Perhaps this raising of a family of her own had been the dream, the detour from the path her life had actually meant to take.

She hated to think that of her darling boy, but she could not do this anymore. She could not pay vigil to his bed and the toys by it, the memories. The last thought of his small hand in hers.

Her breath caught in her throat.

No, she could not replay that nightmare over and over, and this house was a living nightmare. Oh, yes, it was true that it was also full of happy memories. But those memories themselves were cutting her to the quick. She needed distraction. She needed to be busy all day, and a household in which she had to ensure that it ran well? That would do it, would it not?

It had to.

She let her hands trail away from the newspaper, crossed to the hall, and then slowly went up the stairs. She felt heavy. She knew she could traipse the hills with ease. She was strong.

But her spirit? Her spirit pulled her down.

She went up those stairs and paused at the doorway of the room her son had claimed. It was filled with all sorts of drawings and little toys he had made from bits and pieces he had found. The bed was made perfectly. A small toy lamb and a wooden horse rested on the pillow. His clothes were still folded in the drawers.

She crossed to the bed and sat down upon it. She curled herself up into a small ball, certain she could still draw in his childish scent.

December was here.

It was the beginning of winter. The darkest of months, the hardest, the cruelest, the one in which death ruled. Yes, she knew that light was supposed to come and that at some point the darkness was supposed to end.

That was the promise of December, wasn't it?

The promise of the season?

And yet she could not see the light.

No light was coming for her. No one was coming to save her. She had to do this herself, for her son, for his memory, for John, who she'd cared about deeply.

And she had to do it now, lest she be lost forever in the cold December snow.

As tears slipped down her face, she crossed to the little desk that she had begun teaching her son his letters at, pulled out a piece of parchment, took up one of the writing implements, and began a note to seek employment.

Seeking the light.

## CHAPTER 3

“Shut the shaft down,” Gabriel growled.

The Duke of Wrathborne pressed his knuckles into the top of his mahogany desk.

“I will not,” he declared. “Father would be appalled at the very idea of doing such a thing. Besides, men like us do not handle such matters of business. It is beneath us.” His brother’s handsome face hardened with disdain. “My God, one might expect to find the dirt of the mines under your nails.”

Gabriel stared at his brother, older only by a year, wondering how the bloody hell the man could have been his friend for so long and suddenly become like this. It was as if when their father died, he had somehow managed to possess his eldest son.

Once upon a time, Roderick had been a good man. At least that’s what Gabriel had been certain of.

Now, as he stared across at the man who was such a spitting image of himself that some people thought they were twins, he wasn’t so certain.

Roderick’s russet hair shone in the morning light. His hard jaw was a chiseled piece of work. His shoulders were broad under perfect tailoring. He was the epitome of a duke. His signet ring winked in the morning light. As he stood at his large desk with papers all over it, Gabriel had to give his brother one thing. At least Roderick spent time in his office. His father left everything to overseers and land agents. Roderick, at least, took direct authority over the lands he all but ruled.

“The mine shaft is dangerous,” Gabriel warned.

“I suppose you should know,” Roderick said, his gaze dropping to Gabriel’s leg.

Gabriel's leg was a mangled thing. He could only get about with a cane, and he seldom left the house he had inherited. But he had hoped that confronting his brother face-to-face might have an effect.

It appeared he was mistaken. And the truth was that since his injury, he did not like to go out in society. He forced society to come to him... When it came at all.

He was, he supposed, quite lucky that he had not lost his limb entirely. But sometimes, lying in his bed at night when the pain was so intense he could scarce manage it, he wished he *had* lost the limb. But as he understood it, even men who had lost limbs felt pain. Pain in a limb long gone. And so he would not think such thoughts, but pain was his constant companion, and so he did what he could to fight against it. To fight to live. To fight for Tom Baker's lost life.

"You are going to have more deaths on this family's hands if you do not stop that mineshaft and make repairs," he stated, his voice low and firm.

"There is no time to make repairs," Roderick countered. "Besides, the overseers say it is working in perfectly good—"

"Cease," he ground out, pounding his cane into the Axminster rug. "They will tell you anything they think you want to hear. Are you a duke or are you a dog?"

"Take it back," his brother gritted, standing straight, the jewel in his cravat winking.

"Take what back?" Gabriel challenged.

"I know you have always wanted to be the duke, and now it kills you that I am, but saying such things will not further your cause," Roderick bit out.

He did not want to be the duke. He never had. But he was envious of his brother's power because that sort of power could create real change.

"Does my big brother feel threatened by his little brother?" Gabriel drawled. "Does he feel hurt feelings because I've said

the truth?”

Roderick’s mouth tightened into a line. “My God, you are a child of a man.”

“A child?” he countered. “You are willing to risk men’s lives and for what? For another carriage? For more silver plates? To impress Lady Daphne, or whatever her name is? No, I think I am the adult. I want to save men’s lives, or to at least put a pause on the work to see if things can be done to prevent children from dying.”

“You sound like a saint,” Roderick countered. “Perhaps we should nominate you.”

“I cannot be a saint. I’d have to be dead,” Gabriel growled.

“Well, the way you’re going, such a thing could happen,” Roderick replied, his voice a gravelly whisper. “I’ve heard what some of the other mine owners think about your sentiments and what you’ve been doing with your writings and meetings at mother’s house. You must cease,” he said. “You must stop writing speeches, Gabriel. You must cease organizing crowds. You’re stirring up trouble.”

“And what is this life for,” Gabriel demanded, “if not to seek justice? If not to do the right thing?”

“That is not what your position is, brother,” Roderick declared, folding his arms across his broad chest. “You are the second son. You are supposed to go off and be a soldier or a vicar.”

Gabriel swallowed. “And isn’t that disgusting? That a soldier is not meant to fight for justice and that a vicar is merely meant to stand at his pulpit, preach the words of the Bible, and do what the man who pays his living allows?” He shook his head with dismay. “That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

Roderick looked away, a muscle tightening in his jaw. “It is simply the way of things.”

“The way of things,” Gabriel echoed. “Can you hear yourself? Do you even remember the books that you used to read? The ideas—”

“Books like that are for children,” Roderick growled, his eyes flashing. “They are for idealists and philosophers. They are not for men who actually run the country.”

“And now you run the country,” Gabriel returned sharply. “And what will you do with it? Will you drive it further into the ground? Will you make the poor poorer? Is that what you’re going to do, brother?”

Roderick stood silent, rigid, unyielding.

Gabriel gripped his cane harder. “I cannot take another moment of this.” He turned to go, but then he paused. “I challenge you, brother. Go down to those mines. See the work there. See the children left behind. See the families ruined by our employment.”

“Not *our* employment,” Roderick replied, his gaze narrowing. “They are in the duke’s employment.” He unfolded his arms and gestured about him. “You have given all of this up. You eschewed it. You have chosen mother’s family home.”

“And damn glad I am too,” Gabriel stated passionately. “At least there’s honor in shearing sheep.”

And there was. He clung to it. In the dark hours of the night, he clung to the hope that there had been honor in his mother’s family and farming. It was the only way he could sleep when the night pressed in.

With that, he took up his cane, pivoted, and strode from his brother’s office.

God, they had once darted over the land together—riding ponies over the moors, swimming in the frothy sea, and reveling in the sunshine that fell on Cornwall for more of the year than most of England ever saw.

How had they lost it all?

He knew, though it gave him no comfort.

They had lost it in the pit of a mine and the death of a man and the crushing of a leg. Gabriel had woken up to reality. His brother was still asleep, living in some sort of dream where there was no pain or consequences for what they did.

But Gabriel understood it now, and he was determined to make a change.

It took him far longer than he liked to climb up into his own simple curricule.

The butler, Hawksforth, helped him up.

Gabriel hated the fact that he needed assistance, but he did.

“Please come back, Master Gabriel,” he said. “We all miss you terribly. You’ll be much happier here. Cook can make your favorite meals.”

“Hawksforth,” he said gently, for the old man had always been kind to him, “I am not a child anymore, and I haven’t been for more than a decade. I’m glad that you wish me here, and I’m glad you feel that this place is my home, but it’s not any longer.”

He lifted his gaze to the towering stone facade built so long ago, a sign of power over all the land. “I wish to have no part of it.”

The butler winced, his white eyebrows drawing inward. “Many of us are very proud of the work you’re doing, but we’re also afraid of what might happen to you.”

“Oh, I’m made of stern stuff. I can take a threat.”

“Yes,” the butter allowed, “but some might actually act upon it. You’re threatening the livelihoods of a lot of men. Even the miners... Some of them are afraid.”

He relented a bit and placed his hand on Hawksforth’s shoulder in a show of gratitude. “I’ll be careful. Thank you for the warning.”

And with that, he snapped the reins, and his pair rode off over the perfectly manicured gravel drive which hosts of



gardeners took care of.

Yes, he understood what Hawksforth was trying to say.

Not all the miners were happy with his calls for reform. They feared the loss of their jobs. After all, it had happened in the north with the cotton mills. Great men of power far preferred to get rid of inconvenient men rather than make the smallest changes which would cost them the least amount of money and get them profit in the end.

It really was mind-boggling.

He found himself grinding his teeth, furious again that his brother had chosen to join the leagues of powerful men rather than doing the right thing.

At least he could get away from it all. At least he could go home to his mother's house, which he had inherited upon her death.

It had been a rough many years. His leg had never and would never recover.

He'd thought to go to university, but he hated the way people looked at him. As if he was to be pitied. As if it would have been better if he had died.

So, he had chosen to shore himself up in his mother's house, only seeking the company of those who would come to him and consider his bold ideas.

As the curricule approached his manor house, Gabriel drew up.

There was a woman standing at the threshold.

What the devil was she doing there? He had no appointments that he was aware of, except for later in the evening. He had a small meeting of men coming to choose what town halls and cities most needed to hear lectures about the dangers of mining without adequate safety procedures or regulation of work.

She stood with her shoulders back, her spine a ramrod, her simple straw bonnet atop her head perched like an admiral's cap. Her gown was simple, but it hugged her form beautifully.

She was curved in a way he immediately found attractive.

He blinked.

He did not allow himself dalliances, as he did not have the time, nor did he wish to develop the reputation of being a cad. Such a thing was not possible for him. When one was going *against* society, one had to be extremely careful. It made him very annoyed. If he had been a rake or a roue, no one would think anything of it. He could have as many mistresses as he pleased, gamble as much as he wanted, and drink himself into near oblivion every night.

But if he wanted to change the world or help others, he had to be much more careful in his behavior, lest people attempt to tear him down. Nor did he wish to do harm.

So the attraction he felt course through his veins at the way the folds of her gown hugged her form was quickly shoved aside, or at least he told himself so as he drew a slow breath in through his nose and let it out in a rather ragged exhale.

He had not felt such a surge of desire in years. He did not have time for it. That's what he told himself in that moment. He did not have time for it now. So, as he pulled the curricule up to a halt, the wheels rattling over his own rather unkept gravel, he looked down at her.

"Are you haunting my house madam, or are you corporeal flesh?"

She turned to him, giving him a quirked brow and an odd smile. "I confess, sir, I am human form. I will not be doing any haunting of your establishment. Do you usually see ghosts or expect such things?"

He laughed. He could not help himself. He was not expecting such a ready reply. "No, madam. I do not expect to see ghosts, nor fairies, nor strange beasts who come out over

the moors. But I am not expecting anyone to be lurking upon my threshold. Why has no one let you in?"

"I only just arrived and was gathering the courage to knock upon the door."

"Do you need to gather courage? Are you selling something?" he inquired, sitting atop his curricle, holding the reins of his horses, who were pacing and eager for the footman to come. Except, he remembered, no footman would.

No doubt, all the servants were enjoying their afternoon off. He thought it imperative to give weekly days off. It was radical, but he believed it best for everyone's health.

It certainly was not a common thing for lords to do.

So, even if she had knocked, no one would have answered.

The house was empty of everyone except Alec. The boy was Tom Baker's brother.

Then again, even the boy might not be home.

It was far more likely the imp was out romping the land, as he was given to do, looking for birds with broken wings or foxes with hurt paws. The boy was in tune with nature, and Gabriel was rather glad.

It was a much better thing than for him to be down the dark, dank tunnels of the earth.

"What are you doing here then?" he asked, tying the reins to his whipping post to keep the horses steady.

"For my position."

He could think of her in several positions if he was honest, but he shoved the thought away from his mind. No such dangerous ideas were allowed to traverse his mind, no matter how tempted he was.

He cocked his head to the side. "Oh indeed, and what position is that exactly?"

"Housekeeper," she said firmly.

“What the devil are you talking about?” He frowned. “I am the master of this house, and I do not require a housekeeper.”

Her face paled for a moment, and she frowned. “Sir, I most certainly have been hired as the housekeeper of this place. This is Ridgely House, is it not?”

“It is,” he affirmed, cautious. “Who has hired you? Certainly not I.”

Licking her rather fetching pink lips, she pulled a letter from her reticule, crossed to him, and boldly thrust it up.

He took it in his hands, unfurled the letter, and began to read.

Bloody hell, he thought to himself. It seemed his mother’s dear friend, the Countess of Mayhew, had taken things into her own hands. He adored the old girl, but this was perhaps a step too far in managing his life. Still, he couldn’t exactly send this young woman off when she was actually holding a letter of employment from such a longtime friend.

He scowled. “Help me down.”

“My lord?” she said, clearly not understanding.

“Help me down,” he announced again. “I forgot I gave the servants the day off, and it is incredibly difficult for me to get in and out of this vehicle without assistance. It’s a damn nuisance, but there it is.”

She stared up at him. “I would like it if you asked me in a more polite tone, and perhaps with a rather important word attached to the command.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “I beg your pardon?”

She arched a brow. “The word is *please*, my lord, if you are not acquainted with it.”

He let out a long sigh. He did not like being educated about manners, but she was correct. If he was going to care about people’s wellbeing, he should treat them with respect.

Still, he was used to people doing exactly what he wanted when he wanted, even as the second son of a duke.

“Right,” he said. “Would you please,” he said pointedly, “help me down from my curricule so I do not do myself an injury?”

She tilted her head to the side, which caused a wisp of her dark hair to brush her temple. “I don’t understand, my lord. You seem a marvelous physical specimen. How could you possibly do yourself an injury coming down from a curricule?”

“You think me a marvelous specimen, do you?” he drawled.

She blushed at that, and he rather enjoyed the color upon her cheeks.

He held up his cane. “This, madam. This is it, and in a moment you will see why I require assistance.”

“Of course, my lord.” She crossed a little closer to the curricule and offered up her hand. “Will this do?”

He sighed. “Your shoulder is likely better. Your shoulder and your hand,” he said. “And then I will jump down onto one leg, and I will do my very best not to knock us both to the ground.”

Her eyes widened at that. For a moment, he was certain she was contemplating what it might be like to fall to the ground with him. “I’d be completely squashed.”

A laugh boomed out of him. And, bloody hell, something about her sent another surge through him—a warming of his blood—and he wanted to curse himself.

He found himself hesitating. For when he descended, he wondered if her lush form would fit in all the right places with his muscled one. He rather thought they would, and he found himself rather masculinely pleased with himself. Pleased that he had forced himself to maintain a strong sense of physical fitness after his injury.

He drove himself hard.

It did not matter about pain. Pain was a part of his life, and he wanted to be strong. Gabriel found himself oddly pleased that he was, even if he needed assistance since his leg was rather stiff.

She offered up her gloved hand to him, turned her shoulder, and gave a nod as if she was now instructing him. He rather liked that about her. As instructed, he took her hand in his, placed his free hand on her shoulder, gritted his teeth, and jumped down. He was quite pleased that she was strong too because she was able to take his weight, not all of it but a good bit as he went down, and his good leg took most of the pressure.

For a single moment, he grimaced as pain rattled through him.

He was a big man, and such a landing was hard, even with assistance.

Still, for a moment, he lingered, and the scent of freesia and soap wafted up to him. It was the most wonderful thing he had experienced in years. There was something about it that was simple and lovely and welcoming.

And much to his horror, he found himself drinking in the scent of her hair, which had the slightest aroma of roses to it. Freesia and roses. A summer garden in December.

How did she do that? he wondered. He quickly pulled himself back, lest she feel the evidence of his growing desire.

He cleared his throat. "Right. Thank you for the assistance."

And he turned quickly away from her and grabbed his cane. He thrust the tip into the gravel and leaned on it. He focused on the pain in his leg. It would distract him from his errant lust.

"Come along then," he ordered. "We'll need to sort this whole thing out."

"Yes, my lord," she said.

“Call me Gabriel or Morrowby. This *my lording*, while appropriate, gives me little pleasure.”

“Why?” she said. “Are you interested in revolution?”

He laughed. “I am indeed interested in revolution. Not the bloody kind, but a pivoting of the mind. So, let us go in and see exactly where you belong.”

Could he allow himself to let her stay? After all, she was in need of a position and despite his own assumptions, it seemed like he might have one to fill.

## CHAPTER 4

*H*eather had been completely unprepared to find the owner of the manor house to be so extremely volatile and attractive. He was younger than she thought he'd be and fiercer too.

There was something about the way he growled and grumbled that tickled her.

She liked it.

He was different than anyone she'd ever met. Because behind the grumbling and the growling, she felt safe with him, as if all that tough exterior, that roar of a man, was hiding something incredibly soft underneath.

She wondered if other people could see it or if it was just herself. She did not know.

Or perhaps she was having a flight of fancy, having traveled from Wales to Cornwall and having slept very little along the way. After all, on the public coaches, she'd had to sit up top, and the cold and rain did not allow for much rest.

On the journey, she had begun to wonder if she had lost her wits altogether. After all, she had become used to the comfort of her small cottage. She had enough money for firewood or coal, whichever pleased her best. She had warm wool blankets and clothes to keep her comfortable, and she could have a hot brick or tea whenever it pleased her. Yes, a hot brick was just the trick on a cold day.

But the hours spent traveling from Wales to Cornwall atop a coach, well, that had been an experience she did not wish to repeat. But she just might have to if Lord Gabriel Morrowby did not approve of her.

She felt ill at ease.

He had not expected her, and this was a situation she did not know how to handle, so she would handle it boldly and



without apology.

She had been hired by Lady Mayhew and promised a position and a salary, so this was all a bit alarming. Still, she had done no wrong.

As she followed Morrowby into his beautiful Tudor manor, she found herself unable to stop looking about.

The last house she had been of service in had been new, a construction of light and air where everything appeared to be marble, clean lines, gold filigree, and opulence. This was entirely different. This was a cozy state of affairs with nooks and crannies and dark wood at every turn. The outside of the house had been white with dark beams and red brick. The inside looked as if it bore secrets, old secrets, secrets of history. For an instant, she rather wondered at his suggestion that she might be a specter.

Was the house full of ghosts?

She wouldn't be surprised. It did look like a place that would have stories as old as time, or at least as old as the Tudors themselves, where betrayal lurked around every corner. Those men and women had faced treachery at every turn! One might expect themselves to be stabbed or taken away because one was never quite sure what side they were on at any particular moment. Or at least, so said the books she had read.

She was rather glad she had not lived in those days when the country was so ill at ease. Yes, it was a much better place now. Still, there were many challenges, but at least one did not have to worry about an army coming over one's fields. Unless, of course, the French won, and that would be a whole other difficulty.

The things people had to deal with were quite tragic abroad. England was lucky. She knew it in her bones. She liked to read, and the newssheets were very important to her. She liked to stay abreast, if possible, of what was happening in the world.

Words were her window. And she'd never truly traveled about except in her mind.

Now she was in an entirely different part of the country. She was rather pleased.

She followed Lord Morrowby through his house. He made good progress, but she could tell from the tenseness of his shoulders and the way he gripped his cane that it was painful to him. She wondered why he did not go at a slower speed. After all, surely going a bit slower might be a bit less painful.

But she quickly realized that this was a man who did not attempt to escape pain. On the contrary, it seemed as if he embraced pain. He refused to be daunted by the state of his limb, and she wondered what had happened to him to make it so that his left leg was so entirely immobile that he could barely put weight on it as he went.

His gait had a strange sort of swinging quality to it and the thump, thump, thump of his cane followed him.

His russet hair shone in the afternoon light tumbling about them, filtered in through windows along the hall.

His thick locks reminded her of a strong oak tree's trunk in the summer.

Yes, that was right. Lord Gabriel Morrowby was like an oak tree, towering, alive, strong, slightly twisted perhaps, and yet stronger in that twisting.

She wondered if in his limbs he would give her safety, just like an oak tree did to those that came to it.

The thought was shocking, and she blinked at the astonishing nature of it.

He stopped at last at a door, threw it open, and crossed in. She quickly realized that this was his study.

