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THE MERRY  
WIFE OF  
WYNDMERE

*A Lords of Vice Book Novella*

C.H. ADMIRAND

**THE MERRY WIFE OF  
WYNDMERE**

**Featuring the Duke and Duchess of  
Wyndmere  
The Lords of Vice**

C.H. Admirand



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# Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author C.H. Admirand

Author's Note

*Chapter One*

*Chapter Two*

*Chapter Three*

*Chapter Four*

*Chapter Five*

*Chapter Six*

*Chapter Seven*

*Chapter Eight*

*Chapter Nine*

*Chapter Ten*

*Chapter Eleven*

About the Author

## Author's Note

Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has a plot line that involves two married women being pursued by a man who thinks they are enamored of him. The plot thickens as mishaps and misunderstandings ensue. Faithfulness and jealousy play a part, until the wives confide the pranks they have played on the man pursuing them to their husbands.

*The Merry Wife of Wyndmere* has a few of these same elements in the plot line, adding in the element of fear the duke and duchess recently experienced during the terrifying kidnapping attempts the Duke's Guard thwarted. The duke and duchess did not confide their fears in one another, although perhaps if they had, they would not have had a story to tell of what happened *after* their happily-ever-after.



## CHAPTER ONE

PERSEPHONE, DUCHESS OF Wyndmere, stared at her reflection in the looking glass hanging on the wall above the mahogany washstand. The woman who stared back at her shared the same blue-black hair and warm brown eyes, but that was where the resemblance ended.

She poured hot water from the pink and white flowered ceramic pitcher into the matching bowl, then reached for the round of lilac-scented soap and held it to her nose to inhale the subtle scent that always brought a smile to her lips.

*But not today.* Her worries weighed her down. After she washed and rinsed her hands, she reached for the soft linen cloth beside the bowl to dry them. Why had the weight she gained carrying their twins started to melt away, to reveal a hint of her former figure, only to come back?

Tears of frustration welled up, but she blinked them away. “Tears never solve anything,” she chided her reflection. Where was the determination and stubbornness that had carried her through the trials she and her husband endured during the first year of their married life? She sighed, knowing it had been buried beneath the exhaustion from feeding and caring for their twins. Thank heaven she could rely on their nanny, to care for and watch over her babes while she rested.

Sighing at the prominent jut of her overblown breasts, she reminded her dowdy reflection, “You have been blessed with an abundance of milk enabling you to feed Richard *and* Abigail.” Her mind knew her body was balancing her needs as well as those of her twins with the stubborn weight gain, but it bothered her just the same.

Stepping back, she took stock of the rest of her appearance. There was a time not that long ago when Jared



could not wait to sweep her into his arms and carry her off to their bed. The joy they shared, the loving touches, the fiery passion had been all but forgotten in the terrifying weeks the duke and his guard fought to uncover the man behind the plot to steal their babes. Once the danger passed, they had shared a few precious nights together.

It had shocked her to discover that making love was far more uncomfortable after giving birth than she had expected—mayhap they should have waited a fortnight longer. But their passion and need for one another would not be denied. Her husband had been gentle—and maddeningly thorough. Together they fanned the flames of their desire until they had tasted the ecstasy they knew awaited them as they found completion in one another's arms.

The last time they made love, Richard started wailing, and she felt the familiar tingling in her breasts as her body immediately responded to her babe's hungry cries. To her dismay, her milk started to leak on her husband's broad chest. She remembered his shocked expression... It must have been a warm, uncomfortable surprise.

With each day that followed, she saw less and less of him. He spent the bulk of his time handling matters he no longer discussed with her. Would he return to their bed once the twins were weaned? She had no idea.

Mayhap this was what life was like for those who married for duty and the coin to fill their family's coffers. Once the heir and a spare had been delivered, they would be relegated to an obscure estate while their titled husband returned to his cronies at White's, and their demireps who would once more warm their beds.

*No!* Jared was not like the others. He loved her. The life they were building was not on a foundation of sand—a physical attraction that would fade over time—and nor was it the coin in her dowry—once spent, forgotten. They used to share their worries, and their plans they made for the future. They shared titillating conversations over their morning pots

of tea, nibbling on sweets...before Jared closed the door and locked it to nibble on *her*!

The knock on her bedchamber door forced her to gather her worry and tuck it away. "Come in."

The maid hesitated in the doorway. "Are you feeling poorly, Your Grace?"

Her maid's concerned expression added to Persephone's frustration. She could see the question in the young woman's eyes and had heard the rumor whispered through the servants' side of their home. The question no one had been brave enough to ask: *What caused the rift between the duke and the duchess?*

"Nay, Francis. Just tired."