It had such a stamp of *him* upon it. She felt her breath taken away by it.

Flying machines of various sorts hung from the ceiling. She had seen pictures of da Vinci's works before in the last house she worked in, and these had to be reproductions. She marveled at their elaborate artistry.

Paintings covered the green silk-clad walls too.

They were different than anything she'd ever seen.

She found herself stopped right in front of one. It was so ethereal and odd. Was he obsessed with specters? she mused. The canvas was alive and beautiful, and the colors almost seemed to bleed together. It was nothing like the depictions of apples and pheasants and dogs and horses that she had seen in the other great houses.

"You like it?" he asked, his voice a low rumble through the dimly lit study.

"Yes," she admitted freely, tilting her head as she studied it. "It is mysterious and strange."

"That's a good description for it," he said, admiration deepening his voice. "El Greco is the artist. From Spain. It's quite old."

"Spain," she breathed. She could only imagine such distant lands. She'd never traveled in her whole life beyond fifty miles from where she'd grown up. And, of course, then she went to Wales when she married.

And now she was here.

"How beautiful," she whispered reverently. "I feel like the artist is reaching out and touching my soul."

"That is a rather dramatic thing for a housekeeper to say, but I agree with you."

"Are housekeepers not allowed to have such feelings of wonder?" she asked tartly, turning towards him.

"Of course you are," he said, his hands skimming over a ream of papers. "Forgive me for succumbing to the limitations of my class."

She laughed at that. "It's wonderful to hear that you understand that your class has limitations. All classes do," she added.

He inclined his head. "Yes, we think ourselves terribly superior, and we're really not, not a bit of it. We just happen to have wealth, power, and land."

She blinked at him.

Had he truly just said such a thing? Was he truly so self-aware? And yet the fact was that he walked about as if he was the most superior man on the planet. Was he aware of his odd behavior? His contradiction of words and form? She rather thought he was, but perhaps his sense of privilege was so deeply ingrained in him that he simply could not get rid of it.

But he did not seem unkind.

He bent and shuffled the papers on his desk, letting out a sigh. "Now, Mrs..."

"Mrs. Meadows," she offered.

He glanced up at her through his dark, thick lashes with an inscrutable gaze. "Mrs. Meadows, I have a great deal to do this evening. I'm having several gentlemen over to discuss our next set of lectures in St. Ives."

"I see," she said. "How very interesting. And what will you be discussing? Horses?" she asked.

He stared at her for a long moment before his lips twitched. "You really know nothing about me."

"No, I don't. I was hired by letter, you see. I was living in Wales, and I saw the advertisement and communicated with Lady Mayhew. You see the advertisement was in my newsheet..." And then she gasped. "*You*," she whispered.

"Me?" he queried, his brows rising.

"No one told me exactly who I would be working for. The letters were not specific," she rushed. "I was simply hired by Lady Mayhew to come work at Ridgely. And she said I would

be working for a gentleman and that there would be another member in the house. And that discretion and the ability to manage on my own were the only important things that I be able to foster. She was rather clear that an ability to go ahead and take over what tasks needed to be done without much instruction was necessary.”

He laughed. “Well, that sounds like my Lady Mayhew. She knows exactly what I need, though it drives me mad.”

“It is good when someone knows what we need,” she said, folding her gloved hands before her plain gown. “It saves a great deal of trouble. But you’re *Gabriel Morrowby*,” she said.

He straightened. “I am indeed.”

“The same Gabriel Morrowby in the newssheets.”

He gave an elaborate twirl of his hand, though a muscle tightened in his throat just at his cravat. “Yes,” he said, and she could tell he was waiting to be judged, or for her to pronounce what sort of man she thought he was.

Would she fall on the side of those who believed in reform or on the side of those who were against it?

“Very well done of you, sir,” she said sincerely. “There’s a great deal of mining in Wales, you know.”

He nodded, but he appeared confused. “And you’re from Wales? You don’t sound it.”

She smiled. “Not everyone who lives in Wales is from Wales originally. Nor do they sound Welsh. I don’t speak Welsh,” she said, “but I lived there for many years and... And I’ve seen the miner’s villages. I wish...” Her voice trailed off.

“You wish?” he said.

“I wish more people saw the world the way you do,” she said honestly. “Now my John was not a miner. He tended to the beautiful, living things of the earth, rather than going down and trying to extract the dead.”

“*Extract the dead,*” he echoed. “Now that is a saying. Might I steal it from you?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, “if it’s helpful.” And she rather liked the idea that she was helpful to him.

“It *is* helpful,” he said. “We should be more mindful of the living. So few people really care about the living.”

“And you’re one of those few, aren’t you?”

Heather felt a wave of sympathy for him because he was correct. So many people went about life making grand statements about the world without really caring about the lives of the people living *in* the world. So few cared about the lives of regular people, about good wages, clean conditions, and freedom from illness with access to a doctor. She had been fortunate in that they could afford a doctor. But it had done no good.

For a moment she could not breathe, wishing the world had been kinder and not so brutal on the innocents of this life.

“You have the strangest look upon your face,” he said gently. “Are you unwell?”

“Oh, it is nothing,” she said with a forced smile, one that was closest to a grimace and pained her cheeks.

“Don’t lie,” he said softly. “It doesn’t suit you.”

She stared at him for a long moment, weighing what she should do even as her throat tightened. “I was simply thinking about something unpleasant, something personal. I don’t wish to speak of it.”

“Well, if it’s personal, then you mustn’t speak of it unless you wish to,” he said, his face softening. “I would not wish to pry.”

She laughed and found herself relieved that she could still laugh.

“What?” he said, clearly intrigued.

“I don’t actually think that’s true about you at all, my lord. I’d wager you pry quite well.”

He gave her a strange, sly smile. “I do actually.”

She cleared her throat. “Might I ask what you will do with me? I find the suspense to be unpleasant.”

A strange crackling danced through his gaze before it was gone so quickly she was certain she’d imagined it.

“Of course,” he said. “How rude of me to keep you in indecision. I did not intend to hire a housekeeper, but it’s clear my interfering friend thinks that I need one, and I probably do. She’s usually correct about things, and I try to follow her judgment in all things. No doubt, I have been running my butler and the other staff ragged. Someone needs to be brought in to manage things, so that I can continue my work in peace. Do you think you’re up to such a task?”

She drew herself up. It was going to be quite a great deal to learn quickly. After all, she was moving from chambermaid and housekeeper in training to housekeeper in one quick swoop.

“Yes,” she said quickly, “I can.”

Because if she denied it, all that was waiting for her was an empty cottage full of memories, and she was not going back to the past. She was going to stride into the future with Gabriel Morrowby.

## CHAPTER 5

Gabriel was either making the greatest or worst decision of his life.

Perhaps that sounded melodramatic, but it certainly felt that way in this instance. Allowing this woman, who he clearly desired, into his house to essentially manage a huge portion of his life seemed ill-advised.

Still, if his life needed managing as Lady Mayhew said, he wasn't going to ignore it. He had too much to do to allow failures to begin to pile up, and if the lady standing before him, who appeared to be very capable, could help him keep failures from beginning to emerge, he was not going to send her away.

Even if it was going to be slightly awkward and somewhat difficult.

Why hadn't his mother's managing friend hired a woman of several more years who was a complete termagant? Surely that was how all housekeepers should be, not young and beautiful.

Still, here they were.

"Would you like me to show you to your rooms?" he blurted suddenly.

She gazed over her shoulder as if looking for a servant to suddenly appear. "Isn't there anyone else to do it? It seems like a rather unimportant job for someone of your position and busy nature."

"You are not incorrect," he said, his brow furrowing. "About the busy nature part of it, but there's no one in the house. My servants have the afternoon off. They will be returning in about two hours to make certain that everything is ready for the evening."



“I beg your pardon?” she said, as if she had not heard him.

“Was I unclear?” he queried. “My poor tutor would be most dismayed. He was most insistent on my learning excellent diction.”

“They have the day off?” she repeated, shocked.

His heart began to hammer, and he found himself inordinately pleased by her approval. “Yes. I think it is vital to the wellbeing of any human that they have time for themselves. I am more than familiar with the fact that most servants get a half day off once a month. To me, this is preposterous. I do not give myself a great deal of time off,” he said. “I work from dawn until dusk, but I definitely do things I enjoy and that are good for me. Plus, I’m the one who decides when I get time off. So there we are.” He cleared his throat. “You shall also have a day off a week. We will manage without you, I promise.”

A laugh tumbled past her lips, and it changed her face entirely. Her gaze lilted with amusement and surprise. “I’m glad to hear that you’re capable of living without me. After all, it seems you have been doing so for some time.”

“Yes,” he said before adding, “but apparently not well. Come with me,” he said.

And with that, he gripped his cane hard, focusing on the feeling of his legs and the muscles shifting and twisting about his marred bone as he headed out of his study.

It had been tempting to send her off, but he was no fool, and he wasn’t going to rail against a gift. Lady Mayhew had sent him a veritable gift of a human, who was likely going to make his life better. He would be a fool indeed to turn such a thing down.

Often, he didn’t even know what he truly needed. He spent so much time focused on reading and preparing lectures and articles.

He dragged his leg behind him, wincing. He knew his gait was odd and could cause people to fumble behind him. She

did not seem to be bothered by it, and she certainly hadn't made any commentary yet. When they came to the stairs, he grimaced.

This was his least favorite part of being with new people, but he had long ago learned to get on with it. It was also why he kept himself isolated here in Ridgely House on the edge of Bodmin Moor.

So, he began the time-consuming struggle to go up the stairs. First he brought one leg up, then he dragged the other up. And then he repeated it. Each step was painful.

He supposed he could have chosen to keep bedchambers on the ground floor, but he refused such self-indulgence or pity.

"Would you like assistance again, my lord?" she ventured.

"I promise I will tell you when I need it," he said, surprised by her bold offer. Most did not have the courage to do such a thing. "And remember, you are to call me either Gabriel or Morrowby."

"It's very odd," she said tentatively.

"This whole house is odd," he teased. "You best get used to it or find a different position."

"Oh, no. I like the idea of assisting you," she said swiftly, her rich voice drifting up the stairway around him.

"Do you?" he queried.

She cleared her throat. "It will also do me good to know that not only am I providing myself with work and keeping myself busy, but I am also helping the world."

"That sounds rather grand," he said, glancing back over his shoulder and catching sight of her pale face beneath her dark hair and straw bonnet.

"Well, if I keep your home organized, you shall be able to help more people. Your work is very important, and any small part I can have in it is valuable."

He paused, his hand gripping the balustrade. “Thank you. I shall put that feather in my cap, and I will appreciate all the assistance you can give me.”

The flattery made him feel quite warm inside. Though it wasn't flattery. He could tell she felt she was stating a fact, and yet it did feel like a compliment, and he rather liked it. So often, he couldn't tell if people thought that he was a pretender. He wasn't. His life had been changed by the reality of the social conditions of his time.

He was glad it had.

There had been a time when he would lie awake at night, his body in agony, and he'd wished that it never happened. But now he knew it had been the greatest gift of his life. The mineshaft had changed everything.

Though he wished Tom had lived.

Yes, Tom Baker had changed everything.

As Gabriel came at last to the long landing, he hesitated. “I could put you upstairs, but I don't think that worthy for your position. Housekeepers are supposed to have some status in the house, and I wish you to be able to move about and do what you need to do. Plus, I might need your assistance. So I'm going to put you on the same floor as me.”

“Are you?” she queried, her voice pitching up.

“This house is large,” he said, “but not so large that it would be a good idea to put you far away. So.” He paused before a panel door. “This will be yours.”

He twisted the handle and swung it open. She stepped inside and bit back a gasp. He liked that he was surprising her. He liked that she liked it well. He wanted her to be pleased. It was a strange thought, and he prayed to God that he was not trying to seduce her.

No, he was just trying to be a decent fellow, wasn't he? Instead of sticking her up in the attic? He'd always tried to do his best by those who served him.

She went around the room peering at the furnishings, the dressing table, the books, and the beautifully appointed bed with its tapestry curtains. Then she headed over to the window. Her hands gripped the sill.

“Is there a child here?” she asked sharply.

“There is, yes,” he allowed, stunned by her quick question.

Her back tensed, and for a moment it seemed she had been washed over with cold water. “I see,” she stated.

“Is that a problem?” he queried softly.

“No, not at all. Of course not,” she rushed. “Why would there be a problem?”

And from the quick, succinct succession of her words, he knew there was indeed a problem. But he wasn’t about to pry overly, even though, as she said, he was good at it. He wondered what she had seen.

No doubt, an errant ball or perhaps a toy out in the gardens. Alec was forever leaving things about. It was rather endearing actually, for he was completely swept up by whatever he was involved in until he was distracted by something else.

“Might I inquire about the child?” she breathed, still staring out the window, her knuckles now white.

“Yes, there’s a boy,” he said softly. “He is about twelve years of age. He lives here. He is not my son. He is my ward. I took him in, you see.”

“How very noble of you.” She said it without a hint of mockery. She meant it, though she did not turn to him.

“It is not noble,” he said tightly. “It was the least I could do. His brother died in a mineshaft whilst guiding me.”

She swung back around, her eyes wide, her cheeks high in color, and her eyes shimmering with emotion. “The incident?” she said.

“You are aware of it?”

“Half the country must be aware of it,” she pointed out. “Anyone who reads the newssheets certainly knows that you were in a mineshaft accident, that your leg was injured.”

She looked down at his limb, and he felt himself heat at the way she perused his body.

“I did not know that a child was involved,” she said.

He scowled. “The newssheets love to write about the noble lord who went down to help the working classes and was injured. They don’t talk about Thomas Baker, the miner, who was crushed to death, or his little brother who desperately needed his older brother and the funds he provided. Alec is an orphan, alone. I couldn’t allow it. So Alec has come to live with me. I take care of him as best as I can. Though, I have no idea how to be a proper father or even a big brother. I don’t get along with my brother well, you see.”

“I’m sorry for it,” she said softly.

“Are you?” He drew in a long breath. “If you knew my brother, you wouldn’t be.”

She shook her head. “Family is complicated,” she said. “Always. But it is also very difficult to be alone in the world.”

“Are you?” he asked gently, sensing a wound. “Alone in the world?”

And he felt his heart soften. His heart *was* soft. He knew this. It always had been.

It was why he had taken Alec in and why he was trying so fiercely to organize reforms, and he did his best to help as many as he could from the protection of his home.

He would never be hard and cold, but it made him angry. His kindness, his soft heart, well, it lent itself to a burning fury at the cruelty of the world, and it was hard for him to keep that fury on a leash. Or the pain subdued enough to keep breathing with ease.

“I am alone,” she admitted. “I have not always been,” she said quickly, “but I am now.”

“You will not mind having a child in the house?” he checked carefully. “I realize that could be difficult if you do not like children.”

“I like children,” she said, and for a moment a sheen washed over her bright, sapphire eyes. And there was a note to her voice that gave him serious pause.

He felt it like a prick to the heart, the pain in it, and he wanted to cross over to her and take her in his arms and soothe away whatever suffering had occurred to her.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, but he could tell from the way that she stood that she did not want him to ask. So instead, he inclined his head.

“Good. You will not have to spend a great deal of time with Alec or myself. Now, I will leave you to rest. No doubt, you need it.”

And he needed to retreat. Retreat away from these feelings that were stirring within him, brought to light by a woman he barely knew.

## CHAPTER 6

*H*eather's heart would not stop palpitating.

As she stood alone in the bedchamber, she opened and closed her hands, forming fists and then relaxing them. She shook out her hands, hoping to get rid of the sensation of her blood thrumming through her veins.

She began to pace over the lushly woven old carpet. It looked at least one hundred years old. Its hues had faded ever so slightly, but that did not take away from its ornate patterns done in emerald and sapphire. She tried to focus on things about the room. The ceiling was crenelated, painted in blue and gold. Tudor roses dotted every square, and she found herself focusing on the petals of those flowers.

A symbol meant to bring the two great families into union and out of chaos. Of course, one of the families had conquered, and the other one had been forced to submit. She paced about the room, staring at the bed and then at the dark wood. She crossed back to the window and stared out to where the small ball and bat were laying on the ground, discarded.

Her own son had loved to play with sticks and balls, shunting them about, bouncing and kicking.

Dear God, what had she done?

She had come to escape memories of her son, and yet here she was being thrust into those memories so intensely that she could scarcely breathe. Should she turn around and run home to Wales? No, she could not. There was nothing for her there, but here she was in the very house she had hoped would bring her out of her darkness, and it was leading her astray.

Well, she would not allow herself to stand here and let her mind get the better of her. No, she knew the danger of letting her mind spin thought after thought after thought, pulling her down further until she was wrapped in a grief so intense that

she did not think she would be able to peel away its sticky coating.

And so, she drew in a breath, took off her bonnet, tossed it onto the bed, and strode into the hall. He had left her here and gone off to do his own work of preparing for the gentlemen coming to visit him this night.

He too, she felt, was lost in his own world in some ways. It did not matter if he was constantly in the newssheets, or if he was constantly writing reforms and having people here.

He did not leave this house.

His house was a prison for him, much as the cottage had been for her, and she understood the great world outside was harrowing.

She had taken a chance at escape, only to find...

No, she would not allow herself to fall into such thoughts.

She headed out into the dark hallway. Night was already falling, for it was December. The darkest days of the year were coming. And as she went down the hall, she noticed that no greenery had been brought in from the outside. There was no hint or nod to the coming season. And she considered the boy.

Twelve years old.

Her heart twisted. Would she be able to face him?

Surely she could! Surely she was not so weak as to have to avoid children.

Still, even the thought brought a stinging burn to her eyes. She quickly dashed the tears from her eyes and turned her mind to something more pragmatic.

Did the boy celebrate?

Did Lord Gabriel Morrowby celebrate Christmas?

He did not strike her as the sort of gentleman who would celebrate such things or take in the trappings or fripperies of such a celebration.



And yet children dearly loved to celebrate.

She shook her head. She could not allow herself to take up such nonsense.

That was not her position, after all.

And so, instead, she strode along the halls determined to find her way down to the kitchens. She needed company. Surely the servants would have returned by now to aid in the evening's meeting?

She was a capable person, and she would not get lost in the warren of halls and stairs. She was determined. And at last she found the back passage, which wound its way narrowly down to the kitchens.

They were vast and clearly taken from an older time. The ceiling soared. There was a large fireplace with wrought iron arms and pots boiling and protruding all over. A long central table was lined with vegetables and bread and cakes.

It was a room abustle, and it was hot.

She rather appreciated the heat. The upper house was a bit chilly. All great houses were. It was impossible to heat such vast spaces. It was why everyone congregated around enormous fireplaces. But here? Here there was warmth, and it seemed camaraderie. Even singing! Some of the kitchen maids were singing airs.

And there, as she listened to the notes and words, was the first nod to Christmas. They were singing jolly tunes of holly and ivy and deer.

She wondered if she could feel the joy of such times like they felt in their hearts? Could she ever feel it again?

Once, December had been her favorite time of year. Now, it simply reminded her of what had been taken. And, of course, it was paired with the darkest nights, the shortest days, the most opportunity to spend feeling sorry for oneself.

One of the maids looked at her askance with her head cocked to the side, her red curls tumbling about her face, and

said, "What are you doing here?"

"Violet!" a voice called out as an older woman bustled over. "Do not speak to the future housekeeper in such a fashion. She will not take kindly to it."

Violet's chocolate-colored eyes widened. "Forgive me, Mrs., I did not mean to be rude."

"Of course you didn't, Violet," Heather replied, giving the girl an assuring glance. She smiled. "And it is a valid question. This is not my domain, is it? You see, I was in search of someone to give me something to do, or at least to set me to work this evening. I don't think I officially begin until tomorrow, and there's no one to show me about the house. For you are all in dedicated preparation. But I confess I did not wish to be alone in my rooms, and the joy here is a most welcome thing."

"Well, surely you're hungry," Violet said with a grin.

"Of course she is!" Cook exclaimed, tsking. "I was preparing a tray to send up. Most housekeepers I know do not wish to eat with the servants."

"I would very much prefer to eat here," Heather said. And, in that moment, as she stood in the room filled with the most delicious aromas, she realized she *was* hungry.

"You can take your tea with Master Alec," Violet piped.

Heather swallowed. "Master Alec?" She wanted to shout no! To turn and recoil, to say she was suddenly ill. But she would not be so small. What would her own darling boy think of her if she acted like such a miser of the heart?

Besides, all the servants in this room? They were supposed to listen to her. On the morrow, she was to be the head of the house, aside from the butler. She needed to create a sense of morale that showed that she was strong.

And so she gave a tight smile and inclined her head.

She doubted it reached her eyes.

The Cook wiped her hands on a towel, then said, “How do you do, Mrs. Meadows? You are most welcome and most needed. Tynley, the butler, is very capable, but he’s been nigh drowning in all that needs to be done. We expected you today, though I do not think his lordship did?”

There was such a merry glint to Cook’s eyes that Heather laughed again. “Do you often know things his lordship does not?”

Cook winked. “Oh, we all do our best to make his lordship’s life run smoothly. He doesn’t need to know everything. We protect him, you see. He needs it.”

“Does he?” she queried softly. “He seems like a very strong individual.”

Cook tsked. “Oh, he’s strong all right. He’s strong. Mentally tough. He’s fighting all the time, but that sort of fighting? Well, he needs to be taken care of, you see.”

“I suppose I do see.” The amount of energy he must expel taking on the world no doubt took from his ability to care for himself.

Was that why he did not leave the house? He was reserving energy?

Except today, she had seen him out of the house. What had made him leave?

“I beg your pardon. Was he visiting somewhere today?”

The cook’s mouth tightened. “His brother, the duke.”

“Oh,” she piped. “He said they do not get along—”

And she realized she was dangerously close to gossip and quickly shut her mouth. But he had said such a thing, and she felt like there was something intimated in the papers about a brotherly standoff.

“That’s true,” Cook said with a sorrowful look. “I’m Mrs. Hoffman. I’ve known them both since they were in leading strings. Tight as thieves they were, but those two infuriating

lads haven't gotten along since their father died. They have different ideas about how the world should go. That has put them apart. So, the duke never comes here, and Lord Gabriel almost never goes there. I don't know what brought him over there today. It's something to do with the mines, no doubt. After all, all the mines are on the duke's land."

"That must be very difficult for everyone," Heather observed.

"It's difficult for Lord Gabriel, of course," Cook replied. "He wants them all shut down. He says there's no point in digging all that stuff up unless, of course, it can be done safely."

She wanted to reply that she rather agreed, but there was a strange look on the cook's face.

"Lord Gabriel's a good man," Cook said gently. "But he doesn't understand that most of the people get their living off the mines, and until an alternative form of income can be developed, it just won't do. No one will really support it." She scowled as though she'd swallowed cod's liver oil. "Certainly not the masters."

"What would you suggest?" Heather asked sincerely.

The cook jolted, clearly stunned to have her opinion considered. "That we feed all the reformers a good meal and see if we can convince the powers that be to do the right thing by people. Just a few extra beams of wood, shorter hours, better pay, good schools for the children, those sorts of things. It all seems very reasonable to me."

"*Utopia* by Thomas More," she breathed.

"Right," Cook said with a laugh. "I don't know who or what that is."

"It's a place where everything is perfect and was written by an idealistic man who was beheaded many, many years ago."

Cook shook her head. “A work of fiction. And the fellow lost his head for his ideals? Of course he did. I worry for Lord Gabriel. Indeed, I do. Besides nothing is perfect... This place a utopia? It can never exist.”

Heather thought of coming here and how she had assumed she was going to escape into something different. It was far from perfect already. Perhaps Cook was right, but she dared to hope... She dared to hope that perhaps seeking utopia was better than not pursuing it at all.

Cook drew a fortifying breath. “Now come and sit here. Master Alec will be back in a moment. I’ve made a lovely lamb stew for the both of you. He’ll be absolutely freezing.”

“But it is not very cold outside,” Heather replied.

“Ah. You’re not from here, are you?”

“No, I’m from Wales.”

“You don’t sound Welsh,” said the cook.

“You’re the second person who’s said that to me today. I am not actually Welsh, but I lived there, and I’ve grown quite accustomed to the cold.”

Cook gave a quick nod. “Well, Cornwall might be one of the warmer spots in England, but it does get quite damp. Master Alec gets out into the water and then the wind starts to blow over the moors, and we have to watch him like a hawk, you see. One time, he went dipping out in the Irish Sea.” Her eyes widened, and she gave a horrified shiver. “I’ll tell you, Lord Gabriel nearly had us all strung up for it.”

“Why on earth would he blame all of you?” Heather exclaimed, though she felt a wave of horror thinking of the boy alone in a frigid sea. “Isn’t he...?”

“Yes, he is the master’s ward, but we all look after Alec. And the truth is that we all want to keep him well after what happened to his brother.”

“It is a noble endeavor,” she complimented. The whole house seemed to be full of people with hearts far superior to

much of the world.

“I’m glad you think so, Mrs. Meadows. You enjoy your meal this evening. And tomorrow, perhaps you and I can take tea, and you can let me know how you wish to proceed as housekeeper.” Then Cook’s face lit up. “Ah! Here he is.”

And with that, a boy bounded into the kitchen. His hair was tussled wildly from the wind. His eyes were a shockingly bright blue. His cheeks were ruddy, and his clothes were askew.

He came and sat right in front of a bowl of stew which Violet brought to the long table, as if he knew it would be waiting for him.

Alec grabbed a piece of bread and tore into it.

She stared at him with his rough manners and immediately she felt it.

That uniquely wild, boyish spirit with its wonder of the world. Yes, there it was as he snatched up a piece of bread and pushed most of it into his mouth. She admired his ability to shut it all out and be present and just live here, now, and for the moment.

And her heart ached. Oh, how it ached. The pain of it was shocking, but she did not retreat. No, she held her ground.

Alec lifted his gaze to hers, gave her a quirk of a smile, and said, “I don’t know you. You a guest?”

“I’m going to be the new housekeeper,” she said.

“Oh no,” he groaned, but his gaze was full of mischief. “Do you like a lot of rules?”

“Some rules,” she allowed. “But some rules, of course, can be bent.”

He nodded, considering. “I like it. You’re not going to be a taskmaster?”

“Perhaps in a few ways,” she admitted. “Do you like to break rules?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “No, not really. It’s dangerous, breaking rules. But I like it here. There’s a lot of freedom.” He narrowed his gaze and asked cautiously, “You’re not going to take that away, are you?”

“I am not going to stop you from going out onto the moors, Master Alec,” she said. “The outdoors are excellent for us.”

“Just call me Alec,” he said. “You should eat. You look like you need a bit of sustenance.”

She laughed at that, her heart aching anew, and she recalled how children often said whatever came into their heads. “Do I indeed?”

He nodded. “Yes. Quite pale. Have you been spending all your time indoors?”

She winced. “Yes, actually, I have.”

He looked horrified, with a spoonful of stew halfway to his mouth. “Well, you mustn’t do that. It’s terrible for your spirit. My brother had to spend most of his life down the mines, and I can’t suggest that to anyone who isn’t forced to do it for their living. So, you come outside with me. I’ll show you around the moors, and you’ll look well in no time.”

It was remarkable.

Alec was inviting her into his world without any sort of reticence, and she felt... She felt the world spin about her, and she longed to run. Instead, she gave him a smile, picked up her spoon, and said, “Of course. It would be an honor.”

## CHAPTER 7

Sleeplessness, in Gabriel's experience, was entirely due to pain.

But he was not in pain. Well, not the usual kind.

This was a novelty and one he did not enjoy, for it was a very different torture. As he laid there, tossing and turning on his large bed with his cane resting beside it, he gritted his teeth.

He took handfuls of the linen sheet in his hands, stared up at the ceiling, and contemplated letting out a low roar. But he did not wish to wake up the entire household. So, instead, he began to very carefully inch his way out of bed. He longed to throw himself, to bound free, but such days were gone.

No, instead, it was a convincing of his limbs to do exactly what he wanted. And so carefully, with the assistance of his hands, he was able to get his left leg over the side. He winced as his bones protested. It was as if something on the inside had been put on the outside of his bone and never quite been willing to behave itself again.

He stared down at the mangled appendage.

It was a nightmare to look at it. He thought he had long ago made friends with it, but sometimes he felt like the leg was an outward manifestation of how he felt inside—broken and twisted in pain.

And he had been thus since he'd been ripped into reality from the ideals and false nature of his childhood. He had not understood how fake it had all been, what an illusion he had been living in while in the bright and beautiful world of his father's estates.

Every year, they'd gone to London. They'd traveled abroad often, and he'd seen the beauty of it all. He had not



understood what the world was truly like until he had thrust himself out of his narrow strata. And now that pain was visible in his legs, and he could feel it still in his heart.

He lowered his head and thrust a hand through his hair. This was madness. He could not be thinking about Mrs. Heather Meadows.

It was completely inexplicable.

He was a man of discipline. It was the only thing that had kept him going over the years. Discipline was incredibly necessary when one was in pain all the time. Otherwise, giving into the temptation to stay in his bed was a very possible thing. But he also knew that staying in bed was a pathway to more pain and loss of muscle, loss of ability, and the quick infantilization of himself.

Gabriel's leg shook as he forced himself up from the bed. He grabbed his cane, then fumbled with his robe, pulling it over his naked frame. The heavy folds of damask swung about his legs.

He knew he shouldn't go about nude underneath, but he didn't have time to pull on his clothes. It took him far too long. The great robe was far more concealing than his clothes ever could be, in any case. And so he strode down the hall like some clothed ghost. He felt like a ghost sometimes. Like crumpled paper, ready to burn.

He sometimes wondered what his life would have been like if he hadn't found out the truth. Would he be dancing in some ballroom somewhere, making love to some silly woman, being silly himself? He rather thought it was possible, but perhaps not. Perhaps this had always been his path, and he should not question it.

He did the only thing that he could on such nights. There were two options in his opinion. He could go downstairs and drink a bottle of brandy, but he'd long ago learned that was a disastrous decision. He did not like to wake up wishing he was

dead, not from his leg, but from the burning sensation in his stomach and head.

No, the only thing that would do was the night air. And so he quietly headed down through the house, whispering his way along the corridors, sliding over the carpets and polished wood until, at last, he slipped out the front door and into the gardens that kissed the moors.

He stared up at the sky. The stars anchored him. They were beautiful, glistening, alive, sending their light beaming down to him from so far away. They pulled him out of the mire that he sometimes felt himself in.

Out here, feeling the damp of the sea wrap him up in its cloak? He felt safe somehow.

He drew in a long breath. If he fancied it, he could almost taste salt in the air. He loved living so near to the sea and the vast transportation network of the world. Sometimes he thought how wonderful it would be to simply slip aboard a ship and never come back, to let all of it go, to forget everything he was fighting for, to forget Thomas Baker and his devastating last moments.

But he couldn't.

That was a coward's dream, and he was not a coward. He dropped his head back, closed his eyes, and let the damp air slip over his skin.

He felt alive. At peace, for a moment.

Then thoughts of *her* slipped back into his consciousness. It was damned upsetting, to say the least. She was simply a housekeeper. She was here to manage his house. That was all. And yet he could not deny his response to her. He was going to have to ignore her. He was going to have to avoid her like the bloody plague. It was the only thing for it. He needed her help, but he did not need to be around her, surely.

He felt the strangest sensation then on the back of his neck, as if she was listening to his very thoughts. It was absurd, of course. But then he felt compelled to turn, and he looked up to

the windows that overlooked the garden and caught sight of a pale face.

A floating, pixyish oval in the night.

*Her:*

She jolted, caught, but did not yank away from the window. Instead, their gazes met. There were several feet between them in the night air, and there was a window pane between them. But even so, they stared at each other, locked in a strange moment.

How long had she been watching him? What did she think of him out here?

He could not know. It was impossible to tell. But he rather admired the fact that she did not dart away, hiding from him, but held his gaze instead.

Even so, it made his hunger for her flame. His wish to have her, to take her into his arms, only increased at her boldness.

It was a selfish thought.

She was his housekeeper, not a thing to be played with, and he did not play with people in any case, in any way.

That was not the sort of man he was.

He broke the gaze first, though it felt like torture. Sucking in a long breath, he swung his body away, caught sight of the moon, and found himself thinking of *her* even as he gazed at that floating goddess in the sky.

Would Mrs. Heather Meadows say something about this encounter, he wondered?

Was she still staring?

Bloody hell, he longed to look back and see. He prayed she was... And he prayed she was not. The war inside him was real and dismaying.

He'd been caught, vulnerable, out here in the dark. Forcing himself to keep his gaze forward, he began to walk through the damp grass, feeling the glistening droplets on his ankles.

He should go back to his bed and try to sleep, but he knew he could not.

Yes, perhaps she was still watching him. Somehow then, strangely, he did not feel alarmed by it, he felt assured, as if somehow Mrs. Meadows was keeping him safe.

A gasp came out of his mouth. It was the strongest, and certainly the most absurd, he had felt about a woman in all his life.

And as that thought rushed through him, another took root.

Heather Meadows was like the moon: glowing, beautiful, watching. But was she as cold and distant?

He doubted it very much, but only time would tell.

## CHAPTER 8

The powerful emotions charging through Heather were both conflicting and upsetting. She had not felt such volatility, aside from grief and anger, in a very long time. In fact, she did not know exactly what to do or say. But she did know that she needed to address the odd circumstances of last evening with Lord Gabriel.

She had come down early and asked Cook what time Lord Gabriel took his breakfast. And so, with that information, standing outside the breakfast room, she rolled her shoulders back, drew her chest up, and folded her hands before her.

Surely, she had the strength and wherewithal of character to be able to speak to him directly about such a thing. But still, dear heaven, she could not put into words what had transpired. How could it be that so much had taken place at a distance with a glance?

Without a single word exchanged!

She now wished that she had pulled quickly away and hidden behind one of the heavy sapphire-colored drapes that framed her windows. But she was not made of such frightened stuff, and so she had locked gazes with him and let that gaze hold.

The strength of his reaction had compelled her to keep looking at him. The way his face had transformed before her, the way his body had crackled with energy. He had looked like a god standing in his damask robe under the moon. And she had longed to rush down the stairs to him and throw herself into his arms, to know him, to feel his hands on her back, to feel him pulling her into him and whispering into her ear... Telling her every thought that was in his head.

It had been strange, that feeling of oneness with him. After all, she had felt separate from everyone and everything for

some time now.

It had been so intimate.

She might as well have been standing naked in the window looking at him. He might as well have been standing naked in the garden! It was such a shocking thing to think, but there it was. It was how she had felt, and she felt certain he had experienced similar emotions too. Until he had whipped himself away as if he could not take another moment of the power of their connected gaze.

And oh, how bereft she had felt when he turned away.

And then fear had begun to whisper inside her. Fear that she had made him upset. Fear that she had offended him or done something terribly wrong.

She needed to know that she was not going to lose her position, that she had not done something amiss. And so here she stood. She would make him understand that she had merely been curious and hoped that he was well, given his leg. Yes, concern had been her primary feeling, since he was clearly in pain a great deal of the time.

And she was concerned for his pain, but that was not why she had been unable to look away.

No, she had felt much more than concern. It had been a visceral swirl of emotion that had started in her lower belly and teased its way up to her heart, consuming her, running through her blood, heating her skin, making her feel powerful. She could not recall feeling that way in her entire life.

Heather winced.

That thought felt like a betrayal in itself to feel so much now. But she could not deny the truth of it. It was as if she was a compass that had found its true north and could not stop the pull to point to it.

She cleared her throat, took the handle in her fingers, turned it, and strode in.

Lord Gabriel stopped mid-drink of coffee and stared at her over the porcelain rim of his delicately painted cup. His gaze narrowed, his brow furrowed, and his other hand tightened on his newssheet.

He did not look pleased to see her, and that sent a ripple of trepidation down her spine.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said.

“Good morning,” he replied, his voice hard and strong.

And she noted that he did not attempt to make her call him Gabriel again. It was a step backward, a step away from intimacy, not towards it.

She swallowed. “Is your breakfast to your liking?”

“My breakfast is exactly the same as it has been for years. Yes, it is to my liking.”

“Exactly the same?” she dared to tease. “Perhaps a variety of...”

“If you wish to discuss the variety of my breakfasts,” he cut in, dropping his gaze to his newssheet, “you may do so with Cook. I am sure it will be a most serious discussion between you two. I do not have time to discuss it.”

“My lord,” she said, surprised at the way he was speaking. Yesterday he had been kind and inclusive. Now he was talking to her as if her thoughts did not mean anything to him.

“I have much to do, Mrs. Meadow.” He sighed, lowering his cup. “So if you have something to say to me, out with it.”

“Last night...” she ventured before her voice caught in her throat.

He snapped his newssheet, then stared at her, his gaze hard, as if the strange flow of feeling had never happened between them. “What about last night?” he demanded.

She licked her lips, then continued, “Well, when you were in the garden—”

A muscle tightened in his jaw as he cut in. "I was in the garden because I could not sleep. I assume you could not sleep either in a strange new house."

"That is correct. You see, I often have memories and thoughts—"

"Yes, nighttime is the most fruitful at reproducing memories and doing terrible things to our thoughts." He dropped his attention back to his paper as if he was dismissing her. "I recommend having a good walk in the fresh air. It always helps me go back to sleep."

"Oh, I see," she said. "But you and I had an odd little moment, and I wanted to discuss it."

"Did we?" he countered. "Have an odd little moment."

"Yes, I think we did."

"Mrs. Meadows," he growled lowly, "I am very glad that Lady Mayhew thinks that I need you, and I'm willing to take that judgment on. I'm willing to see if I do indeed need you, but I don't need to interact with you a great deal. I'm a busy man. I don't particularly like people. As Cook will tell you. I stay in this house for a reason. I don't go down to Bodmin. I don't go up to St. Ives. I barely see my brother. I only see people who come to visit me, so that I can help them with their own works throughout the country. And I pay special attention to trying to improve the lives of those in Cornwall. Now, anything beyond that is a distraction, and I'm not interested in distractions."

She felt her blood chill. "I understand," she said. "Forgive me. I did not mean to cause any trouble."

"You have not caused any trouble at all, Mrs. Meadows," he said as though he had given her very little thought. "Thank you for your concern. I'll be most eager to see what breakfast you think I shall like. And, of course, you do have the run of the house. I will be very busy. I will not need any assistance from you. I'm sure you are very capable. And as her ladyship



said, the main quality of your position is to be able to work without my guidance.”

He stilled and lifted his unwavering gaze. “Are you still comfortable with that?”

“Of course I am,” she said, even as her spirit sank. Even as she felt the connection that she thought she had made with him drifting away from them.

It felt hellish.

Another wave of pain traveled through her. She had not felt hope for a connection in some time, and now she felt herself utterly foolish for having thought that someone like him, a lord, might want to be her friend, might want to see her as more than a housekeeper. Might feel...

She shoved the thought away.

She gave a quick curtsy and turned to rush out of the room.

“Mrs. Meadows,” he called.

She paused with a hand on the doorknob.

“I don’t wish to be disturbed by you,” he repeated firmly, his voice rough, “but I want to be clear. You’ve done nothing wrong. I’m not unhappy with you. I just simply prefer to be left alone.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said without looking back and strode through the doorway, her head held high.



Gabriel was tempted to throw his as yet unbuttered toast across the room, but that was the action of a child. And he would not allow himself to be the child that his brother had just accused him of being yesterday.

Every now and then, he did like to go on a good row, throwing things, dashing things about, or pounding on a large pillow he had made for just such an occasion. After all, people infuriated him, and he needed to let the fury out some way. He didn’t have a boxing partner, nor did he wish one.

He couldn't get about on his leg well enough to box.

So, he took his cane and he beat pillows when he was furious. It was better than shouting at people. He didn't like to shout at people, but he knew that he had a slight problem controlling the volume of his speech.

People had told him before that he growled.

He only growled after he had asked several times nicely. That was the truth. People often refused to listen to kind logic. They thought they knew better. Perhaps they did. But in his opinion, people had tried the same things over and over and over again, and it had borne no results.

They needed to try his ideas for a change. And if it took a little bit of growling to get people where he wanted them to be, a bit of growling was worth it.

But he had not meant to growl at Mrs. Meadows.

It wasn't her fault.

It wasn't her fault that he could not allow her in. That he did not allow anyone in. He had learned long ago that only the people closest to one could cause the most pain.

People like his father and, worse, his brother.

He could not ever forget that betrayal.

He had carefully isolated his pain, his memories, his feelings, so that he could make it through every day. And if something happened to those isolated parts, well, he would not be able to survive the pain, the memories, the thoughts, and the wish that Thomas Baker was not underneath the earth.

Nor would he manage his feelings about his brother, who had changed so entirely.

He had paid for Thomas Baker's funeral, and all the mine workers and villagers had attended. Baker had been a beloved member of the community. Gabriel had never recovered from the looks on the faces of the people around him.

The look on Alec's face.

He did his best with the boy, but he didn't know exactly what to do. He went on a walk with him every day to make sure that Alec was all right. That he wasn't lonely, that he was cared for.