The duke, his personal guard, and their staff had protected their babes from the first threat to the last. Richard and Abigail were unharmed, the kidnappers behind bars, and the blackguard behind it no longer a threat. So why did the duke maintain his distance when their babes were safe? It had to be her overblown figure, coupled with the unwanted emotional highs and lows, that had cooled his ardor. How could she rekindle it?

The maid bustled into the room bearing a tray containing a small pot of tea and large glass of milk.

Eyeing the single *small* pot of tea, Persephone felt her mood swing from complacent to fractious. "I distinctly recall requesting two pots of tea."

Francis flinched at the harsh tone, and Persephone immediately regretted it.

Her maid carefully set the tray on the elegant mahogany table beneath the window that overlooked the garden, as if it contained black powder...and the duchess held the flint to create the spark that would blow it to bits. Francis paused then placed her palm against the window that looked out over the gardens. "It's bitter cold outside. Shall I fetch your heavy

woolen shawl? Merry is concerned you'll catch a chill eating by the window."

The duchess knew she should not take out her frustration on the maid, but she could not seem to help herself. "You have neglected to answer my question, Francis."

Every ounce of color drained from the young woman's face as she held the silver tray to her breast as if it were a shield that would protect her. "I... We... That is, His Grace—"

"Is behaving in an unacceptable, autocratic manner! Did *he* have to go without his precious morning pot of tea this morning, or, for that matter, for the nine months I carried our babes?"

Her maid swallowed and shook her head.

Persephone strode over to the bellpull and yanked it. Within moments, a footman appeared in the doorway. She sent him off on a quest to return with her pots of tea.

Persephone was beyond caring what anyone thought, tired of everyone treading lightly around her—or, when she raised her voice, keeping their distance—as if she were fragile. The man Persephone had trusted to always be there for her had deserted her. Without the strength she had come to depend upon, she could not think of a way to pull herself free. Instead, she felt as if she were trapped in a bog, sinking deeper every time those around her eyed her as if she were a raving madwoman...and mayhap she was. The duchess knew she needed to regain control of her emotions and her temper. If she had to resort to sneaking down into the kitchen and preparing the tea that was essential to her state of mind and her ability to function, then she bloody well would!

She drew in a deep breath and felt her strength ebbing as it had for the last sennight. Where had the strength she had regained gone? Why was she constantly tired? Was it a malady due to birthing two babes instead of one, or was something quite serious wrong with her?

The duchess hated that she was easily vexed with anyone who tried to tell her what to do. Whether their advice was out of love and concern did not matter in the slightest. Mayhap she needed to seek the advice of someone besides Jared's pompous physician. A woman she could trust. Her confidantes, Ladies Phoebe, Aurelia, and Calliope, were married now, two of them expecting. All of them unable to make the journey in such wicked weather.

How long had it been since she'd corresponded with Lady Phyllida and Lady Cressida? Before she married the duke, they had been her closest friends and constant companions. Would they be understanding, given all that had occurred, or would they be vexed with her?

Never letting go of her silver shield, her maid asked, "Shall I ask Merry for a tisane with her special herbal blend?"

"Just the pots of tea I requested, thank you."

The maid dipped into a deep curtsy and closed the door behind her.

Persephone should have felt relieved at the closing of the door. Glancing about her, the duchess wondered why the soft greens and blues of the drapes and coordinating colors on the counterpane on the bed did not soothe her as they normally would. The room she used to share with her husband had been their haven, where she and her love were surrounded by colors that reminded her of the sky and the meadow around their home. It had been their shelter from the slings and arrows of the society that had become part of their everyday existence.

She sat at the table and stared out of the window at the frozen scene. Ice and snow transformed the verdant green of the park surrounding their home and gardens into a fairytale setting. She squinted and imagined she saw the Snow Queen standing with her head held high as icicles and snowflakes danced on the air, swirling about her. The queen's eyes were the same brilliant, crystalline blue as those of the man she loved.

Vowing not to think of the man who was bent on reminding her what to do, and when and how to do it, she concentrated on the wintry scene below. Did the wood nymphs and faeries feel the cold, or did they wear coats made from layers and layers of moss and leaves? Did they brave the wintry weather or settle in for a long winter's nap?

Sipping her now-lukewarm tea did not soothe her or prod her brain to wake. *Jared knows it takes two strong pots of tea for me to wake sufficiently to face the day with any sort of good humor.*

A knock on her bedchamber door had relief flowing through her—her tea had arrived. *Finally!*

“Come in.”

“I understand you are not pleased with your morning tray.”

Persephone shot to her feet. “Jared? I thought you were closeted with Hawkins going over his suggestions for the spring planting.”

He crossed the threshold but went no further. Hurt lanced through her. Could he no longer stand to be in the same room with her?

Her husband frowned. “I was until I was told that you refused to eat until you received your pots of tea.”

Her irritation spiked and her temper got the better of her. “Why have you insisted that I be deprived of the one thing I must have every morning in order to face my day?”



THE DUKE CLENCHED his hands behind his back before he gave in to the temptation to put them on her shoulders and shake some sense into his wife. *Face her day?* Was her life here so tedious? Marriage to him such a trial? Did she regret the proof of the love they made...their babes?

He schooled his features and donned the ducal expression he often employed to keep others from discovering his true

thoughts and feelings. “Is there anything I can do for you, other than send up what our physician has expressly forbidden?”

“I was assured I would be able to return to my regular diet of—”

The duke cut her off. “I have spoken with him recently, and he has changed his mind.”

Every ounce of color bled from her face. He did not reach for her, didn't dare touch her for fear he would lose his head and give in to the desperate need that had its claws in him. Bloody hell! It had been too long since they made love. That brief taste after they thought she had healed sufficiently from the birthing had not quenched the desire he had kept a tight leash on for the last months of her pregnancy. His need had him pacing late at night, but the knowledge his babes needed her more kept him at a distance. Anyone could see she suffered from exhaustion. But God, how he was tempted to toss her onto the bed and sink into her welcoming warmth... losing himself in the ecstasy they used to share.

The hurt in her eyes pulled at him, but he could not give in when his physician had agreed with his concerns, insisting that the duchess maintain the mild diet previously prescribed with the hope she would regain her equilibrium and sunny personality.

He dug deep to regain his ironclad control. The need to be alert at all times, on guard, protecting Persephone and their babes from the bastards who had been dogging his heels from the moment he assumed the mantle of duke, was essential. There had been too many attempts on his life...hers...and their babes. He would not rest until he put his latest plan into place and hired more men to see to their protection.

Thank God for Patrick O'Malley and the men comprising his personal guard. They were now spread between his estates and those of his two closest cousins, protecting his immediate and extended family.

His contacts—Captain Coventry, his London man-of-affairs, and Gavin King of the Bow Street Runners—were in constant communication, apprising him of any hint of a threat against himself or his family.

Exhausted from the strain of being constantly on guard, he'd been at his wits' end on how to deal with his wife's malaise and mood swings. They seemed to culminate after the threat of kidnapping had been removed. Shouldn't the removal of that threat have eased her mind and prompted his loving wife to return to his arms—and his bed?

“My head aches,” she said. “I believe I shall lie down.”

“But you haven't eaten.”

“I'm no longer hungry.”

“Our babes will be in a few hours' time. The physician has warned that you must eat to keep up with our babes' needs. As a precaution, he has recommended two suitable wet nurses from the village.”

The stark pain on his wife's face gutted him, but he would not allow his wife to fall ill, nor let his babes go hungry. If she could not gather herself enough to think of them, then by God, he would!

The physician had advised him to be firm, but encouraging, with his wife. But when she stepped around him, putting even more distance between them, his gut churned and the lid on his anger blew off. Words he never intended to say, in a harsh tone he instantly regretted, burst from his lips: “I shall ask Mrs. O'Malley to send for the wet nurses at once, as you do not seem to care whether or not you are able to feed my children.”

Instead of the reaction he expected—where Persephone would fly into a rage at him, which he would counter by capturing her in his arms, soothing her with promises of anything she desired, as long as the loving woman he married returned to his arms—his duchess, who had become more of a stranger every day, walked away from him.

Guilt grabbed him by the throat. He had been autocratic, not encouraging. Harsh when he should have been compassionate.

Swallowing against the tautness of his throat, he stated, “I will speak to Mrs. O’Malley at once and return to my meeting.”

His wife did not bother to respond, nor did she slip beneath the covers. She lay down on their bed and faced the wall.

*Good God!* Was this the end of their marriage? He wanted to get a response from his wife—angry or happy; he would take either.

“I shall be leaving at midday.”

Persephone bolted up in bed and stared at him. “Leaving?”

He noted the worry in her eyes and decided then and there not to tell her how long he planned to be away—or why. “I have business to attend to in London.”

Let her wonder if he planned to take up residence at their London town house, or if it would only be for a short time to handle urgent business.

“How long will you be gone? What of our children’s safety?”

Pleased that she had roused from her malaise to question him, he replied, “I couldn’t possibly entertain a guess. I have a number of issues that I have neglected, due to circumstances beyond my control. O’Malley and my guard will protect the children. If something arises, O’Malley knows to send word.”

He should beg her forgiveness because of his inability to keep the bloody kidnappers from their door. But he would wait until he had the opportunity to speak with her for more than a few moments in passing.

Until then, the Duke of Wyndmere would do what those in his family had always done: protect the family name, keep the coffers filled to pass down to the next generation, and assume his seat in the House of Lords.