But still Gabriel knew that he wasn't allowing the boy in. He didn't want to let anybody in. Certainly not Mrs. Meadows.

Last night had been a testimony of what he could not tolerate. How close he had been to turning back, coming back into the house, going up into her room, and throwing away everything he had worked for.

For just a moment of pleasure.

But he'd seen where pleasure took people.

Pleasure made people use others, and he wasn't about to do such a thing to her. He couldn't. He couldn't do it to himself either. He wouldn't be able to look at himself in a mirror, and he had to be able to look at himself in a mirror.

It had taken him some time to be able to do so again, for he had blamed himself for years for Tom Baker's death.

Shouldn't he?

After all, the man never would've been down the mine that day, that particular mine, unless Gabriel had asked him to go.

But there was no turning back the clock of time. There could only be going forward.

There could only be making amends, and that's what he did every day, and he wasn't going to let some foolish connection between himself and his housekeeper ruin everything.

## CHAPTER 9

Once, the twelve days of Christmas had been Gabriel's favorite time of year. But over the last years, he had grown to dread them.

That was the simple truth. He stalked around his study, teetering a bit on his leg. He grabbed his thigh and massaged it. The muscles were particularly tight which sometimes affected his back.

He dug his fingers into the tightly wound flesh, seeking out the source of his pain, but experience had taught him he never would find it. No, he was on an endless search to locate the font of that agony. And yet, he could not stop searching, could not stop hoping that one day he would be able to end the pain that coursed through his body, radiating out from his once-broken bones. Bones that had mended, but strangely.

It was the curse, he supposed, of men to be at the mercy of fate—broken bones, death, illness. He was grateful to be alive. He had to be grateful to be alive. Anything else was too dangerous.

He'd flittered with those dark thoughts years ago, but he did not allow himself to go down that path. Not any longer. Not when Tom Baker had already had his life taken from him.

Gabriel relentlessly clung to his life and work to make certain that he could get through the dark hours of the night.

He let his attention wander to the dark window.

The sun had already sunk below the horizon, for the dark came so quickly now. He wondered how regular people, people who could not afford wax candles, made it through the long nights.

Did they crowd round their fires?

Were they able to get enough wood to keep the burning embers glowing against the unending night? He had made it a personal mission to ensure that all the families on his mother's land were given firewood, that they could collect it from the woods on his property and burn it to keep the night bright, to be a beacon in the darkness.

So many lords did not give a damn about the darkness and the people trying to find any small light. Picking up fallen wood in the forests could result in charges. And he struggled to understand the perverse cruelty of his class.

Well, he would not be one to spread the dark. And so he let out a long sigh and massaged his temples now, for the ache there was increasing. He had been in his study all day for the last several days.

The work that he did was time-consuming and required a great deal of reading and a great deal of writing. His hands often cramped, his elbows often ached, and his back was often a mass of protest.

Bending over his desk for hours upon hours did strange things to his spine. He had taken to standing when he worked, to pacing about the room as best he could. He was even considering hiring someone to take down his words so that he might be able to spend more time pacing about whilst he worked.

Today? Today, he had been fighting his thoughts. He was losing.

They kept on in their unruly protest as they returned again and again to Mrs. Meadows.

Heather Meadows.

He had been so determined to cut her from his thoughts, certain that he could be the master of his will. It was a laughable joke. The damn woman kept invading his study via his thoughts as if she was standing there in the corner.

He had made mistakes with her; there was no question about it. He had not been particularly kind at the breakfast

table, but he'd needed her to go. He could not take the rising emotions deep in his heart and in his body.

Surely it was absurd that a woman who had been in his presence for such a short time could make such an impression and cause him to think so many strange thoughts. Yet here they were, and he could still feel the disappointment in her as she had left him to his morning repast.

Why had he done it?

Why had he disappointed her so entirely?

He knew why.

Fear, wasn't it?

It had to be. And he had never thought himself a coward before. He knew that fear made people do the worst sorts of things. And yet he had been determined and was still determined, clinging to the idea that it was logic and reason that was keeping him on this path.

He swallowed, closed his eyes, then blew out a long sigh. It was a damned difficult thing to be a human being. Sometimes he envied the foxes and the squirrels that raced over his lands, the birds that danced through the sky, and the fish that leapt in the sea.

Because sometimes he wished that he did not have his damned thoughts rattling around his brain. He wished he could simply take to the fields, to the bright skies, to the seas, and live.

Yes, how he longed to live fully, totally in the moment, thinking only of what was necessary, of living to his fullest.

But the life of a man was nothing like that at all. As a small child, the ability to think only of now had quickly been eradicated.

The idea that living was the purpose of life had quickly been dispelled by his father, his tutors, and the great machine of society.

Living was not the purpose of life for men, for women either. No, they were born to strive, to fight, to conquer, to imagine, to worry, to ever be seeking one's daily bread, changing the world or holding onto power, conquering countries, destroying people.

Gabriel crossed to the fire and grabbed the mantel as he let the warmth seep into his pained bones.

England was the greatest nation on earth. It had been for hundreds of years, and it would be for a very long time, unless, of course, it messed the entire situation up itself.

And it was capable of doing so. He knew the great lords, and they were no longer so very great. Perhaps they never had been. Perhaps it was all a lie. Greatness. But he longed to be great.

To change the lives of others for the better.

He wondered if the fish in the sea longed to be great. Or did the fish in the sea already know it was great, simply by swimming with its silvery scales through the icy waters and doing as it had been born to do?

Was this what he had been born to do? To pace a small study? To deny himself affection, connection, intimacy? It seemed so. But guilt and regret were emotions he could not tolerate. And if he had a remedy, he would make use of it.

It had been several days since he had disappointed Mrs. Meadows, and he would not allow it to stand. He had to pull himself together. He had to do better.

That was the purpose of his life.

To do better.

And so he strode to the door. Well, he hobbled to the door. If he was honest, he still liked to think he could stride, but he knew better.

He had been a beast this week.

A foolish, self-pitying beast, unkind and cruel, self-absorbed, thinking only of his own feelings. He headed out into the hall. He could do better.

His cane thumped beside him. Thump, thump, thump it went, along the way.

And then he forced himself to move with more care, to be quieter, to allow the stillness of the December night to fill the space around him.

It was a time of wonder. He had always loved Christmas. Yes, he had always loved the days leading up to those joyous twelve days of celebration, the celebration of the coming light, the celebration of the beating back of the dark, the celebration of the possibility of joy and love.

During Christmas, his youth had been full of dancing, and singing, and oranges, and the scent of cloves. Holly and ivy and mistletoe had decked every surface.

The music that had filled his father's house had been endless during those twelve days.

And here, in his grandmother and grandfather's house, which was now his, well, it had been an endless party of hiding walnuts, and finding toys, and sharing good cheer, and spreading wassail, and eating figgy pudding.

They had shared with the neighbors.

His grandmother and grandfather always gave dinners to the people who lived on the land, and presents too. They had known how to live, his grandmother and grandfather, and he often wondered how his mother had survived in his father's cold house. She'd never seemed to enjoy it, like a fairy creature brought to the human realm and withering.

But she had taught him a love of the land and a love of living things. He knew that's why he could not celebrate the deep, dark of the mines.

But he had not celebrated the twelve days of Christmas in years. Oh, he made certain that the villagers got their presents,



and things were done for the people on his land, but he could not take part.

For his own heart... His own heart could not revel. He paused before her door and wondered if Heather Meadows liked to revel, if she celebrated these days leading up to Christmas.

And then, much to his horror, he heard it.

Sobs shook through the air. Stifled sobs. She was clearly trying to be quiet, but they traveled through the door and to his soul.

They pierced it intensely.

He gasped inaudibly. Her pain was slipping through the chamber and out to him, pulling him closer.

He leaned in towards the door and silently rested his forehead upon the cool panel.

Dear God, had he done this?

Had he made her first days here at Ridgely House a misery? He'd certainly contributed to the misery with his coldness and his beastly behavior.

He knew it in his bones.

She had admired him, admired his work. And what had he done to her? He'd acted like a miser of spirit. It did not matter if he was always writing to improve the world if he could not be kind to those around him, surely.

And she was swallowed up in sorrow.

Oh God, it hurt. It hurt him, and not the way his leg hurt. This was a visceral deep shudder through his body.

Her sobs, dear God in heaven? They were powerful, though she was trying to suppress them.

He lifted his hand then. He had to speak to her. He had to apologize. He had to make it right. He folded his fingers into a fist and knocked upon the door.

Before he could say anything, her voice, sharp and intense, called right out, “Go away. I am perfectly well.”

He was silent. Perfectly well? Hardly.

Still, she did not wish him to enter.

“Go,” she said strongly. “Please, I do not wish to speak to anyone at present. If you wish me kindness at all, you will retreat at present.”

And so he stood there, lingering, uncertain what to do. Did he respect her wishes or did he push through the veil of her discomfort? Did he insist? Did he indulge himself to gain the forgiveness he so longed for?

His hand lingered again before the panel, about to knock.

She bit out again, “Please go.”

And this time the pleading note in her voice cut through him like a blade.

“Please just go,” she begged now. “My sorrow is my own, and I wish to share it with no one else.”

The words slipped through him, and he could not bring himself to defy them.

And so, much to his shame, much to his own disappointment, but knowing that he had to respect her wishes and not force himself upon her, he inched back from the door slowly.

Gabriel limped away, his heart heavy, knowing that he could not continue as he was, knowing that he had to change.

For Heather Meadows was in pain, perhaps as much pain as he was in.

Perhaps more. And the self-indulgence he had been allowing himself to dwell in?

Well, that could no longer be allowed to stand, now could it?



Heather held her breath, waiting to see if the person on the other side of the panel would do as she asked. She willed whoever it was to go.

She willed them with every fiber of her being. She sat upright on the bed, tense. Her eyes were riveted to the closed door. Her cheeks were wet with tears. Her eyes felt blurred.

Her hair was a wild tumble about her face and shoulders. She wiped at the mess of grief upon her face, furious with herself, furious that grief had followed her here.

She had made it through the last several days with dedicated work and zeal. She had thrown herself into her position and was already successful. The other servants liked her very much.

Tynley, the elderly, kindly, and wise butler, thought her a marvel. They took tea every day with Cook.

It was the happiest she had been in ages.

She felt like she belonged. They made her feel like she belonged, and the ache in her heart had begun to ease ever so slightly.

Of course, there was still the ache of Lord Gabriel and the mistake she had made there.

She had waited those first days to find out if she was to lose her position, but he had been serious. He was taking no notice in her or the work she did and apparently was not unhappy with her.

All he required of her was to do her job, and so she did it and did it the very best that she could. Did it with a smile. She was actively working on bringing in greenery to the house because she wanted the boy, Alec, to feel as if there was hope at Christmas time.

She did not spend a great deal of time with the child. He was always out on the moors, and that was good for him.

It was good for her too, because her heart could not yet bear being with the boy.

She knew that she would eventually have to go out with him. She would do it. She would, she promised herself, but as she sat there clutching the small locket with the likeness of her son in it, she sucked in a sharp breath and waited.

Waited for whoever had dared to knock and interrupt her sorrow to retreat. She wondered what was going through their heads and then, much to her relief, whoever it was stepped back.

She heard the creak of the wood on the other side of the door, and she closed her eyes with relief. She forced her legs over the side of the bed and crossed to the crackling fire. That beautiful warm hearth, which made her room feel welcoming. She knelt before it and stared into the orange, flickering flames. She clutched the small locket to her heart.

She had done so well, but of course, her sorrow had come for her.

Of course, it always would.

It was surely the way of grief. The absence of something could not be denied.

How she missed Jamie. How she wished that he could see Ridgely House, Bodmin Moor, and the beauty of Cornwall. How she wished that he could run out with Alec over the moor and see the wild creatures and birds there and ride a pony.

How she wished that she could ask Cook to make him sweetmeats and lamb stew. Oh, how she wished...

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks. She blinked, wishing. Wishing was how one wasted their life, and she was not going to waste hers.

She couldn't.

She'd been gifted hers, and so she had to do what she could with it, the very best.

Slowly, as if she was a woman of eighty, she stood and turned and crossed to her door. She placed a hand upon it.

She paused there for a long moment and, for a single second, she was sure that whoever had knocked was still standing on the other side.

And for a single second, she was certain that it was Gabriel and that he was sharing her sorrow and that he was willing her to be well.

Somehow that feeling—that feeling of being lifted? It did something to her. She almost put her hand on the handle and turned it, but she did not because her grief was her own and she was not ready to share it.

But the simple feeling of being wrapped up in his embrace carried her through the night.

## CHAPTER 10

*“Why do you always look so sad?”*

Alec’s bluntness should not have startled her.

She had already experienced his honesty, and in her experience, children were the truth-tellers.

Oh, they were excellent purveyors of imagination and created worlds, but they saw through all the lies that adults spoke, all the false assurances, and saw right to the core of things.

When someone was not well, children knew. When someone was sad, children knew. Adults could not hide things like they thought they could from children.

Alec was no different.

Alec sensed the emotional barometer of Ridgely House, and he sensed her emotions as well. In truth, she did not wish to answer him. Had she not just sent Lord Gabriel away from her door because she did not wish to give an answer?

But here on Bodmin Moor, standing beside the boy who was frolicking across the land like a goat or a mountain sheep, she felt her heart long to yield for a moment, to meet his transparency with her own.

And so before she could stop herself, she blurted, “I miss my son.”

He blinked, then crouched down, his fingers slipping over the blades of moor grass which were rough, bending back and forth in the wind that whipped in from the Channel.

He was silent for a long time as he studied it carefully.

“He’s dead?” he asked bluntly again.

“Yes, dead,” she confirmed. It felt as if her lungs collapsed at that. She didn’t wish to breathe again, but she would. Of

course she would. She always did.

“My mum died as well. My dad too. And my brother.”

In the face of his loss, did she dare grieve? Of course she did. The loss of a child was significant. He had lost his entire world though, his whole family in a short span of time, as she understood from the cook.

“I’m very sorry for it,” she said, her heart bleeding not just for herself now, but for him too.

His hands stilled over the blades. He tilted his face up and took her in. There were no tears in his eyes, but there was emotion on his face. Raw, strong emotion.

“I thought I was going to die too,” he said. “I thought when my brother died that they should just dig another hole and put me in the earth beside him. I didn’t want to live without Tom. He’d made it possible for me to survive without Mum and Dad. And he kept me up from the mines, kept me learning. But after he was gone, I thought I was going to have to go to an orphanage.”

His brow furrowed as memory seeped into his gaze. “I didn’t have any more family, and no one could afford to take me in. Not really. Everybody lives hand-to-mouth, meal-to-meal, day-to-day. They can scarce take care of their own. And then of course, Lord Gabriel came. And he offered me a place to stay. Said he admired my brother very much and wanted to do right by him. That I could come and live here on his lands next to the moors and never have to go down the mines. Never know a day’s hunger again.” Alec’s lips quirked in a smile. “He didn’t say that bit, but I knew it. And so I came. At first, I was determined to keep my heart hard like a stone, because Gabriel’s family is the reason the mines aren’t kept well. But Lord Gabriel? He’s different, he is. And I found myself here and the moors healed me.”

“Healed you?” she echoed, unable to believe a thing to be true, and yet she could not deny it. He seemed like a thriving child.

“That’s right,” he said. “Here on the moors, I’ve learned what life is.”

“I don’t understand,” she said honestly.

“That’s all right,” he said. “You’re used to staying indoors, aren’t you?”

She laughed, much to her surprise. “Yes, I’m supposed to. It is a housekeeper’s duty to stay indoors.”

The truth was she almost hadn’t come on this walk. She was supposed to stay indoors. That was her dominion and her domain, to rule from the attics to the cellars, to organize it all. But it would’ve been very bad of her indeed to deny Alec’s invitation when she’d had a bit of free time to come out with him.

Was he right?

Could the moors heal?

She tilted her face up to the sky. It was a winter sun. The sky still managed to feel steely, but the blue of it was bright, and the sun had a golden sort of glow with a strange luminescent quality. It was as if time could stand still forever, as if time did not actually exist out here on Bodmin Moor.

And the wind whispered in, tracing over her hair and his, making her cheeks burn with life. His were ruddy too, and she could feel it in her hands and her skirts whipping about her legs. The wind was like a playful sprite.

It was hard to let herself turn inward, to memory, to pain, when out here on the moor, she realized.

She gazed down at him. “How did it save you?”

“Well, I’ve seen things now out here amongst the animals. We all must go back into the earth,” he said softly. “We don’t know when that time will be, but it will certainly come. And it could be at any time.”

She winced. “That is very true and very wise.”



“It’s not wise” he said swiftly. “It’s just acknowledging the facts. Most people don’t seem to be able to do that, but you’ll see it here. The mice eat the bugs. The birds eat the mice. And sometimes the birds don’t have prey at all. But sometimes the birds are hunted by foxes, and humans, of course. We all are part of it,” he continued, “and then when we die, our bodies go back to the earth. And it starts again, you know? It helped me find peace to understand that we’re all just part of something, something great, something beautiful.”

She blinked back tears.

For so long, the idea of her little boy buried in the cold earth had been terrible, but here Alec was suggesting something very different.

“Your son,” Alec said. “He’s in everything, you know? He’s eternal.”

She stared at him. It was such a powerful thing to say.

Alec continued as if in a reverie. “He’s in the earth and the air and the trees and the flowers and the butterflies. And in the winter, he’s getting ready to make the world strong again and burst into spring. That’s what winter is. Death right before life,” he whispered as he brushed his hands along his trousers. “But life always returns.”

She stared at him, feeling as if she was a knot being gently and slowly untied. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

He stood carefully and, much to her shock, he took her hand in his. “Because I could feel your pain when I sat down across from you that first night.” Alec winced. “I almost couldn’t bear it. I almost had to run away from the kitchen and rush back out to the moors because you were wearing it like a shroud. It was thick. And it made me feel like I couldn’t breathe. But then I realized...I could help you. I could help you see, and if I could give anybody a bit of the peace like I found out here on the moor? Well that makes me a good one, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said brightly, laughing even as tears filled her eyes. “It makes you a good one indeed, Alec. Thank you.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Do you feel any better?”

She stared down at him, taking in his boyish face and the earnestness of his gaze. She reached up and tucked an errant lock of his curling hair back behind his ear. “I do because I found a friend at last.”

“You have?” he said, his brows crooking with curiosity.

“You, Alec.”

“Oh,” he said, grinning. “I thought you meant maybe Cook or one of the women in the kitchen.”

“They’ve all been very kind. But everyone is afraid,” she confessed, “to talk about grief. They dance around my sorrow. But not you.”

She thought of Gabriel, who had stepped back from the door when she told him to go.

But not Alec.

Alec knew death well, and so he had not been afraid. He had walked death’s path, and he had decided to take her hand in his and help her negotiate the way.

It was perhaps the kindest thing that anyone had ever done for her.

“You won’t feel very much better,” he warned. “Not right away. Not for a while. But I promise you that if you come out here to the moors, and the sunshine and the rain and the cold, if you watch the animals and see the grasses dance in the wind, and if you come out and witness the stones that have been here for hundreds of years, you’ll feel it,” he whispered. “You’ll feel that though we are here for only a blink of an eye, we are part of something so powerful that we cannot even imagine what it is. It is miraculous,” he breathed.

“Oh, Alec,” she replied, marveling at him. “You should be a poet.”

He laughed. "That's what Gabriel says too. He says I got a way with words and that he'll send me away to university if I want to go."

"You should," she urged, savoring the feel of his small hand. And much to her shock, she felt both the longing for her own son's hand and the joy of becoming close to Alec.

"I don't know," he confessed as he gazed around. "I like it here. I don't like the idea of ever leaving. But I do like the idea of seeing more of what has been created. It's remarkable, our world. Even with all that pain, there's so much beauty," he said softly. "And so many friends waiting to be met."

She choked back a sob at that, her heart welling with emotion at his pure heart and how much he had overcome.

She'd turned so many people away, shut them out, and chosen sorrow and loneliness until she'd been quite alone. But now with Alec beside her, his small hand in hers, she knew that she was not alone.

Ridgely House was a place of welcome.

It, and its staff, had welcomed her with open arms. But now she realized she'd been welcomed with an open heart too.

She was glad of it.

"Come along," Alec said. "There's much more to see. I'd like to show you my favorite cairn. And then I'd love to show you the most marvelous little hole in the ground. Mice live there, you know?"

"Mice," she yelped.

"Oh, don't be silly," he asked. "Promise me you're not silly."

She gave him a most serious look of consideration. "Well, I don't like to let mice get into the pantry."

"Well, this isn't the pantry," he said patiently. "This is the moor, and this is where they belong. And then there are the

rabbits. Rabbits are wonderful,” he said, “because they teach you how to not be afraid.”

“How can a rabbit teach you to not be afraid?” she laughed.

He gave her a knowing look. “You can see their nose and ears twitching, and their fur quivering with fear, but they come out of their burrows anyway, don’t they? They race from their safe place and dart about the moors, even though they know that, at any moment, a great big bird could fly down from the sky and get them. But they don’t let that stop them, do they?”

“No,” she breathed. “They don’t.”

“I like the rabbits,” he said firmly, “because of that. They don’t have any great defenses, but they’re not afraid. Or if they are afraid, they carry on, because they know they cannot spend their lives underground.”

She sensed the importance of this to him, and she nodded at his wisdom.

Every day at Ridgely House seemed to be a revelation.

And Alec was one of the greatest revelations of all.

One could not spend a life in hiding.

“Come on then, Alec. Show me these mice,” she said as she squeezed his hand.

And together they ran off over the moors... Laughing.

## CHAPTER II

*H*eather had not seen Lord Gabriel in over a week.

It was quite surprising that he had been so friendly, so welcoming, and then suddenly had disappeared.

She had not believed he would so completely avoid her.

Despite his claims she had done nothing wrong, he must have truly thought she had. But had it been so terrible? Her staring down at him from her window whilst he'd stood under the light of the moon?

It was the only thing that she could think of.

Or had it truly been him who had knocked upon her door in the night? Had her grief dismayed him?

Surely, such a thing would not have driven him away from her.

But whatever it was, he acted as if she was not in the house at all. And in fact, his behavior wasn't at all like the man she'd interacted with when she'd first arrived.

In the days that had passed, she had begun calling him the beast in her head. The Beast of Ridgely House.

Not because he was awful or horrid, but because he loved to growl. Though she never saw him, she knew that he was in the house because she could hear his loud, booming voice emerge from his study. And the pounding of his cane upon the floor.

When men came to the house to discuss things with Lord Gabriel, the volume often rose as did the tenacity. And then there was the fact that he stayed in his cave.

Yes, this is what he did. Like a bear, he retreated into the darkness of his study with his fire crackling and candles lit.

She knew this because she made certain that white wax candles were constantly supplied, along with food.

Yet, it was clear he did not wish to see anyone. He did not even wish the maid to come in to clean.

She was shocked that he was apparently cleaning his own fire grates and depositing the ashes in their copper container outside his door.

She was here to make his life easier, but for all she could tell, she must have made it harder. Or had he always cleaned his own fire grates and stayed so entirely to himself?

She would have to ask the cook or Tynley. She had not quite got up the courage yet to find out if this was a new habit of his, but everyone seemed to go on as if this behavior was somewhat normal, or at least no one questioned him.

So, she had done her best to focus on her tasks. And she had many of them. She needed to organize the books and catalogue the house. To have a better understanding of the way everyone worked together, she interviewed every single kitchen maid, tweenie, chambermaid, footman, groomsman, gardener, and stable boy.

She needed to know the scope of the house to run it well. She'd had to examine the pantry from top to bottom and determine how many jars of jam there were, how many things had been put away for the winter, and how much meat there was in the store. It was imperative that she understood how often they dealt with the butcher, the grocer, and all of the merchants who came up from the village.

It was no small thing, and her notebook was already full of duties to perform.

She met with Cook every day because Lord Gabriel did not like to decide his own meals, and so she had begun to learn the meals that were his favorites.

He loved simple, hardy food—potatoes, lamb, beef, stews—things that would keep him fortified. She was rather

surprised to find that he did not have much of a sweet tooth, except for hot chocolate in the mornings.

He had a bath hauled up every morning by the maids.

His bedchamber was just down the hall from hers, and she did not know how he avoided her so thoroughly, but she had yet to catch him going from his room to his study.

Did he go down while she was sleeping?

Did he linger before her door to make certain that she was still asleep? She contemplated staying awake the whole night long to catch him, but he was her employer, and such a thing was silly.

She supposed she could pound upon the door and demand an interview with him, but she wanted to keep this position because it did keep her busy. It was doing what it was supposed to, and yet she could not stop the niggling obsession she had with the beast behind his door.

Would he growl at her?

She rather liked the idea of it actually, the rumble of his voice rolling over her, the fiery crackle of his eyes taking her in. But she did not want to be sent away, so she had chosen to be careful instead.

And now today, this evening, she was investigating every room on the third floor. It had been a task she had taken on with methodical care, notebook in hand.

She was making a detailed record of every single room, taking down its purpose and most of the important furnishings in each place.

She had also been searching for secret passageways.

Houses of this kind were rife with them.

This she knew from the last housekeeper that she had trained with. Such hidden ways and rooms had to be studied carefully because it was a housekeeper's job to know the secrets, or at least as many secrets as possible, about a house.

After all, even those places needed to be kept clean and free of dust, animals, and damp.

The evening was late, and she took her candelabra down the hall and wound her way back into one of the more ancient parts of the house.

She tapped along the walls, looking for hollow panels, and then she turned down another dark hall, her candle tossing shadows and a golden glow about her.

The passage, compared to others in the house, was quite small, but she pursued it.

At last, she found herself standing in front of a set of paneling with an interesting swirling work carved into the wood. It was beautiful.

There were painted shields upon it. No doubt, they were family crests of bygone days.

She wondered how long Gabriel's mother's family had owned the house.

His mother's portrait was downstairs, as were most of the lady's family's portraits.

She could see the resemblance to her son. Still, here in the house, Heather found herself loving this sense of adventure.

It was more adventure than she had had in years.

Investigating the house, its nooks and crannies and secret places, made her feel awash with purpose.

She leaned forward and traced her fingers over the wood until she found an odd little bit sticking up.

She twisted it, and much to her delight, she found that she was correct. The panel shifted and clicked.

She had found a secret hiding place! As the panel swung open and revealed an empty black rectangle of space leading downward, she gasped.

"It's a priest's hole," a voice rumbled.



She tensed and whirled around, her heart slamming rapidly against her ribs.

She felt her back press up against the now empty opening, and she nearly tumbled back in.

A hand shot out and grabbed her, steadying her.

“Careful, we wouldn’t wish you to fall in,” he said.

“Well, I wouldn’t go very far,” she riposted, even as she felt completely off foot. “It’s not deep, is it?”

He held her tightly against his hard body. “No, but I still wouldn’t wish you to fall back in. You could do yourself a damage. And I have enough difficulties without being accused of murdering my housekeeper,” he teased softly.

She tensed in his arms for a single moment as she stared up at his face.

He was such a beautiful man.

His jaw was strong and stubbled with the shadow of a beard. His scent was lemon and ink. It was intoxicating.

His hard body pressed against hers, and his palm was splayed against her lower back.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his warmth undeniable, his strength formidable, even as he relied on his cane.

“Making records of your house,” she replied, still stunned to be in his embrace.

“Surely, there are records somewhere.”

“Well if they are, I have not found them yet. I checked the last housekeeper’s library of books, but she did not do what I am doing now. Or if she did, she took the book with her or mislaid it.”

“How very careless of old Mrs. Coxby,” he rumbled before his lips twitched. “Perhaps she took it with her. It wouldn’t surprise me. She was a dear old soul who was very protective

of the family. She lives across the moor, if you wish to go and investigate for yourself.”

“I’m rather enjoying my own exploration, if I must be honest with you,” she confessed.

“Well, I do like honesty,” he said. “You like poking about in the dark with a candlestick?”

“No,” she countered steadily, not missing that he still held her close. “I like learning about this place and investigating it.”

“I see,” he said. “You’re very curious?”

“I am,” she replied softly. “It’s a beautiful place.”

“I agree.”

Biting her lower lip, she turned ever so slightly in his arms and stared at the empty opening she’d nearly fallen through.

She could still feel his hard chest against hers, and she fancied she could even feel the beat of his heart.

Heather closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation of him. She felt dangerously close to scandal.

But she enjoyed the feel of him.

Dear heavens, she did! And in that moment, she realized how lonely she was for another person’s touch. It was a frightening realization.

Her breath was ragged for a moment, and she winced.

Had he heard that? Heard that little gasp, that intake of air from her?

Did he know she longed to rock her body back against his? But she could not jeopardize her position by doing such a thing. It would be the height of foolishness.

“Can you believe that people used to hide here hundreds of years ago?” she breathed.

“It was very brave of them,” he mused. “Especially when they knew it could get them killed.”

“Brave of the family too,” she observed “To hide them here.”

“Yes. The power of one’s convictions and beliefs is a remarkable thing,” he agreed. “Most people now, I don’t know if they’d be willing to die for such a belief.”

She tilted her head to the side, contemplating him and the shadows lining his face. “Oh, I don’t know. I think many people would. I think many people do.”

“Do you?” he asked softly.

“Well, look at you,” she urged. “Clearly, you still have the power of your mother’s family’s convictions running through your veins.”

He smiled slowly then. “My mother loved the priest hole and what she considered to be the romantic nature of this family.”

“Really?” she asked.

He laughed softly. “She’d loved to tell stories of how our ancestors stretched back to the Cousins War and how our family has turned its coat a few times, from white rose to red.”

She gasped at that. “You can’t possibly be serious?”

“Of course I am.” His dark gaze roved over her. “It is the way of all English families who have lived to see the day. We’ve had to choose our alliances well, don’t you know?”

“And is that why you are doing what you are doing now?”

“What do you mean?”

She hesitated, wondering if she was mad to be so honest. “Turning your coat, so to speak, against your own class?”

His brows rose. “How very astute. Do you see what I see?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed, hoping he never let her go. “What do you see?”

“That the future is with the people and not with the aristocrats.”

She frowned at his fanciful idea. “I don’t know if that’s true. I think certain people will always hold power,” she said. “But I do not think what is happening now can continue. Not with the way things are progressing, and I wouldn’t wish them to either. They’re simply unkind.”

“And you wish the world to be kinder?” he asked softly.

“I do. As do you,” she ventured. “And I’m very sorry,” she rushed suddenly.

“What are you sorry for?” he asked, his voice rumbling about her.

“I know I gave you offense, and I do not wish you to think ill of me. Do you—”

“Why would you believe I think ill of you?” he whispered.

She arched a brow. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Have I?” he queried.

She turned slowly away from the small hidden room, angling herself back into the crook of his arm. “You have, and you know it. I thought we got along quite well when we first met.”

“We did,” he said softly. “Perhaps too well.”

“Too well?” she queried.

“Too well,” he affirmed.

And his reply sent a shiver of anticipation through her limbs before it awakened her heart.

## CHAPTER 12

*He* was making a mistake.

It had to be a mistake, and yet he could not resist. He had come out of his study and seen her slip down a hallway, a candle held high in hand, a notebook in the other.

She had so entranced him with her dark hair clouded about her pale face and her simple wool gown clinging to her form. She had drifted down the hall, and he had felt connected to her by some invisible and undeniable means.

Much like the night when she had watched him from the window, he felt compelled to watch her.

And so slowly, quietly as best he could with his cane, he had followed her. And she had not heard him, so entranced with her own thoughts, she seemed.

Whatever was she thinking, he had wondered.

Now he knew she was falling in love with the house just as he had done over the years.

He far preferred it to his brother's house. That place was a mausoleum to him now. A cold place, a memorial for wealth and power.

This place held secrets and stories and memories of his grandmother and grandfather, and far happier times in which he had, much to the shock of his father, played with the sheep out on the moors and helped to shear them once upon a time.

He had never heard the end of that, and his mother had not either. Gabriel had not been allowed to go out to the fields and moors again after that. He'd only been allowed to observe the shepherds and their dogs at work.

Now, he stood in the corridor, the priest's hole behind them, staring down at the young woman who had done the strangest things to his mind and his body.

Yes, he was curious about her, very curious indeed, and from the way that she had gasped, she felt the same about him. He had not meant to frighten her, but he had seen the way her eyes flared, not just out of surprise but out of desire.

And then there was the way she had lingered in his arms. He loved the feel of her curved body in his embrace. He never wanted to let her remove herself again.

It was a damned coil.

This was madness. It had to be madness.

“You know,” she said softly. “I’ve begun thinking of you as a beast.”

“A beast?” he queried, surprised for he had thought the same that night he tried to seek her out. But he teased, “I think I’m rather nicer than that.”

“Oh, you are,” she assured. Before she gave him a mischievous look. “You’re a gentle beast. A good beast, but a beast all the same.”

“In what way?” he asked, letting his thumb trace over her wool-covered ribs.

“Like a bear,” she said. “Always off on your own, always in your cave, hiding away, keeping to yourself.”

“I do not keep entirely to myself,” he countered.

“No, I suppose that’s true,” she murmured. “You allow people in every now and then to roar at them, but why did you suddenly shut yourself away? I have not been able to ask anyone if it is because of me.” Her eyes widened as if she dreaded his reply. “Is it because of me?”

He let out a low groan and longed to lower his forehead to hers. “Please, Mrs. Meadows, you have done nothing wrong. You have done nothing to offend me. I was telling the truth. I like you. I like you very much, but you must understand I cannot give way to feeling. I don’t trust feelings, you see. I’ve been rather let down by them... And I can’t risk—”

She nodded. “I understand. I’m your employee. I must be careful too. I would not wish it to get about that I was a woman of easy virtue. I have only ever been married the once and my husband is the only...”

Her breath caught in her throat.

He knew what she was about to say. And he knew what they were both thinking. That both of them were lonely.

That both of them longed for the touch of another human. That both of them longed to fall into each other’s arms, feel each other’s embrace, and gain succor there.

He swallowed as wave after wave of hunger for her devoured him.

“I’m tempted to act the beast,” he rumbled softly.

“In what way?” she returned, her lips parting.

“To kiss you,” he whispered, barely daring to say it aloud. “It’s what I wanted to do the moment I saw you. I wanted to take you in my arms, to wrap them about you, to tilt your head back, and to kiss you.”

“That doesn’t sound so very much like a beast,” she said, even as her voice hitched slightly.

“Does it not?” he breathed. “For it is not what a gentleman should do. That’s what a beast would do. A beast would take what they want. And God help me, I want you.”

She blinked at that as if the idea of it suddenly flitted through her mind, and she liked it very well indeed.

“Perhaps it would not do too much harm for one kiss,” she said. “For you to take what you want this once... Especially if it is what I want too.”

It was as if she was trying to convince herself that this was all perfectly reasonable, the two of them in a dark corridor, but he needed no further urging.

It was as if years of self-denial suddenly swept over him. Gabriel lowered his mouth to hers, and though he longed to be

gentle, he realized he was a beast, for the hunger in him made him so ravenous that he kissed her with a passion he did not even know he possessed.

His mouth took hers, claiming, devouring, branding her as his own, and she wrapped her arms about him as if she wished to do the same to him.

Her back arched, her hips rocking into his frame.

She took his kiss, every bit of it, and then began to kiss him in return. His tongue teased the line of her mouth, and she let out a gasp of air.

Their kisses roared like embers lifting into the sky—hot, beautiful, primal.

After a moment, she suddenly pulled back. And he winced, certain he was going to need to beg for her forgiveness.

“Why do we have to deny ourselves?” she blurted. “I came here so that I would not be lonely, and now I suddenly find I don’t have to be. You are offering me something far more than I thought I could have.”

“And what is that?” he said.

“The gentle touch of another,” she professed with a powerful conviction. “Of being close to someone without the pain of memory. Don’t you think we could have that?” she urged. “Don’t you think we could keep each other company? You are lonely too. I see it in you. You are suffering, as I am. Perhaps we could be each other’s balm.”

He hesitated, but he could not deny that he longed for what she offered. “It sounds terribly dangerous.”

“Life is dangerous,” she countered. “You know it better than most.”

“You’re using my own life against me,” he groaned.

“I will use whatever tools I have to seek what I hope for.”

“And what do you hope for, Mrs. Meadows?” he asked softly.



He could not feel regret for what he had begun with their kiss, but he worried now that he had started something which might cause more pain in the end. More pain for her and for himself.

He swallowed, at war with himself. “I cannot offer you my heart—”

“And I do not ask for it,” she cut in. “You are far above my station. You could never love someone like me.”

Those words left a bitter note in him. He hated the idea of such class structures, but she was largely right. Society would never smile upon a relationship between them. His own servants would be shocked. The villagers would be appalled. A man like him was supposed to marry another of his station. It wasn't like fairy tales in books. Reality never was. Reality was always far harsher than fiction.

“We could have each other,” she said. “Perhaps at night in the quiet of your room. You could have me, and I could have you. We could be company for each other during the long dark hours. We could ease the loneliness in each other's hearts.” She nodded as if committing herself to the idea. “Clearly, you are suffering. How long have you kept yourself alone?”

He looked away. He didn't wish to discuss it. Not really. But then he found himself admitting, “Since the accident.” He frowned. “Well, not exactly. There was a short period of time after the incident where I tried to force myself to be intimate with people, but I couldn't.” His throat burned as he recalled the brutal memories of those times. And the acidic nature of it was so sharp that he nearly gasped. “It was too awful,” he confessed. “The lies, the trying to appear fine to everyone, as if everything was as it should be.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

And much to his shock, he realized that somehow she did understand.

“You need not pretend with me,” she said. “You can be exactly who you are with me.”

“You say that like I should trust you,” he said, and he realized how cold his words might sound.

She stared at him for a long moment, then began to pull away. “You’re correct. You don’t know me at all. It was simply an idea...”

“Wait, Mrs. Meadows,” he urged. “I don’t know why, but in many ways, I feel like I know you better than anyone. There was something about you the day that you stood on my threshold, and there was something about you the night you watched down upon me.”

“I felt the same,” she whispered. “A connection. Surely, we should not throw it away. Surely, life is full of enough suffering. We can at least keep each other company.”

“Company,” he echoed, and he lifted his hand to her cheek and cupped it with his palm. He tilted her head back and traced her lower lip with his thumb. “Intimacy. It is a dangerous road to take. Are we truly going to do this?” he asked. “Are we going to throw all caution to the wind?”

“No,” she replied, even as she trailed her hands up to his shoulders. “We are going to be very careful indeed. For we are both wounded.”

“I have gone far too long trying to be alone,” he confessed. “But it no longer serves me. That which I thought gave me strength is now weakening me. You are right. Let us help each other.”

She nodded, causing her dark curls to tease over his hand. “Let us know each other. Let us offer each other solace.”

“I did not realize I needed solace,” he returned, “but the ache in me has never gone away. I always thought it was just my leg,” he said softly.

“It is not just your leg,” she replied. “It is something more.”

He gave a tight nod, but he did not wish to talk about Thomas Baker today, in this moment, in this hall. And

instantly he understood.

“That was why you sent me away,” he rasped.

She blinked. “What?”

“When I knocked on your door.”

“I thought it was you,” she said softly. “I felt your spirit.” She winced. “That must sound absolutely mad, but I did.”

“No, it doesn’t sound mad,” he countered. “It’s how I felt when you were staring at me from the window. I felt you with me,” he said. “Somehow, as if you were protecting me, shielding me from my pain, as I went out onto the moor to try to bring my thoughts back together. But you sent me away from your door because you could not face putting your grief into words or having someone witness it.”

She stared at him, shocked. “You understand?”

“I do understand,” he affirmed. “I’ve never been able to let anyone truly see. And I don’t want to. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Not after what happened that day in the mine.”

“Then let us make a pact,” she began, her voice rich and full of passion. “You will not ask me to show you my grief, and I will not ask you to show me yours.”

He traced his fingertips gently over her cheek, up to her dark hair, and stared down into her eyes. “I agree.”

“Then you shall come to my rooms soon, and our friendship shall begin.”

## CHAPTER 13

*H*eather brought Gabriel his hot chocolate herself this morning.

She felt rather pleased that the idea had come into her head. And she stood in front of his study door with the silver tray balanced carefully on one hand.

She gave the door a quick knock, then she turned the handle and nearly upended the hot chocolate pot and accompanying cup onto the floor.

Heather let out a yelp of surprise, and Lord Gabriel also let out a sound of shock. Not, she thought, because of what he was doing but at her reaction to him.

He was standing in front of a basin of water, his shirt off. Water droplets danced along his perfect skin. His chest was a sight to behold. It was a masterwork of muscular hills and valleys.

Heavens, he was a work of art, as beautiful as any of the paintings she had seen along some of his walls.

His russet hair was damp as well, flicked back from his angular face, and his breeches? His breeches clung to his hips and legs like a second skin.

His cane was positioned against his desk, a hand's grip away.

"What are you doing?" she rushed, though it was fairly obvious, and she felt like a dolt for her silly question.

"I like to splash myself with cold water," he informed with a bemused smile. "It gets my brain going when it's tired."