If his life be devoid of love from the woman his soul cried out for, then so be it. His children depended on his surviving and doing everything in his power to provide for their future.



## CHAPTER TWO

THE DUKE GLARED at the head of his personal guard. “I repeat, I cannot make the journey to London if you accompany me. I need you here guarding my wife and family.”

O’Malley frowned at the duke. “I wasn’t aware a missive arrived from London.” When the duke remained silent, O’Malley persisted. “Ye’d have discussed any communication with me.” Crossing his arms in front of him, he glared. “If ye expect me to do me job, ye’ll have to tell me what in the bloody hell is going on!”

Jared had encouraged the head of his guard to speak plainly when they were alone to cut through what the duke considered useless platitudes. But right now, he wished he had not done so.

He leaned forward and rasped, “It is none of your concern.”

O’Malley’s eyes widened. “Then why are ye leaving yer wife and yer babes when ’tis plain as the nose on yer face they need ye here?”

“On this we disagree. As long as you and your men remain at Wyndmere Hall, my family will be safe.”

*“Bollocks!”*

“Need I remind you that you are speaking to a peer of the realm?”

O’Malley snorted with laughter. “Ye gave me leave to speak to ye as an equal. Ye cannot be takin’ it back now. I’m not the one who’s leavin’ his family behind to hie off to London. In order to fully protect ye and yer family, Yer Grace, tell me what I need to know.”

“I feel as if we are at cross-purposes—”

O’Malley inclined his head, spun on his heel, and reached for the door.

“Where in the bloody hell do you think you’re going?”

“To let me wife know we’ll be leaving yer employ. ’Tis a difficult time of year to be travelin’, especially given her delicate condition. I need to reserve our seats on the Mail Coach.”

The duke stalked over to the door and placed the flat of his hand on it. “You do not have my permission to leave.”

O’Malley met him glare for glare. “I do not need yer permission to resign from me post. I did not sign me life away when I agreed to head up yer guard.”

The duke dropped his hand and stepped away from the door. “You’d leave without a recommendation?”

O’Malley turned around to face him. “Aye.”

“If you leave, your brothers and your cousins will likely follow.”

“Not if I ask them to remain until ye hire others to take our place.”

“I trust you to guard my family as I would—with your life.”

“I know, and I’m grateful yer faith and trust have been fully restored, but I cannot do me job if ye don’t tell me everything!”

The duke inclined his head. His throat felt constricted by the emotions he held in check. He cleared it before continuing, “The kidnapping attempts on our babes gutted me. I failed in my bid to protect my wife and children. These attacks—verbal and physical—started the moment I assumed the bloody title and have not stopped!”

O’Malley listened intently.

“If I am to live with these constant threats against my wife and family, I will need a wider net of protection. I need to hire additional men for my London guard. I plan to meet with King and Coventry and finalize my plans.”

O’Malley met his gaze. “’Tis something we have discussed.”

“We?”

“Aye, the rest of yer guard.”

“You discussed it among yourselves, but not with me?” Jared could not countenance it!

“None of us could agree on the number of men needed—or where they would be most useful. ’Tis why we have not discussed it with ye yet. We prefer to have our plan in place, ready to move ahead, before we bring it to ye.”

“I believe a dozen or more men to haunt the docks, the gaming hells—”

“White’s, Gentleman Jackson’s, Tattersalls,” O’Malley countered.

Anger radiated off the duke. “Do you honestly believe additional eyes and ears spying on the *ton* alone will suffice?”

“Aye, have ye forgotten the men behind the vicious slander have been members of yer precious society? Yer peers have contacts on the docks and in the stews of London. Their coin will hire those to carry out the physical attacks and kidnapping attempts while their soft white hands remain clean.”

When the duke clenched his jaw and curled his hands into tight fists, O’Malley nodded and continued, “The men and I have discussed anywhere between fifteen and twenty more added to yer London guard. If ye want to end this *shite* and show ye’ll not stop until the madness ends, ye have to hit the bloody leeches where it hurts and turn the tables on them. ’Tis time to call out the bloody buggers!”

The duke glanced down at his clenched hands, envisioning them wrapped around the necks of Hollingford, Chellenham,

and Radleigh. He'd never experienced the need for violence until that first campaign to destroy his name, and the one aimed at ruining Lady Persephone's reputation.

Relaxing his fingers, he glanced up to see understanding in O'Malley's expression. "What would you do, if you were in my position?"

"I'd kill anyone who attacked me family—nay, mayhap only hobble them—but I'm not a member of polite society and not held to the same standards as Yer Grace."

"The chances of your being tossed into a cell at Newgate and sentenced to hang are far greater than mine."

O'Malley slowly smiled. "Aye, but I'm used to movin' about in the underbelly of society. I've more connections that would be willin' to hide me...for a price. Thanks to yer generosity while in yer employment, I can more than afford to pay any price."

"I have spent my nights pacing the floors trying to come up with a viable solution to this problem. I believe this is the answer." Jared raked a hand through his hair, then dropped it to his side. "This constantly looking over my shoulder, expecting an assault, is no way for my wife and babes to live."

O'Malley frowned. "Have ye told Her Grace ye're leavin'?"

"Aye."

"How did she take the news?"

"She appeared to rouse herself enough to be shocked. She has not been herself as of late. I know that caring for one infant would consume one's life—but caring for twins..."

He was not certain how to put his thoughts into words without damning his wife to the possibility of being sent away to be cared by someone more adept at dealing with someone with a fragile, emotional state. Hearing rumors hinting at loved ones with similar issues being locked away had him keeping that thought to himself.

“Mayhap the time away will benefit the both of us.”

“I doubt it,” O’Malley mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Talkin’ to meself, Yer Grace. Who will travel with ye, then?”

“Flaherty.”

O’Malley nodded. “Rory’s the sharpshooter of the family. Who else?”

The duke met and held O’Malley’s gaze. “No one.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Yer Grace, but are ye daft? Ye could be set upon by any number of brigands or thieves along the road south to London! If anything happened to ye, what would become of yer wife and family?”

“I won’t be a target riding in the state coach. I’ll be on horseback.”

“Yer stallion will have ye recognized in a heartbeat.”

“I’ll be riding one of the geldings.”

O’Malley seemed to consider the idea. His next statement was proof of that: “Ye’d have to dress as if ye were of lower birth. A mud-brown coat and trousers, worn boots, and a battered hat ought to be enough of a disguise.”

The duke slowly smiled. “I have already spoken to my valet about finding the proper clothes in my size.”

“If they were a bit on the larger side, all the better. Ill-fittin’ would be best. A common man doesn’t have the blunt to pay the finest tailors.”

“Indeed! I shall speak to my valet at once.”

“Do ye have someone in mind to fill in for Flaherty?”

“I sent an urgent missive to Finn. He should arrive tomorrow or the next day.”

O'Malley inclined his head. "'Tis fortunate ye sent me brother to Summerfield Chase in the Borderlands with missives for the baron. The distance is closer than if he were at Penwith Tower in Cornwall."

"Most fortunate," the duke agreed.

O'Malley mumbled his agreement, then queried, "Have ye had a recent report from Fenton Flaherty? I'm wonderin' how the local men they hired to take me brother's place at Penwith Tower are gettin' on."

"The change has been seamless. Having been in Cornwall for nearly a year, they have been able to assess the situation. I'm certain you are aware that at times there is a fine line between the excise men and the smugglers."

"Aye, ye have the right of it. Ye've thought of everythin'—exceptin' how Her Grace will react once ye've left."

The duke had purposely distanced himself from his wife while he'd been making plans to arrange protection for his family. "Do you foresee a problem?"

"Ye don't?"

"She did not put up an argument, which, truth be told, I expected." He met O'Malley's direct gaze. "I'm entrusting you with my very heart, O'Malley."

"Between Finn and our cousins, the four of us will protect yer family with our lives."

The duke held out his hand. "I depend upon it."

O'Malley shook the duke's hand and vowed, "I won't let ye down."



A FEW HOURS later, the duke rode away from Wyndmere Hall, Flaherty by his side. Another layer of guilt weighed him down. He had not been able to bid his wife goodbye. She was not in the nursery when he kissed his babes goodbye, and the weather had turned foul.

But he could not waste a moment more looking for her. Nothing would stop him from his mission to add a covert arm to his personal guard.

He would see his family protected at all costs—including his own happiness.





## CHAPTER THREE

“HIS KISSED THE twins goodbye without waking them.”

The duchess stared at her nanny, trying to comprehend what she’d just said. “Jared was here and he did not wait for me?”

“I told him you would return shortly, but he said he had to leave immediately.”

A feeling of dread washed over Persephone. “I cannot let him leave when I have no idea how long he will be gone!”

“Go now,” Gwendolyn urged, “before you miss him!”

Persephone argued with herself as she rushed to the servants’ staircase and descended. The thought of Jared leaving with harsh words hanging between them bothered her. She had no idea what tasks awaited him in London, or when he would return. Her appearance was suddenly not as big a worry as his leaving them. She had come to rely on his strength far more than she’d admitted to him.

Mayhap she should tell him that. Her mind raced. Should she apologize first or kiss him? Unable to decide, she yanked the door open with more force than she’d intended and rammed into a wall.