"Do you?" she said, clearing her throat.

"Indeed." He picked up a piece of linen and began drying himself, a fascinating process in itself. "It is an age-old tactic

used by stoics all over the world and throughout the centuries. Thomas Jefferson apparently likes to stick his feet into a bucket of cold water every morning.”

She had of course heard of Mr. Jefferson and his writings. “And have you met Mr. Jefferson?” she asked, quite curious.

He blew out a sigh. “I have not. He is rather grandiose, as I understand, and difficult. Many powerful men are.”

“Oh,” she said. “Have you met many powerful men?”

And then she wished to kick herself. Of course he had.

“Well, not lately,” he said kindly. “Most of the men I meet are important men, but they’re not what I would consider truly powerful. Not in the sense that you are thinking. Besides, they can be damned impossible to be around.”

“Oh, I see,” she said.

He blew out a derisive breath. “I’m not interested in mercurial people.”

Her lips twitched at that.

“Damn,” he said, amused. “You think I’m a hypocrite, don’t you?”

“Not exactly,” she began as she crossed towards him with his hot chocolate. “But you are rather mercurial.”

“Am I?” he exclaimed.

She arched a brow at him.

“Bloody hell,” he said. “Yes, the beast thing.”

She nodded as she examined the cluttered surface of his desk, contemplating the safest place to put the tray down. “You go from hiding yourself in your cave to acting quite... pleasantly.”

He winked. “Perhaps that is my nature. Once you get to know me, all my growly bits are quite pleasant.”

“I always liked your growl,” she said as found a small spot between Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders and a report on tin.

“Did you?” he queried, surprised.

“Oh, yes,” she assured, adjusting the pot and the cup. “The sound of your voice is quite lovely. May I pour you your hot chocolate?”

“Please do,” he said.

He gazed at the tray and a frown pulled at his lips.

“You look disappointed,” she said, hesitating as she picked up the heavy, beautifully worked silver hot chocolate pot.

“I wish there were two cups,” he said honestly.

“You do?” she breathed, realizing what he was implying.

He cocked his head to the side, which caused his damp hair to play against his cheekbones. “Pour some into a saucer for me, and you take the cup.”

She blinked in astonishment. Of course many villagers did drink their tea from saucers, but this felt somehow almost as intimate as his touch.

“Remember that we are going to be close,” he reminded.

She laughed. “So we are.”

And with that, she took the cup from its saucer and poured a bit of hot chocolate into each vessel.

“Come,” she said. “Or would you like me to bring it to you?” She swallowed as she let her gaze travel down to his naked chest. “You certainly should put your shirt on.”

“Why?” he teased. “Is it distracting you?”

“Yes,” she said, honestly. “Now come along.”

“My goodness,” he mused, clearly pleased. “What a housekeeper you do make. Perhaps I like being ordered about by you.”

“I doubt that very much,” she returned as she handed him the porcelain saucer painted with blue flowers, now carefully full of the expensive dark liquid. He took it in his hand, and she picked up the cup.

They each took a drink.

The rich chocolate slipped over her tongue.

It was bliss.

She had not tasted anything so rich or luxurious in all her life. After all, servants generally could not afford to have such things. But as she stood there taking in the hot chocolate and taking him in too, she realized that he was introducing her to a world that she had not even known existed.

One that she'd never even considered being close to, aside from serving.

“What are you doing this morning?” she asked boldly.

He eyed his desk as if was a millstone. “I’m going over lists of people in the House of Commons and Lords. I think it’s incredibly important to know who votes which way at any given time. And then, of course, I’m going over the latest reports on tin mining in Cornwall and reviewing the new machinery being made.”

“I see,” she said, her brow furrowing as she considered all that he studied. “And does knowing about tin mining help you reform it?”

“It does,” he said. “It also helps me to know what the local owners are thinking. Some of them really are good men. They wish to do the best they can, but they can’t afford to change things. Some men are like my father, incredibly powerful with a great deal of money, and others, well, they’re barely getting by. And it’s important to make a distinction between the two.”

“It seems a great deal of work,” she confessed. “Do you ever weary from it?”

He was silent for several moments as if struggling with his reply. “I do,” he said. “But I cannot stop. It’s a mountain of work for very little change. And if I am honest, I do not think much change will occur in my lifetime. I will work at this until I am old, but I will not give up.”

He took her breath away, with his commitment and refusal to be daunted by the scope of his challenge.

But there was a sorrow to him now as he contemplated the nature of his unrewarding goals.

She cleared her throat and took another sip of hot chocolate before she asked, “Do you ever do anything that you enjoy?”

He gaped at her for a long moment, his sorrow fading, replaced by surprise. “Yes,” he said. “I enjoy going outside. Sometimes I go with Alec to the moors. I read. I enjoy reading very much. And well,” he hesitated, “I like to play chess, but I haven’t had anyone to play with in a long time. Alec is not particularly keen.”

“You could teach me,” she dared to offer.

“I suppose I could,” he said, brightening. “Would you like to learn?”

“Oh, very much. Anything to entertain my brain,” she rushed. “You see, my brain has a way of creating all sorts of trouble.”

“Does it?” he laughed and not unkindly. It was the sound of one who likely felt empathy.

“Does yours do the same?”

He blinked before he put his saucer down. “Yes, it does cause trouble, that is. Why do you think that so many of us have brains that cause trouble?”

“I really couldn’t say,” she said, pursing her lips. “So we must do our very best to keep each other afloat. Now, I must go back to work, my lord. I have much to do. Christmas is coming, and I have decided that it’s very important that Alec see a house decorated beautifully and have some entertainments laid in so that he can enjoy the season. And I know, in the past, you approved celebrations for the staff.”

“Yes,” he said. “That is very good. Tynley usually arranges it.”



“Poor Tynley,” she replied. “I do think if he has to arrange one more thing, he shall lose his wits and tear out his hair.”

Gabriel groaned. “Damnation. Have I done that to him?”

She gave him a kind but firm look. “Yes, Lord Gabriel, I think you have, but that’s all right. He didn’t want to tell you the truth of it. He likes you so very much, you see, and wants your approval.”

“Does he not know that he has it?” Gabriel asked, astonished.

She paused, then replied, “I don’t think anyone knows that they have your approval unless you give it to them specifically.”

He drew in a long breath as he weighed her words. “So you are suggesting that I give out some compliments?”

“I don’t think it’s a terrible idea,” she encouraged. “Everyone likes to be recognized.”

He smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “Perhaps that can be the first round of Christmas cheer. I shall give out compliments to everyone. Should I start with you?” he teased.

She shook her head quickly and felt her cheeks burn. “Oh, dear,” she said. “I was not fishing for a present. Now, I truly must go.”

“But you’ll see me this evening, as we agreed?” He looked hesitant, as if he was afraid she was going to say no.

“Yes, my lord, I will,” she replied evenly, even as her heart raced.

“Chess,” he said.

“Chess,” she agreed and then decided to make certain that she could have her way. “And you agree to a yule log being brought in, a host of greenery, and celebrations meant to increase good cheer?”

“Add anything you’d like,” he said softly. “Whatever you like, I shall like,” he said before a shadow crossed his gaze. “I

just simply... Well, I think I've let the place down a bit."

"It's all right, my lord," she assured, her heart aching for his sudden sense of failure. "Sometimes we let one thing down when we pay so much attention to something else, and your attention has been taken up in most important matters. There's always time to turn the ship, so to speak."

He gave a nod, but he looked rather disappointed in himself.

"I did not mean to cause you distress," she said softly.

"You have not. I promise you that." And with that, he crossed over to her and took her hands in his. "I'm glad that you are here. I'm very grateful that you have come. You are changing things that I didn't even know needed to be changed."

She smiled at him. "And there is my compliment then. My first Christmas present. Thank you, Gabriel."

And with that, she slipped her hands from his and headed out into the hall.

As soon as she had closed the door behind her, she pressed her back to the wood paneling and looked up to the painted ceiling.

She could not explain the wave that went over her. She felt...wonderful. She felt at ease. She felt alive, and it was very good indeed.

Bolstered by hope and Ridgely House, she charged down the hall, ready to do her work, ready to whip the house into shape for a very merry Christmas and a beautiful December.

And it would be something she did with relish.

## CHAPTER 14

The figure coming out of the sleety rain on the moor was unwelcome, like a hand coming out of the cold to drag Gabriel back into darkness.

He stopped and held his hand towards his ward who was beside him.

“Alec,” he warned in a low steady voice, “you best go back to the house.”

Alec looked out into the distance as if he could somehow see through the sleet spitting down from the sky.

The thunder of hooves pounded towards them. And Gabriel knew exactly who it was from the sound of the racing horse and from the size of the man atop it.

His brother’s great coat swirled about his large frame, and the Duke of Wrathborne rode up hard before he pulled on the reins of his powerful stallion.

Alec gave a quick tug of his forelock to the duke, unable to resist past traditions. Then he turned and ran off towards the house.

“The boy’s afraid of everything,” the duke said.

“No, but he knows that you are a bastard.”

His brother swung down off the horse, holding the reins tightly in his gloved fist. “I am no such thing, and you know it.”

“I don’t mean literally, man,” he sighed, wondering when his brother had become so serious. So grim. Once, he’d been full of joy. “You’re a figurative bastard. You can cause a great deal of discomfort and discontent wherever you go. But it doesn’t have to be that way, you know?”

“Dukes can make people uncomfortable. I’m aware of it,” Wrathborne stated. “Now, you and I need to talk.”

“What do we need to talk about?”

“You have a new housekeeper, is that correct?”

“Yes. Lady Mayhew sent her.”

That seemed to give his brother pause, and he was rather pleased by this. Gabriel loved stunning his brother. His brother thought he knew everything, but he did not.

“She did?” his brother breathed.

“Yes,” he replied without adding any more information, which his brother clearly wished for.

“And she’s Welsh?” his brother prompted as the sleet lessened but still glistened in his dark hair.

“She’s from Wales. There’s a difference,” Gabriel pointed out. He enjoyed playing with his brother now. Not as they once had done when banter and good fun had ruled the day. No, he liked to watch his brother negotiate his new rigidity.

His brother’s eyes narrowed. “She’s also beautiful, I’ve heard.”

“Is she?” Gabriel asked, refusing to rise to the bait.

“That is what the gossips are saying,” the duke warned. “They are saying a beautiful young woman, not even thirty years of age, is living in your house, under your roof.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Well, if she’s living in my house, she’s most certainly under my roof,” he drawled. “And yes, she’s under thirty. As a matter of fact, I would guess that she’s closer to twenty-five. But she’s no wilting flower. She’s known suffering and had experience of the world, or at least that’s what I understand from Tynley.”

“Well, Tynley would know,” his brother ground out. “He knows everything. And Lady Mayhew. What does she say about this?”

“She posted me a note not long after Mrs. Meadows arrived, apologizing for her nefarious behavior, but saying that it was for the best. Like cod liver oil, unpleasant, but resulting in good consequences.”

His brother rolled his eyes. “The countess should keep herself to herself.”

“Perhaps, but she never has, and she never will.”

“She doesn’t bother me,” Wrathborne gritted.

“That’s rather sad,” Gabriel returned, wrapping his hand tightly about the head of his cane. “Must mean she’s given up on you.”

His brother’s eyes narrowed. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

“Why are you here? You betrayed me,” Gabriel said firmly. “And I—”

“I did not betray you,” his brother declared. “The melodrama of such a statement is—”

“It’s not melodrama,” Gabriel cut in. “It’s not ridiculous. You’re the only family I have left, and you want nothing to do with what I’m trying to accomplish. As a matter of fact, you’re opposed to it. You took his side in the end, and only after he was put in the ground. I can’t understand why.”

Wrathborne’s face grew grim and his eyes... Oh his eyes, turned hard as if something had crushed the life out of him.

“You don’t need to understand why,” his brother rasped. “It is the position that I am in, and the one I must accept.”

“I won’t believe that,” Gabriel countered. “And my heartbreak at your betrayal is such that I don’t know if I can trust anyone ever again.” He struggled to find words to explain his shock and dismay. “You were like a saint, and now you’re like a devil.”

“A devil?” Wrathborne bit out. “Well then, I shall do my best to cause hell all around.”

“Why would you do that?” Gabriel breathed.

His jaw clenched tight, and his black gloved hand curled into a fist as if some demon did indeed twist inside him. “If everyone thinks me a demon, perhaps I should behave thus.”

“Can you hear yourself?” Gabriel challenged.

His brother ground his teeth, ignoring the question. “Can we at least agree on one thing?”

“No, I don’t think we can,” Gabriel replied firmly. “Not until you can see the suffering that our family causes.”

The duke looked away. “I went down to the mines,” he said tightly.

Gabriel hesitated. “What?”

“I went to the mines like you suggested. I even went down one of the shafts.”

“You can’t possibly be serious,” Gabriel whispered. “I would’ve heard about this.”

Wrathborne gave him a cold smile. “Would you, if I told them to say nothing?”

“Perhaps not, but I am surprised.”

His brother drew in a long breath. “Gabriel, I know you are a smart man, and I’ve hurt you terribly. I’ve done things that I can’t explain, and I won’t explain them either. You say I betrayed you. Well, I understand betrayal. Betrayal is a brutal thing. It burns one up. But here’s the thing. I have a duty to do, to the estate, to Father. Promises were made.”

He had not been there on their father’s deathbed. He had not heard the words spoken between the old duke and the new. But suddenly, he wondered if some sort of agreement had been made, a deal. What had his father known about his brother that could make his brother retract so much of his old self, his goodness?

“Tell me,” Gabriel urged, “and I will help you.”

“There is no help,” his brother replied, his voice hollow. “But I had to let you know that I at least did that.”

“And you will change things?” he asked, daring to hope.

“I did not say that,” his brother said tightly.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Then the betrayal still continues if you cannot see the evil done.”

The duke stared at him, almost all traces of the boy he’d known gone. “You should come for Christmas. It is where you belong,” Wrathborne said.

“I haven’t belonged in that house for years,” he replied quietly, firmly. “And as a matter of fact, I don’t think I ever belonged there. Mother never did. You should come here,” Gabriel added. “You belonged here once.”

“It is not my house,” his brother snapped, and the cold thread between them stretched.

It must have been difficult that their mother had left the house to Gabriel. She had loved them both dearly, and she had hated the rivalry that would occasionally come up between them. They had both held her hands when she had slipped away from this earth from a cancer, and she had been so certain that they would be best friends always.

How disappointed she would be, how brokenhearted.

And that felt like another betrayal by his brother, for Gabriel was not the one who had changed.

His brother had.

“Well,” Gabriel said at last, “if you cannot make merry in your heart and find the real reason of the season, you’re correct. You do not belong here. It is not your house. And you should leave now.”

“Just be careful,” Wrathborne said. “You might cause a scandal with that housekeeper.”

“Ah, it sounds like a delicious proposition,” he mocked, hating that his brother thought he had to warn Gabriel. “You

see, I have never done wrong in my life, and I won't now."

"You just keep to that," the duke gritted. "Because people are already talking."

"I don't care if people are already talking," he growled right back, unafraid. "You care more about what people are saying than the lives and deaths of the people around you."

His brother tensed, then swung himself back up on his horse.

"Our friend paid me a visit," the duke bit out at last.

"Which friend?" Gabriel demanded, stunned.

"The Devon one."

"What?"

"He came in out of the dark and said there's a war going on in Devon." His brother's face darkened. "The families, they're at it again. The bodies are piling up, and it seems our friend is concerned and wants to know if he'll have our support."

"I don't do those kinds of things anymore," Gabriel said. "I don't go on trips in the dark across the channel for a bit of a lark."

The duke nodded. "I know, nor do I. I can't. But you know what it's like over there. You know what's done in secret."

"Are you going to call the excise men?" he asked swiftly.

Wrathborne gave him a disgusted look. "Don't be ridiculous. Why in God's name would I do such a thing?"

"I wouldn't put it past you."

"You think that I would have one of our friends arrested?"

"Yes," he said truthfully.

And with that, his brother whipped his stallion around, and with a look that bespoke a storm, he raced back across the moor to the house that was his, and that he was alone in.



Gabriel turned back to Ridgely House, which was now becoming warm and welcoming.

His servants had always done wonderful work, but he was no fool. He knew that she was the reason why it was all beginning to hum together. He needed to write Lady Mayhew a letter of thanks. His mother's dear friend was right, as always, and he was grateful.

And he could not wait till this evening, until chess, until he had the opportunity to teach Heather exactly how to use her queen... And how to rule a board.

## CHAPTER 15

*A*s Heather tried to move her knight into the wrong position, she let out a laugh as she realized the error of her ways.

The look upon his face was priceless.

It was clear he had been playing chess for years, but he was kind and patient and explained the rules well, which was why she knew already that she had made a mistake.

“Oh dear,” she groaned, leaning her forearms against the inlaid small table, ideal for cards and games and positioned just before the fire. “Are you going to take him captive?”

“Well,” he said carefully, “I suppose I should now that you’ve said so, but I had considered being merciful.”

“You must not be merciful,” she chastised playfully. “You must play it as you mean to.”

“That would be cruel,” he said, “for I have been playing since I was a child. We are not yet evenly matched”

“Oh dear,” she said. “You mean to say to me you’re going to have to take it easy on me?”

He smiled at her slowly. “Devilish easy, but luckily we shall have a great deal of time to practice, and you will improve. It is clear that you have a cunning mind for the game. You have already taken two of my pieces.”

She grinned at that, quite pleased. And she realized that she’d never thought she’d feel such emotions again. A wave of gratitude swept over her. “Indeed I have. I quite like it. Who knew I would like a game about war so well?”

He looked down at the board and then tilted his head to the side, which caused the collar of his linen shirt, which was open at the neck and free of a cravat, to shift. “It is not just about war though,” he pointed out. “It is about logic. It is about thinking ahead. It is about studying patterns.”

“And you like those things?” she inquired, admiring the beautifully carved set.

“Oh yes, very much,” he said swiftly. “Sometimes I wish people were more like chess games, and I could predict everyone’s every move.”

She bit her lower lip, considering this, before she replied, “That sounds like it would be rather boring in the end.”

He let out a low groan and thrust his hand through his hair, a gesture she had noticed that he often employed.

“You are correct,” he sighed. “But perhaps there might be something nice in the boring nature of it.”

“Well,” she began, “people are not chess pieces. Not in truth. So we will never know.”

“A fair point to you, Heather,” he said. He hesitated. “May I ask how you got that name?”

She nodded, then took up the cup of spiced tea next to her elbow and took a sip of the delicious, hot liquid. “My mother was Scottish, and she missed the Highlands. It is simple as that. Everyone thinks it’s a terribly odd name.”

“But it suits you,” he protested, mirroring her and picking up his cup of spiced tea. “A flower that grows under the winds of Scotland.”

“Have you been to the Highlands?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” he said easily. “Many times when I was a boy. My father dearly loved to hunt up there. Have you been?” he queried.

“Of course not, my lord,” she said, trying not to laugh at the idea. “I have been to Wales, and I have been here, and that is about all,” she said with a laugh. “People like me don’t get to travel like people like you.”

“Oh dear,” he said, looking chagrined. “Have I not realized my privilege?”

“Just a bit,” she teased, “but you cannot help who you are, just as I cannot help who I am.”

His gaze caught hers, and there it was, that intensity that always leapt between them in such moments.

“I think that you are marvelous,” he said.

He reached out and stroked her cheek gently with his fingertips, as if she was the rarest gift in the world.

Her breath caught in her throat. “I rather think the same about you too.”

“Not just the things you’ve read about in the papers though?” he asked, as if he was afraid that she might not like him in reality and think him a beast indeed.

She lifted her own hand and traced his cheek. “No, Gabriel, I do not just like you as you are in the papers. I like you in reality. I can see the kindness in your heart and how you long to help people, how you long to help me, and I cannot help but admire that.”

He leaned towards her over the board and took her lips in a soft kiss.

He began to stand, but he winced.

“Wait,” she said, and with that she gently pressed his shoulders back. Slowly, deliberately, she stood and then crossed around the table.

“May I?” she asked, gesturing to his lap.

His eyes widened and he nodded.

Carefully, she lowered herself down to sit atop his breeches-clad legs and linked her arms behind his neck. She felt bold, so terribly bold. She had always enjoyed intimacy, but it had been a very long time.

It had made her feel close to her husband, but this was different. This felt like liquid fire.

And she did not have the same trepidation as she had when she was a young girl, and she wished to know intimacy again.

“Does this hurt you?” she asked, eager not to cause him pain.

He gave a shake of his head. “My leg is always in some sort of pain. But no, you do not hurt me,” he assured.

She let out a relieved sigh, and then she kissed him.