“Yer Grace? Are ye hurt?” O’Malley inquired as he steadied her. “I didn’t expect ye to be comin’ down this staircase.”

She braced a hand to her heart and shook her head. “My fault, Patrick. I know you and your guard use the servants’ staircase during your patrol.”

Instead of waiting for him to reply, she scooted around him and rushed along the hallway.

“Is there somethin’ wrong, Yer Grace?”

“I don’t want to miss saying goodbye to my husband.”

O’Malley’s loud groan halted her in her tracks. She slowly turned around, meeting his troubled gaze.

“Yer Grace...”

Hand to her throat, pain lancing through to her soul, she rasped, “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Aye.”

“Without saying goodbye to me?”

“Ye were indisposed.”

“He could not spare the time to say a proper goodbye to me and our babes?”

O’Malley cleared his throat. “His Grace stopped in the nursery first. When he could not find ye there—”

“He left.” Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “I understand. Thank you for telling me. If you’ll excuse me, I need to return to the nursery.”

“If there’s anythin’ I can do for ye while he’s gone, Yer Grace, ye’ve but to ask.”

She nodded and slipped around him, retracing her steps without a sound, without a word. What could she possibly say to her husband’s most trusted guard? Jared’s leaving without bidding her goodbye spoke volumes.

As she trudged up the steps, a devastating thought cut her to the bone. Had he gone to London for reasons other than urgent matters left too long unattended? Had he come to loathe her appearance and temperamental moods that much? Could he no longer bear to be near her?

She paused and grasped the railing. Dear God, had he fallen out of love with her?

Persephone pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to cover her gasp. Would he seek comfort in another woman’s

arms? It was obvious he no longer sought it in hers.

As soon as the thought filled her mind, she pushed it away. They had vowed to love one another. He was too honorable to break that vow...but he had been so distant as of late.

*As have you*, her conscience reminded her.

With a heavy heart, she forced herself to walk up the remaining steps and opened the door at the top. A quick glance about her revealed that none of the staff appeared to be about.

The first tear fell before she could stop it. Anguish cut her to the bone. Careful to quiet her footfalls, she rushed to the bedchamber they used to share. She shut and locked the door, spun around, and braced her back against it as if that were necessary to ensure no one would invade her privacy. Listening for any sound to indicate she had been followed, she waited.

Convinced she was alone, she slid to the floor and unleashed the pain of Jared's leaving.



FRANCIS AND MOLLIE stood in the hallway outside Their Graces' bedchamber, hands grasped tightly as they bore witness to their employer's pain.

"Should we knock?" Mollie whispered.

Francis shook her head. "We'll wait."

"What if we're needed elsewhere?" Mollie queried.

"We share the duties of lady's maid to Her Grace," Francis reminded her. "With the duke leaving, she'll have even more need of us—especially today."

The door to the nursery opened, startling the maids.

Gwendolyn O'Malley stepped into the hall and frowned. "I thought I heard Her Grace return."

Mollie nodded and motioned to the closed door. "We did not want to disturb her."

“Did Her Grace manage to say goodbye before His Grace left?”

Francis sighed. “No.”

Gwendolyn’s eyes flashed with worry. “What happened?”

“We don’t know,” Mollie admitted. “We have been waiting for Her Grace to stop crying before we intrude.”

The nanny absorbed the information and their worry. “We must do all that we can to see to Her Grace’s comfort.” With a glance over her shoulder, checking on her charges, Mrs. O’Malley closed the door behind her. “Francis, would you please have Constance prepare a tray for Her Grace? Strong tea and something sweet to comfort her in her distress.”

Eager to help, Francis replied, “At once,” and scurried off.

“Mollie, would you ring for one of the footmen to bring up more hot water? Her Grace will want to bathe her face before she sits down to eat.”

The maid wrung her hands. “Why would His Grace act so cold? We all know how brave she has been these last weeks.”

The nanny frowned and shook her head. “They both have. We must be vigilant in the duke’s absence to see that Her Grace is coddled and reminded to eat well and rest to keep up her strength. The twins depend on her.”

Mollie hesitated for a moment. “Mrs. O’Malley, there is something you should know.”

Gwendolyn paused and waited for the maid to continue.

“I overheard one of the squire’s maids the last time I was in the village.”

“Oh? What did you hear?”

Mollie hesitated then met Gwendolyn’s concerned gaze. “She said Her Grace’s milk will either dry up or sour because those brutes tried to steal her babes!”

Gwendolyn admonished the younger woman not to repeat such nonsense, all the while worrying that it was a distinct possibility...well, as far as the duchess's being able to continue to produce enough milk for two babes. The duke had spoken to her about sending for the two wet nurses his physician recommended. Given Her Grace's current mood, she would wait and speak to the duchess before she did.

“Hurry now, Mollie!”

The maid rushed to the servants' staircase and clattered down the steps.

Gwendolyn stood in front of the bedchamber door and lifted her hand to the knob—twice. And twice she dropped her hand. What could she possibly say to the woman who had become her friend, the woman who took her into her trust as a confidante to comfort her? Should she reassure her that His Grace left abruptly because the weather had turned foul as he was planning to leave?

She drew in a deep breath and then another, deciding that she should. What other reason could there be?

“There ye are, lass.”

She whirled around at the sound of her husband's voice. She held her hand out to him, then grabbed hold and pulled him into the nursery.

Feet braced, ready to spring into action, Patrick waited for her to speak.

“Francis and Mollie have been waiting outside of Her Grace's bedchamber.”

“For...?” he asked.

“Her to regain her composure.”

“I should have followed her immediately.”

“Why? What has happened?”

Patrick raked a hand through his hair and let his hand drop to his side. A glance over his shoulder had him lowering his

voice so as not to wake the sleeping babes. “She crashed into me as she bolted through the door at the base of the servants’ staircase.”

“Oh dear. That was my fault. I told her to hurry, or she would miss His Grace.”

Patrick frowned. “She missed him by ten minutes.”

Gwendolyn placed her hand on her husband’s forearm. “Why did he not wait? What do you know about their argument?”

He answered the first question: “’Twas best to keep ahead of the weather bearing down on them.”

She inclined her head, waiting for him to answer her other question.

He held her gaze for long moments before admitting, “Not a bloody thing. What I noticed lately was himself spendin’ more and more time with us, discussin’ extra protection and fortification of Wyndmere Hall and the grounds surroundin’ it. The kidnappin’ attempts have had a profound effect on the duke.”

“Her Grace as well. Though I did not mention it until she asked me, she and I both noted His Grace’s new habit of not returning to their chamber until it was time for the twins’ midnight feeding. It was only a short while later that the duke started insisting that Her Grace needed her rest.”

“Aye,” he agreed. “He mentioned that worry more than once.”

“Her Grace has been distraught, and her worry increased once the duke started sleeping in the room on the other side of the nursery.”

Patrick grumbled, “’Twould be funny if their hearts were not so bruised. They have been at cross-purposes before, but this time they started avoidin’ one another.”

“What can we do?”

“I’ll keep His Grace apprised of the situation here, while ye see that Her Grace continues to confide what’s troublin’ her.”

Rising on tiptoes, she kissed her husband on the cheek.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she sagged against him. “That’s the kind of send-off she should have given His Grace.” A rolling thump to his middle had his eyes widening. “Our son agrees.”

“Our *daughter* knows Her Grace would have given him a kiss that spoke of love and the reminder of the lives born of that love...*if* he hadn’t left without bidding her goodbye.”

Patrick rested his chin on the top of his wife’s head. “’Twill be up to us to see that they do not drift further apart.”

Gwendolyn gently pushed away until she could meet her husband’s intense gaze. “What do you have in mind?”

“With this bitter cold weather, it’s too soon for Her Grace to start makin’ the rounds visitin’ their tenant farmers. I’m thinkin’ she needs a bit of a visit with her neighbors.”

“The vicar and his wife might be feeling a bit shut in with this weather,” Gwendolyn said. “Mayhap we can suggest she invite them to tea.”

“A sound idea. Speak to Merry; I’ll speak to Humphries. They’ll know who is in residence this time of year, and what type of entertainments would be proper for Her Grace to host while His Grace is in London.”

“How long will he be gone?”

Patrick frowned. “Until he’s completed his business.”

“I see.”

“Nay, lass,” he said, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes. “I do not think ye do. He’s a man torn. ’Tis not me place to speculate, or to discuss certain aspects of His Grace’s business with ye, as ye knew when we wed.” When she opened her

mouth to protest, he silenced her with a brief but potent kiss. “Have a care and rest yerself. Our son needs ye to be strong.”

She laid her head on his chest and sighed. “I will rest when I can.”

“Ye agreed to let Her Grace know when it becomes too taxin’ for ye to care for her little ones and our unborn babe.”

“I have not reached that point yet, my darling. Trust me. I know my limits and would not do anything that would hurt our babe.”

“Ye might think ye know yer own strength, lass, but a woman carryin’ is known to be a bit unreasonable when suggestions are made to her.”

Gwendolyn’s laughter surrounded the couple. “I am most agreeable and reasonable, husband.”

Patrick grinned, devilment dancing in his green eyes. “Oh aye, wife, that ye are. I’ll be needin’ another proper kiss from ye before I return to me duties.”

Gwendolyn sighed exaggeratedly. “If you must.”

“Do not be temptin’ me now,” he grumbled, then grinned. “Tempt me later.”