His hands wound to her back, working over her gown as they kissed softly, slowly, passionately. The only sound to fill the air was their breath and the crackling of the fire.

How she adored it, and how he did too. She could tell from the growing fervor of his touch. And suddenly a thought popped into her head.

She wanted to be with him, not just in this room but out of it too.

“You should come with us,” she breathed against his lips.

“What?” he said, his mind clearly muddled by passion.

“Tomorrow we are going to go out to search for greenery,” she explained. “Holly and ivy and such. You should come.”

He tensed ever so slightly beneath her, and she was terrified that she had broken the spell.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You don’t need to decide now,” she rushed.

Then she lifted her fingers to his lips, silencing any denial he might make. “Wait. Do not make a hasty reply. One you might regret. Give yourself the opportunity to think on it. To truly consider what you actually want, not just what you are used to.”

“What I’m used to,” he echoed, his brows rising. He stroked his hands over her ribs. “Oh, Heather, I have not been doing what I am used to since you arrived.”

“Nor I,” she agreed, shocked by how her body came alive under his hands. “Do you like it?”

“Like?” he queried. “Like is not the word.” And he pulled her tighter to him on his lap. “You are turning my world upside down.”

“A revolution,” she teased, recalling their earlier conversation.

“Yes,” he laughed. “You are causing a revolution of my ideas and my ways, and I am so glad for it.”

With that, he slid his hand up into the thick curls of her hair, tilted her head to the side, and kissed her again.

Gabriel slid his hands over the wool of her gown and worked at the fastenings of her bodice. He forced himself to go slowly, to move almost methodically. His desire and hunger were so great that he feared he would lose control. And so he made himself savor every moment of this, every bit of skin that was revealed to him as he slid back the wool and exposed her chemise.

He pressed kisses to her skin, longing to devour her, to taste every part of her.

Patiently, he worked the bodice down her abdomen until it pulled about her waist.

He stroked her skin, loving the soft feel of it, the heat of it. She let out a low moan and dropped her head back at his touch.

He unwound the ribbons of her stays, then pulled the undergarment free and dropped it to the floor.

“Stand,” he urged.

She did as he bid and inched her stays and gown to the ground. Then, standing before him, her body silhouetted by the fire, she pulled the ribbon at the neck of her chemise that allowed it to slip over her body and tumble to her feet.

She stood before him, naked like a goddess.

“You are a wonder to behold, Heather,” he growled as his body grew hard at the sight of her.

The desire pounding through him was powerful, visceral, and he reached out for her, pulling her back to his lap. He stroked her breasts, bent his head, and took a nipple into his mouth.

He teased it, circling the hard point, tasting her sweet yet salty skin.

How he adored it.

Half drunk on her nearness, he let out a groan of sheer pleasure, then he turned his attention to her other breast.

His hands roved over her back, kneading, massaging, and she arched into him.

Unable to wait any longer, he slid his hands to her hips. He took her ankle in his hand then and stroked her stockinged calf, tracing upward, spinning towards her thighs. Then he dipped his fingers to the soft thatch of hair there.

She moaned as he found her wet heat, and the fact that she was slick and ready for him with nearly his undoing. But he wanted her to love this, to enjoy it, and so he parted her thighs slightly as she sat on his lap.

Gabriel slid his fingers over her most sensitive spot, teasing and tracing the folds. He noted her face, looking to see what pleased her most, and as he saw passion flush her cheeks and her eyelids fall closed, he followed her rhythm.

Yes, he would give her what she desired as she began to rock against his hand.

His breath came in harsh rasps as he watched her mount towards her peak. He felt an intense male pride as her mouth fell open and she let out a cry of bliss.

“Yes, love. Yes,” he whispered, pressing his face into her neck, kissing the soft skin there. And then her hands were at his breeches, undoing the buttons there. She slipped his linen shirt free and tugged it upward.

The fabric caught on his shoulders, and he moved to help her. He yanked it free, and it tumbled atop the chess board, knocking pieces over.

For a moment she paused, hesitating, her boldness on hold.

This was a moment in time. There was no going back after this. He knew it too.

A look of resolve and passion warmed her face, and she leaned forward, sliding her hand into his breeches, finding his hard sex.

His cock sprang free, and he ground his teeth to keep himself in check.

At her touch, his cock bobbed, longing for her attention.

And she studied it most curiously before she stroked it with her fingertips. She smiled softly. "For me."

"Yes," he growled. "All for you. Take it if you will."

"Does your leg hurt you?" she asked.

He frowned. "It always hurts me, but at present... I do not care."

"I wish I could take away your suffering," she whispered as she traced her fingertips over the head of his sex, spreading the moisture there.

"You can give me something better," he whispered, sliding his hand up into her hair.

"What is that?" she breathed.

"You."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she eyed the bed.

For a moment he wanted to grimace. He would have to slowly stand and head to the bed. She'd have to watch him, and surely the moment would be broken.

Then, much to his astonishment, she climbed off his lap. She bent, her hair falling like a curtain, grabbed his breeches, and said, "Lift your hips."



He wanted to resist. She was trying to undress him, and no one had seen his leg in some time. Even he didn't like to look at it.

What if she was appalled? Sickened.

But she lifted her gaze to his and arched a brow, "Come on, now, my lord."

He swallowed at the lush look of her mouth and the way she gave him that gentle but firm order.

Bracing himself with his forearms on the chair, he did as instructed.

She guided those breeches down. Then she paused and laughed softly.

"What?" he gritted.

"It is clear that I have never been a lady's maid or a manservant. I have gone about this all wrong."

"Nothing you could do would be all wrong, Heather," he countered.

"Your boots."

"Oh. Yes. Devil take it." Boots could be a damned inconvenience. And right now, he wished he shuffled about in slippers.

She contemplated the well-polished things, then shrugged. She took up his right foot and gave several solid tugs before it slid free.

She stumbled a step and laughed again. "Oh my, this is most undignified."

And yet it was warming him in ways he had not known possible.

There was something about watching her, her cheeks high with color, her dark hair curling about her face, as she divested him of his troublesome boots that caused his defenses to lower.

She made quick work of the other one and tossed the boot aside. She brushed her hands together with triumph.

“Now, that’s done...”

She gazed down at the mass of scars and twisted muscle.

He flinched. Soon her face would twist with horror, but instead, her eyes softened, and she let out a gentle sound. Then he watched her, as the room and time almost stood still, as she knelt and gently began to trace kisses along the ruined leg.

The gentle caress was both a balm and an ember. For it eased his fears that she found him repellant and only fanned his desire as she kissed ever upward until, at last, she kissed the head of his sex.

How he longed to let her continue, but he wanted to be inside her. More than anything. He wanted to feel at one with her.

“I want you now,” he growled.

He began to stand, readying himself to make the walk to the bed.

But she shook her head. “Here.”

His eyes flared and he held out his hands to her.

She laced her fingers with his, her eyes full of desire, and he guided her perfect, strong palms to his shoulders.

She climbed atop him, straddling his legs.

Heather gazed down at him with wonder.

“Ride me,” he urged, “Ride me.”

And with that, he guided his cock to her entrance, teased her opening, then rubbed the head up and down her slick folds. Then he positioned himself and she lowered her body down, taking her time to grow accustomed to his girth.

A hiss of breath slipped past his lips at the perfection of her.

It was all he could do not to thrust up in one hard move, but he knew it had been some time for her, and he did not want this to be over quickly.

He wanted her to remember this moment when they became one. And he wanted to remember it too. He wished to lock it into his thoughts and remember every detail. The way her dark hair floated over her pale body, the way she gazed at him with liquid hunger, and the way she moved as if being with him was heaven. He wanted to remember it all.

At last, he brought his hands to her hips and then began to undulate. He rocked his hips back-and-forth, back-and-forth teasing that sweet spot until he could almost take it no more.

She wound her hands into his hair, tugging ever so slightly.

Their gazes locked, and it was almost as intimate as the connection between their bodies, as her heat wrapped about him.

Just when he was standing at the edge of the abyss, about to catapult over, she lowered her mouth to his and he wrapped his arms about hers until it felt as if nothing could come between them. As if they were one.

Finally, Gabriel thrust deep, thrust home, again and again until they both flew into ecstasy.



She all but bounded down the stairs, hoping beyond hope that she would witness not just Alec waiting for her, but Gabriel too.

When she reached the bottom and crossed into the foyer, tightening her cloak about her and securing her mittens, she noticed that he was not there.

She refused to feel daunted or disappointed.

Perhaps he was simply not ready for such a thing, but Alec was. He stood in his wool coat, his cap, his scarf, and his red mittens, looking ready to take on the world.

“Shall we go?” she asked, smiling at the boy even as her heart sank for a moment.

But she wouldn't allow her failed expectation to dampen the outing.

“The woods await,” he said with great fervor.

And out they went into the cold. They were going to meet one of the gardeners out in the woods, where he would help them collect greenery into boxes, which would then be brought back to the house to use as decorations on every possible surface.

She was determined to lace every chandelier, every mantelpiece, and every balustrade with ivy and holly. It was going to change the house for the better, to bring the light in.

And so they crossed out, not towards the moors this time, but towards the thick woods that were full of brambles and branches and bare trees, who had given up their leaves so that they might survive the cold winter months.

Suddenly, to her shock, she found herself singing.

It was the first time she had sung in more than a year. And Alec joined her, their voices meeting and harmonizing on the winter air. Their breaths came out frosty before them.

Alec seemed to know the song that she was singing well, and they all but skipped across the frosty field as they entered the woods.

It was dark and beautiful.

Birds darted back and forth from branch to branch.

How wonderful it was to see them alive and thriving. Squirrels darted over the trees, staring at them as they entered.

“Have we invaded their sanctum?” she asked Alec.

“Oh, they'll let you know,” he said. “If they feel that you've invaded, they will chitter furiously and throw things at you.”

She gaped at the little fellow up in the tree, amazed. “My goodness. Squirrels are so very warlike?” she asked.

“They are,” he said. “They’re constantly making war with the birds. But I can’t really blame the birds for being angry at squirrels. You see, squirrels do like to steal birds’ food and then birds like to steal theirs.” He laughed. “I do not understand why it is this way, but it does seem to be the nature of things. Look!” he exclaimed. “A holly tree.”

She spotted the beautiful, tall tree and applauded, but before they headed to it, Rob, the gardener, dragged a cart covered with boxes into the forest.

He lifted his hand in a cheerful salute. “Look who’s come.”

And much to her amazement, Gabriel came up behind Rob, his cane in hand. He was making slow progress because he had to go over the ground carefully with his wounded leg and the cane sliding over the hard earth.

He looked frustrated but determined. She was tempted to go over and assist him, but she knew that that might make things worse.

Alec let out a slow whistle and whispered to her, “Did you manage to get him to come?”

“I suppose I did,” she confessed.

“Good for you,” Alec said. “He needs to be out in the forest, and trying things like this, and finding a bit of cheer in his heart.”

“Have the moors healed him?” she asked softly.

“Oh, it’s happening,” Alec said firmly. “It’s happening, but it takes time, you know.”

She rested her hand on Alec’s shoulder, then patted it. “I admire your optimism, Alec,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said with a flourish of a bow as he doffed his cap. Then the boy darted over to the holly tree. His eyes

shone brightly as he studied the red berries and glistening, waxy green leaves. He reached out to touch one, and it poked his hand. He let out a delighted laugh and sucked his thumb through his glove. "Have to be very careful getting these in."

And they would have to be careful not to take too much from any one particular tree. She hated the idea of leaving one denuded.

"You've come!" she exclaimed as Gabriel came up beside her.

"I couldn't let you two have all the fun," he protested, his skin aglow in the cold and his dark cloak swinging about his strong body.

She longed to reach out and take his hand. "I'm glad that you've made it. My heart... It feels warm now."

"And mine," he said. "I had not realized how very cold it was until you."

And with that, she could not stop the smile from tilting her lips or the warmth in her heart from growing.

## CHAPTER 16

*The* last days leading up to Christmas Eve raced past with a ferocity that even Gabriel had not expected.

He did not know how she had done it, but everything was a whirlwind of beauty and joy. The house was decorated to a splendid degree. The servants were filled with enthusiasm and cheer.

Villagers had been invited up for the evening celebration. Mulled wine and cakes and every good thing had been served. Even dancing was happening in the Great Hall. Dancing. And much to his shock, he was in attendance. He did not know how he had been dragged into all this.

But here he was, finally after all these years, taking up his grandmother and grandfather's shoes, overseeing the festivities of the Christmas Ball at Ridgely House.

Everyone was full of Christmas excitement at the old tradition returning. For at Ridgely House, the ball was not for lords and ladies, but for local people.

The orchestra that she and Tynley had hired was not one that would be taken up at his brother's house.

No, this one was full of reels and jigs and country music. And the villagers in their best clothes were dancing reels and bouncing about the hall, their faces alight with smiles.

Even Heather was dancing with Alec.

He loved watching the two of them. He did not know how their friendship had occurred, but however it had transpired, he realized the two were like a balm for each other.

Alec gazed up at Heather as if she was a wonder.

He knew that she would never replace the boy's mother, but he realized now how desperately Alec had been missing a

woman in his life who could care for him—who did care for him—and treated him so well and with such tender affection.

He had noticed the special care that she gave the boy, always looking out for him, always making sure that he had treats, always making sure that stories were read to him.

He wanted to kick himself or brain himself with his cane. He had not read to Alec because he knew how capable the boy was, especially with words. But much to her credit, she had insisted. And every night he had spied her reading books to him, and Alec had sat at her feet listening, rapt.

He had noticed there was a slight shaking tone to her voice when she read to Alec, as if she was on the verge of tears. He wondered at that. He knew there was something there. And also in the way she would stroke the boy's hair as he laid his head across her knees.

He, too, listened rapt to her voice and, if he was honest, loved to watch them together. It was beautiful, the bond growing between the two of them and in such a short time. His own bond with her was also strong.

Time did not matter. Time was nothing. He had known his brother for years. He had known his father all his life. And look at what had happened there. Time was not a predictor of relationships or affection.

And as the mince pies were passed and people cheered and sang out Christmas songs, he found himself going amongst the villagers and those who lived upon his land, smiling at them, welcoming them, and speaking with them all.

No one talked about the mines this night, or sorrows, or hardships. No. Hope was on every face. Hope for a new year. Hope for the coming of the light. Hope for spring that would soon come.

And after several hours, when the last villager had left the foyer, Heather let out a sigh of pleasure.

“That was a night well done,” she said to the staff, which had collected around her.



He crossed over to them, his cane in hand. "I cannot agree more. I want to thank every single one of you for making this so beautiful and giving so much joy to all those around. And I hope all of you will have a very merry Christmas day."

It had already been agreed that the staff would be given the day off, their presents having already been distributed. He, Heather, and Alec would have a cold lunch together.

And so with that, the staff, eager for their own celebrations to begin, went back down to the kitchens to take care of the last-minute things that were required.

"Come, Alec," Heather said. "I will take you to your room."

Alec laughed. "I don't need assistance."

"Of course, you don't need assistance, but I bet you wouldn't mind it," she said.

"All right then. Will you read me a story?" he asked tentatively.

"It would be the best Christmas Eve present," she replied as she took Alec up the stairs.

Gabriel knew that she would soon join him in his chambers. They would spend the evening together, and he could not wait.

So many years ago, his heart would be awash with joy on Christmas Eve. And for the first time in a very long time, he felt it happening again.



Heather could not believe how well things were going.

She closed the door. Alec had managed to slip off to sleep. She was surprised that he had, since he seemed so eager for the next day. It was, she thought, probably the first time he had been excited for Christmas in a very long time.

And she was glad to have been a part of it.

All children should know the joy of the season. And she felt a moment of pride. And as she stepped away from the door, she caught sight of the man who'd captured her heart, a heart she had been certain was closed, and she stilled in the hallway.

“Well done, Heather,” he said, his voice a rich rumble in the moonlight.

“Thank you,” she replied, for she was not going to turn away from such a compliment.

He stared at her with awe. “You have bewitched this entire house. How did you do it?”

“I don't know,” she said honestly as emotions began to rush through her, “but I had to. I had to,” she repeated, crossing slowly to him.

And as they stood in the light of the window, she realized that snow was falling softly across the front gardens. She let out a gasp and turned to watch those soft flakes fall.

She placed a palm to the cold window. And for one moment, she was back in Wales, back in the little cottage, and tears slipped down her face.

“What is it?” he asked, alarm filling his voice. “What have I said, Heather—”

“It is nothing,” she rushed.

“Tell me, please,” he urged, reaching out for her.

She shook her head, trying to make herself strong. “Remember our pact? Remember our vows,” she insisted.

“All right,” he breathed. “If that's what you wish.”

But then a cry slipped past her lips, and she whispered, “I miss my son very much.”

He stood silently watching her and then his arms wrapped about her. “Oh, Heather,” he murmured against her ear, “I'm so very sorry.”

And with those gentle words that did not push but were full of genuine sympathy, she placed her head on his shoulder and let the tears flow.

Gratitude and wonder filled her, even as her tears fell. Now the tears no longer felt like torture. They felt like a great release instead, like a sign of love, like a promise to her son that she would never forget him, but she would feel love again just as he would wish.

“Come then,” he said. “Let me take you to your room so that you can rest.”

“No,” she said, raising her head and wiping her eyes. “I do not wish to be alone. I wish to be with you. I wish to be with you always.”

As those words slipped past her lips, she wished she could take them back. But though he looked startled, he did not say another thing.

He took her hand in his, and together they wound up the rest of the stairs to his chambers where the fire glowed, awaiting them.

“You were singing a song with Alec the other day as we came back from the woods. Would you sing it for me?”

She blinked, astonished.

It was the song that she had sung with her son when he was a little boy. It was Welsh and always filled her heart with a melancholy that was both beautiful and full of longing.

And part of her felt somehow he knew. Somehow he knew that she had sung it with her son, and singing it now would help her heal.

So she gave him a nod. “Of course.”

And as the snow fell down outside the window, making a blanket of white across the earth, she let her voice drift softly across the room. As the chamber was colored red with the fire and she sang the nostalgic words of Christmas, the song that

her son had loved so well, she knew that her little boy was still very much with her, just as Alec had said.

Her son was in everything, and he was most certainly in her heart.

And her heart was beginning to thrive again.

She looked across at the man who had awakened it, and she knew that his was still closed, and it might never open.

She was not certain that it ever would.

Still, as he looked upon her as she sang, her voice quavering with emotion, she knew how much he cared. Deliberately, Heather crossed to him, placed a hand on his heart, stared deep into his eyes, and willed him to let his heart be free, willed him to open up to her.

But she knew the power of pain and how it could keep one locked away from everyone and everything that could make that pain go away.

She only hoped that, with time, he would realize that all the love he ever needed or wanted was waiting for him right here in this house.

## CHAPTER 17

*The* tin mine mocked Gabriel.

Gabriel stared at the works, his insides twisting.

He had not come to this place since the day of the accident, since Tom Baker's death, since his leg had been marred.

He gripped his cane so tightly that he feared it would cut into his flesh, but he needed that grounding in this moment, lest his thoughts whisk him down to the darkness below and he began to scream.

The power of his mind and memory were a shocking thing. For here, as the wind whipped at him, snow still falling from the sky on this Christmas morning, he knew what he had to do.

He had not come to this place in years, and he had been determined to do the right thing for years. He had even told his brother that he did the right thing and would never do the wrong.

But after last night, after Heather had offered up her heart to him, showing him her pain and singing those beautiful notes to him, he knew he was in the wrong and there was truly only one thing to do.

He walked slowly over the rough ground and stared at that mine, knowing that there was a warren of passageways beneath the earth.

Christmas Day was perhaps the only day the mine stopped. The only day when people did not come to descend into the earth. He looked about him and cursed himself. He had been fighting for too long. He would continue to fight. He would not stop, but in this moment, it felt interminable.

It felt as if he would not be able to do anything important or meaningful, but he knew that wasn't true. He'd already done so many things, and he was about to do more. He was

about to show the world that a lord could always do the right thing.

He glanced back and realized that Alec was waiting in the rugged slopes descending to the mine. He spotted the boy with his new puppy.

Heather had been quite firm, making certain that the puppy had been kept a secret until this morning.

They had brought it in for Alec, and Alec had been shocked and full of happiness at the site of the small border collie, who was now racing up and down barking delightedly.

Pax. That was what the boy had named the frolicking, licking puppy.

Peace. It was an astounding and beautiful name for the perfect little thing.

Alec lifted a hand in greeting.

Yes, they would be a perfect pair racing over the moors. The dog would be Alec's constant companion, and with Alec's cleverness, he would be able to train the dog easily.

But in truth, Gabriel was shocked to see that Alec had come here.

After all, this was a site of great sadness for the boy too. And now that Gabriel had spotted him, Alec descended along the path that led to where he stood.

"I'm sorry that you've come here on Christmas Day. I did not mean to bring you any unhappiness," Gabriel said gently.

Alec stared up at him thoughtfully, the dog racing about their feet, twining through their legs.

"I'm not unhappy at all," Alec said. "I miss my brother and I miss my parents, but I have let all that go," he said softly, and he bent down. The puppy, with its floppy black and white ears, ran into Alec's arms. The boy stroked the dog's small head.

How? Gabriel wanted to ask. How had Alec done it? Gabriel did not seem to be able to let it go, and much to his

shock, he blurted, “I don’t understand. Can you tell me what to do?”

“Anyone can do it,” Alec said, continuing to stroke the puppy’s soft ears. “But you have to be brave, and you have to know that the people who died want you to let them go.”

Gabriel sucked in a sharp breath.

“My brother,” Alec said quietly, “wants you to let him go. It wasn’t your fault, you know? You did not do that to him. Generations did that to him. Yes, your family did that to him, but not you and not your brother either.”

His breath shook out of him as he exhaled. “Alec, how do you—”

“I don’t know,” Alec said with a shrug. “I think it’s because I spend so much time out in the wild, and I see the way that animals are, and humans really aren’t different. Or they shouldn’t be.”

Gabriel blinked. Hadn’t he longed to be like a fish, a fox, or a bird in the air?

“Alec,” he said, “humans are very different. They—”

Alec cut in. “We let our thoughts get in the way. It’s true,” he said, “but you don’t have to.”

“I don’t?” he queried.

“No. All you have to do is feel the earth beneath your feet and lift your face up to the wind and open your heart.”

Open his heart. His heart had been closed off for so long.

“Yours is open,” Alec said as if he could hear his thoughts.

“No, it’s not,” he countered.

Alec snorted. “It is. Why do you think you took me in? You like to pretend like it’s closed, Gabriel, but it’s not. You know what you want to do. You know what you want to offer. I’ve seen the way you look at her. Make her yours.”

He stared at the boy, amazed. “I’m going to,” he admitted.

Alec nodded. “But don’t do it out of duty, Gabriel. You always want to do the right thing, and then you lie to yourself, and you tell yourself it’s not your heart, but it is. Your heart is the best and purest of all of us. You think it’s me, but it’s not. I’ve just learned to tell it like it is, and you still hide behind lies. Don’t hide anymore, Gabriel.”

He gaped at the boy, wonder filling him. “How are you so bold, Alec?”

“Like I said,” Alec stated with pride, “I live with the wild things, and the wild things have no choice but to be bold. It is only living indoors that makes us afraid. It is only conforming to society. That’s what makes us afraid. We’re so terrified of losing things, but who cares if we lose those things? There’s still the streams and the fields and the sky, and the wind and the stars, and the moon and the sun. You can never lose those things, Gabriel, and you can’t lose her love either. Not if you tell the truth.”

His body felt like it might shake apart as feelings coursed through him. Powerful feelings of freedom and the realization he had been holding on far too tightly.

Was he still trapped down in that mine after all these years? His body had made it up to the top, but was his heart still down below?

He turned his face to the sky as Alec suggested, and he let the wind sweep through his hair. He felt his feet in his boots connected to the earth, and he looked down at Alec’s visage and knew the boy was right.

All he had to do was stop lying to himself. All he had to do was stop blaming people. And all he had to do was convince Heather that he did not want her out of a sense of duty.

He wanted her with all his heart, not just because it was the right thing to do, but because she offered him love in a world full of darkness. And if they could be together, the world would be full of light.



## CHAPTER 18

Christmas lunch was the tastiest thing she had ever had. There had been cold ham, cheese, bread, figs, jams, and a cake.

It had been delicious. Every last bite.

She felt full to bursting and content. Every moment of this Christmas had lifted her spirits somehow, making the pain of the past, well, not vanish but at least dissipate. The look on Alec's face when the puppy had come racing out this morning into the long salon had filled her with triumph.

It was so good to see that look upon Alec's face, and Gabriel had been pleased too.

It was wonderful.

It gave her hope, and it gave her purpose helping other people feel good again. That, she realized, was what this life was for. Helping others, lifting them up, making sure that the suffering of this life was mitigated by kindness. And as she stood before the fire, she smiled to herself as Gabriel crossed to her and pressed a gentle kiss to the nape of her neck.

Alec was out somewhere playing with his new dog, and she was alone with him. She was so glad to be alone with him for a few moments.

She turned slowly and beamed up at him.

“And you, Lord Gabriel, how is your Christmas Day?”

He smiled down at her. “My Christmas Day has been full of surprises, but the greatest surprise is the one I discovered out on my walk.”

She had wanted to go with him, but she had felt that he needed to be alone. And sometimes one of the greatest gifts one could give a person was to allow them to be alone when they needed it.

“Oh, and what is that?” she said.

“Heather,” he said softly, “I want you to marry me.”

“What?” she gulped, certain she had misheard him.

“I want you to be my wife.”

She blinked, trying to understand what he was saying.

“Why would you want that?” she rushed. “I’m your housekeeper.”

“You’re so much more than my housekeeper,” he insisted, his face earnest. “You have come into my life, and you have changed everything. You have made me feel again. You have made me see who I want to be, not just someone who stays in my study and does what they can for the world, but someone whose heart is very much beating. Someone whose heart deserves more than the coldness of a study.”

She swallowed and looked away, her earlier feelings of contentment quickly fading away. “You can have all of that without me marrying you,” she protested. “No one will understand,” she continued. “The servants will not understand. Your brother will not understand. And your friend, Lady Mayhew, oh my goodness, what will she think? She hired me, and now she will think that I have come into your house like a viper—”

“No,” he cut in quickly, his voice rough. “No one will think any of that, of you, Heather. Anyone who has met you would know that is not true.”

Her heart began to pound, and her body felt like it was starting to shake. How could this be happening? Last night, she had hoped he’d open his heart to her. Today, he was asking her to be his wife. It should be a dream! But it did not feel like a dream. It felt like the beginning of a nightmare.

“You know that that is not how society is. Society will judge.”

“Who cares what society thinks?” he snapped.

“I do,” she said. “For you!”

“Well, you shouldn’t,” he said. “Society will not keep us from love.”

“Do you think that love is enough?” she asked softly.

“You do love me, don’t you, Heather?”

“Yes,” she breathed as tears filled her eyes. “I do. I cannot deny it.”

“Then you must give into this,” he said, his eyes darkening with emotion.

“Must I?” she countered. “I fear it will create more problems than joy.”

“We will meet each problem,” he said. He took her hand into his. “Truly. You will see that we can.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she protested.

“Say yes,” he said softly.

She licked her lips as her thoughts began to spin and spin. “I cannot. Not yet. I, I...”

The feelings overwhelmed her. She had not expected this. She had never expected this. “We were not supposed to violate our pact. We were not going to...”

“What, Heather?” he breathed, his voice gentling.

“Last night,” she began. “I let you into my suffering. Are you going to let me into yours?” she queried.

He was quiet for a long moment, as if he was searching for words. “I have realized that my suffering is very slight and what I was doing is walling everyone out. So yes, I am letting you in. I’m asking you to be mine.”

“If I say yes,” she whispered as images of people disdaining her or, worse, disdaining him and using her as an excuse to condemn his work, raced through her brain. “The world will...”

“I don’t care,” he bit out.

“You should,” she replied passionately. “The work you do is so important. I cannot get in the way of that. And if I marry you, the gossips will say terrible things, and all of the people you are trying to help will be hurt. I am not that important,” she insisted as she began to pull away from him.

His face filled with emotion. “Heather,” he said, grasping for her, “do not allow yourself to feel this way. We will find a way to fix it, truly.”

And with that, she blinked. “I need a moment,” she said. “Please, will you give me a moment as I gave you a moment this morning when I clearly understood your wish to be alone? I need to think.”

He swallowed. “Of course,” he said, his voice hollow as if he was already certain that she was slipping away from him. “You should think, but do not let people take away what is yours.”

She nodded and headed out of the room, out to the foyer, then out to the cold air.

She did not even put on a cloak.

She began to rush farther and farther out onto the moors, as he had done before when he was lost to feelings. She went fast through the snow, her boots crunching.

She wrapped her arms about herself as thought after thought whipped through her head. Thoughts of her son, thoughts of John, who had died in the war so long ago.

Could she marry again? Could she go against the world and choose love? If she did, would she be the most selfish sort of person? She walked and she walked, her hair tumbling out of its bun, whipping about her face until, much to her shock, she came upon a figure standing and staring out over the moors.

“Hello?” she called.

The man turned slowly.

She gasped and took a step back. It was impossible.

“I’m not Gabriel,” he said softly. “You are not seeing a ghost if you just came from him.”

“Who are you?” she asked. They did look almost identical, but now she could see the lines of this man’s eyes and the way he held himself, as if he was made of stone.

“I’m the Duke of Wrathborne,” he said. “I’m trying to make myself cross the boundary of our lands. My brother told me not to come for Christmas because I don’t belong, but I can’t stop the call inside me,” he said. “I miss him.”

“Then you should come,” she replied simply.

He gave her a wry smile. “He doesn’t want me to come. I’ve done terrible things.”

“Begin to make amends,” she said honestly, “for those terrible things.”

“I know who you are,” he said, swiftly changing the subject.

“Oh?” she queried, stunned she did not feel afraid with him.

“You’re the housekeeper,” he stated.

“I am the housekeeper,” she agreed. “It’s true.”

He cocked his head to the side as snow fell into his russet hair. “I’ve heard the rumors, you know.”

She tensed. “The rumors?”

He was still for a long moment as he stared at her. “What the bloody hell are you doing out here without a cloak?”

“I needed to think,” she explained.

“Can you think while freezing?” he drawled before he whipped off his own cloak, crossed to her, and wrapped it about her shoulders. “He’s asked you to marry him, hasn’t he?”

She let out an exclamation of surprise. “Are you a spirit then, though you say you are not, to know such a thing? He

did just ask me.”

“Ah, your Christmas present then.” He closed his eyes for a moment before saying, “His heart.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “that cannot be right. I cannot take such a thing from him. Not when the stakes are so —”

“I’ve been led to understand you’re made of sterner stuff than all of that. He told me that he wouldn’t do the wrong thing, you know. But it’s clear that you two are very close. Very close.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Do you have a spy in the house?”

He was quiet for a long moment. “Possibly,” he said. “Tynley,” he breathed.

“The butler!” she blurted.

The duke raised his hands in a sign of supplication. “He’s very good friends with my butler, and he and I were very close too. When I was a small boy and came to my grandparents’ house, he took special care. Tynley does tell me things, but not out of maliciousness. He wants my brother and I to be friends again, and he hopes if he keeps visiting me that one day I will see reason.”

“Will you?” she asked.

A muscled ticked in his jaw. “There are things at play I cannot speak of, but I will tell you this much. I do want my brother to be happy. I’ve tried and tried to do what I’m supposed to, but it’s not working. I want him to be happy, and so you must tell him yes because it’s clear to me, from everything Tynley has said and how Gabriel has behaved, that he loves you. You have saved him from his pain.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “He’s done that himself.”

“No,” the duke denied swiftly. “You offered your hand to him, and that’s what’s done it. I tried in so many ways after the accident to pull him out of the mire. And then after our

father's death, it grew worse, and I could no longer offer my hand because..." His voice died off.

"Because?" she queried.

"It doesn't matter," he said quietly, his voice nearly disappearing into the snow. "But you must turn around now, and you must make him happy and yourself too. Because if you have a chance at that happiness, then you should seize it. Do not let yourself be cut off from it like..."

She knew he was about to say like I have done, and she wanted to ask him what it could be that had cut him off from any chance of happiness.

He looked as if he was consumed by misery, but she knew that he would not tell her, even if she dared to ask. Suddenly, she wondered. Because Gabriel had made it clear that his brother had betrayed him, but she did not think that was true now.

His brother seemed to be drowning in a sea, possibly of his own making, trying to tread water. But he was not a bad man. Not in his heart.

"You don't have to choose whatever you have chosen," she insisted softly. "Come with me."

He shook his head. "No, I can't. I can't. But you must turn back. Do not choose to be alone as I have done."

And with that, the Duke of Wrathborne turned and strode into the falling snow.

She watched as his figure slowly disappeared into the white. She held his cloak tightly about her and realizing that she had his approval, realizing that he was right, she began to head back to Ridgely House.

She had come here to avoid loneliness, and she was almost choosing it again. But the words of the Duke of Wrathborne, here on the moors in the falling snow, made her understand that if she turned away from Gabriel now, she was only

choosing the pain that she was familiar with, and she was done with doing that.

She had to be.



## CHAPTER 19

*P*acing was beyond Gabriel, but there were days when he still wished he could.

There was something soothing about the rapid back and forth and the moving of limbs in a particular order when one's thoughts were out of sorts.

He sighed.

Would she come back and tell him no? Would she come back and choose to follow the rules of society? Would she come back and act against everything she had taught him? It seemed absurd. For all this time, he had been so certain that it was him who was struggling to open his heart.

But what if it was Heather? What if she was the one who would fail to take all her teachings to heart?

He would not be able to blame her, but, dear God, he would be sorrowful for it.

Gabriel supposed they could continue on as lovers for years. Lords did it all the time. They set people up in houses. They could have a family, but he wanted to shout to the world that she was his, that she had helped him change his life in a short period of time. All because she had had the temerity, the audacity, to believe in him. Yes, she'd taught him how to leap, to pull himself from his loneliness. Now he wanted to proclaim her as his own and share with the world the spark they had created.

That spark had undone years of pain.

His breath caught in his throat as the door to the foyer opened, that big Tudor door, which was so heavy and sometimes so difficult for a single person to open.

It had been opened thousands of times over the years.

Her footsteps echoed over the floor, an ancient floor crossed by his ancestors, by countless visitors, by his servants and many servants before.

As he stood waiting to hear her answer, he considered the lives that had filled this house, the lost chances, the dreams, the romances, the memories, the failures, the triumphs. Somehow, in this moment, he felt it all, and he felt as if the entirety of his life was about to be decided.

She strode in slowly, the shadows of the room casting over her, for winter light was still dim, though now it was going to grow stronger with every day.

Immediately, he noted the cloak over her shoulders and the way her hair, kissed with snow, floated about her face. Only one person could have given her that richly made cloak. His hand tightened on his cane, and it was all he could do to stop himself from driving it into the ground in a burst of anger. But he was not that person anymore. He would not give way to such outbursts of emotion.

“I hope you did not listen to him,” he said softly.

“Who?” she queried, her dark brows lifting.

He gestured to the cloak. “My brother, the Duke of Wrathborne.”

Her eyes flared. “Oh, I see. I did listen to him, actually.”

He looked away. “How will I bear it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied slowly. “But you did say that you were ready and prepared to defy society. Has that changed since I went for my walk?”

“What?” he gasped.

“Your brother told me to make you happy.” She paused. “Your brother told me to marry you.”

“How did he know that I asked?” he demanded, shocked and hardly daring to believe her words. Surely, his brother had not said such a thing!

“I’m not going to share that information with you, lest someone get into a great deal of trouble.”

He paused, let out a groan, and then a dry laugh. “Tynley,” he surmised.

She smiled softly. “You must not be angry with him. He clearly loves you both very, very much.”

He let out a groan. “Yes. The old man has always loved us, taking care of us when we bruised our knees. He helped us mend things. Of course, he’s still trying to help us mend things.”

“I asked him to come back with me, but he would not,” she added.

“Of course not,” he whispered. “He’s afraid.”

“Yes, he is.” She took a step towards him, her hair glistening as the snow melted. “But I will tell you this. I thought he was going to castigate me. I thought he was going to tear me down as a housekeeper daring to reach above my station. But no, he told me to choose you and myself.”

“And will you?” he ventured. “Choose us?”

She folded her hands before her, reddened with the cold. “Let me tell you what I am going to choose. I do not ever want to do what I was doing again. I do not ever want to choose sorrow and loneliness every day. And I do not ever want to go back. No,” she said boldly, “I want to go forward. I want to create something new with you. I want to chance it all. I see a vision of us together, daring to live in a new way.”

Leaning against his cane, he crossed to her slowly then and offered his hand to her. For a long moment, he did not know what she would do, but then she slipped her fingers into his.

“I will be your wife,” she said. “I had no idea when I answered that newsheet advertisement that I was choosing such a different life. All I wanted was to not be lonely anymore. But look,” she declared, “I have you. I have Alec. I have Ridgely House and all its occupants. I am making friends

with the villagers and helping them live their lives and bring them happiness. And you are too. You and I can bring so much joy to the world. And even though I have lost my son, even though I lost my husband so many years ago, that is not the end. No,” she proclaimed. “That day when my little boy slipped away, even though I held him in my arms, it was the beginning of something. And every day, I will live for him. Every day, I will make his memory count, and I will bring hope and light to as many as I can and show them that they do not have to be alone.”

He smiled at her, his heart beating, not with fear, not in alarm, but with anticipation of a new life. “I don’t want to be alone here anymore either. I have tried to help so many people through letters, and articles, and by entertaining people here. I have not left these lands in years, except to go to my brother’s house. But this morning, I went to the mine where it happened, and I refuse to repeat the past over and over again. So with your help,” he said softly, “I want to change. I want to go out into the world again. I want to cross the boundary of my land, and I want to do justice and memory to Tom Baker, who died the day I was injured, and take his memory to the world with your son’s.”

He pulled her into his embrace. “Let us celebrate life every day. Every moment. Life can be taken away suddenly and quickly.”

“And we can either choose,” she said softly, “to share misery or to share hope.”

He stroked a lock of her damp hair back from her face, his heart soaring. Gabriel lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her gently before he whispered, “Let us choose hope, Heather. Let us choose hope.”

## EPILOGUE

*I*t had taken time to gain the confidence to travel about the country.

Gabriel realized part of it was that he was afraid of how he might cope with the pain. After all, travel required sitting in a coach for long hours, and lecturing required standing for long hours. But what he was gaining was far more powerful than ever staying at home at Ridgely House.

Gabriel had not realized how he could touch people by speaking with them personally, by showing the effects of his own injury, walking about a stage with a cane, and by talking about Tom Baker. And he did talk about Tom Baker.

In every city hall, at every county fair, at talks in London and salons throughout the great cities of England, he talked about Thomas Baker and how he had died needlessly. He spoke passionately about how just a bit more effort on the part of the Duke of Wrathborne, Gabriel's father, would have kept Thomas Baker alive.

Gabriel talked about how important it was that children like Alec, who he would bring on stage with Pax, could see the light of day and gain schooling. He professed how important it was for children to dream, for people to have hope, and for there to be an opportunity for people to love.

Now, at first, not everyone liked what he had to say, but he honed his speeches with Heather. And her passion and desire to help others, to carry on the memory of her little boy through acts of joy and love, made him stronger, made him refuse to give up and turn less to anger.

So, as they stood this day in the county of Devon, overlooking the sea in the village of Clovelly, Gabriel prepared himself to speak.

He knew the dangers in a county like this, and he wondered if his friend was somewhere out in the crowd watching. After all, his friend was endangered too, and Gabriel would do all he could to help him, just as he knew his brother, the Duke of Wrathborne, would too.

Devon was a county of conflict between the government and between the men who did things that were not in keeping with the law. But at the heart of all of it, Gabriel knew, was love.

And as he laced his fingers with his wife's, he looked down upon her. She placed her own hand gently on the swelling of her belly, and she looked up at him with such love and pride.

Of course, the memory of her own son who had died played upon her face, because as they went into the future, they both knew they could not take the past with them.

Still they could keep memories. Nothing they did would replace those who had lost their lives, and they could not eradicate the pain. But they could, oh, they could, choose such a life of possibility, a life that went far beyond a small study or a dark room on a winter's night.

And as if on cue to his thoughts, he heard the first bird of spring warble through the air. Gabriel spotted the optimistic and determined bird wheel overhead, and he knew that soon the warmth would come back, just as it had done in his own life.

THE END

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The Duke of Wildwood has but one goal, vengeance. After seeing his sister destroyed by a wastrel, he will stop at nothing to hurt the man who ruined his sister. But when the house party he sets up, to undo the villain responsible for so much pain, begins to deviate from his plans, his frustration knows no end. . .

Then, there's one exceptionally irritating lady, who keeps popping up at the oddest times, book in hand, spectacles on nose. Wildwood has no time for her, or so he tells his heart, but she just might teach him that vengeance will never give him the peace he needs. Yet, with the wall around his heart, can Wildwood choose love?

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