She smiled. “Aye, Patrick.”

Her quick agreement had him frowning down at her. “No prevaricatin’, wife of mine.”

“I would not dream of stretching the truth, husband of mine.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, giving her a brief hug. “I’ll have messengers goin’ back and forth between here and the London town house—and a few other locations as well. We’ll both have a clearer picture of Their Graces meetin’s and entertainments and will be able to formulate our plan to hurry His Grace back to Wyndmere Hall.”

“I pray that it works.”



“It has to.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

UNAWARE THAT SHE had caused an uproar with her staff, Persephone wiped her face with the backs of her hands. Her nose had started to run, and rather than resorting to using the hem of her gown to wipe it, she pushed to her feet and fetched a handkerchief from her wardrobe.

She rubbed a hand over her heart, but the burning ache remained. Massaging her forehead with the tips of her fingers did nothing to relieve the pain hammering there.

*My own fault. If I hadn't been so beastly to him earlier... not just earlier, she reasoned with herself. In my bid to have a modicum of control over our terrifying situation, I butted heads with him for weeks. He never budged, insisting he and his guard were handling the situation.*

Unable to recall the last time she had not been at odds with her husband, she realized something more...she had been suppressing the terror and worry that remained even though their babes were safe. She spent all of her time caring for their twins, neglecting Jared—who seemed to have his hands full running the ducal estates.

Hand to her lips, she swallowed her keening cry. *I pushed him away.*

The loud knock on the door was telling—it was not one of the staff. Only the men in her husband's guard had such a forceful knock. Rather than berate them for pounding on her door, she accepted it, as she had the men who protected them with their lives.

“Come in.”

O'Malley entered. “Yer Grace, there's a problem in the kitchen. Constance is asking for ye to mediate.”

Persephone stared at him for long moments... There was a hint of hesitation in the depths of his green eyes. Something was not as it should be. As far as she knew, there had never been anything more than a bit of territorial posturing in the kitchen—nothing that would require her interference.

“Merry urges that ye come at once.”

She acquiesced, although with the mention of the housekeeper, she knew something was afoot. The only way she would know what was going on in their household was to address it at once. It was the least she could do now that her husband was not in residence.

A spear of sorrow jabbed hard in her belly. Her sharp intake of breath and hand pressed to her stomach had O’Malley reaching for her arm to steady her. “What is it, Yer Grace? Are ye ill?”

She drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. The worst of the pain was receding. Patting his hand, she thanked him. “I am fine.” With her gaze locked on his, she added, “I’d best see to whatever the commotion is. It must be troubling if both Constance and Merry have asked you escort me to the kitchen.”

“If ye’re certain ye are not ill.”

There it was again—that hesitation, right before he released his hold on her. This would not be the first time her husband’s guard had kept information from her, thinking to protect her.

“His Grace would have me head if I let anythin’ happen to ye.”

His competent, direct look was back. Whatever he avoided discussing with her, she would not be able to pry from Patrick O’Malley’s lips. However, she could—and *would*—attempt to wheedle it out of his wife.

Persephone went to the kitchen. Constance was flushed and looking more than a bit harried. Persephone immediately felt remorse for thinking the head of her husband’s guard had

manufactured a disturbance simply to involve her with the staff so soon after her husband's departure.

The cook rushed toward her. "Thank goodness you are here! Mollie's collapsed! Eamon carried her into the room off the pantry. Merry is with them."

Persephone walked quickly along the hallway. "Did she seem ill before she fainted?"

Constance kept pace with the duchess as she responded, "Mollie was the picture of health a few hours ago. She and Francis are always flitting about seeing to their duties for yourself as well as assisting Mrs. O'Malley in the nursery."

"Are we asking too much of Mollie and Francis? After all, they were scullery maids when I first arrived. Learning what was expected of them as my lady's maids was a lot to take on at once...and then helping me to care for our babes until we hired Gwendolyn."

The cook shook her head. "They are both young and full of energy...normally."

Worry tangled with guilt. Had Persephone been so overly concerned with her appearance and her husband distancing himself that she had neglected her staff?

She rushed toward the pantry and entered the room just beyond it. The room had been instrumental in tending for the wounded during the attack on Wyndmere Hall. One of the walls was lined with shelves filled with an assortment of herbal remedies, salves, and tinctures. Beneath the shelves was a cupboard that held a ready supply of linens and various lengths of bandages.

What grabbed her attention was the pale form of her lady's maid lying on one of the cots. Mollie appeared so still, so small.

Eamon turned at the sound of her footsteps. His face was devoid of expression as he said, "Yer Grace. I don't know what happened. I'd just greeted her on me way through the

kitchens. Her gaze met mine, and I swear every drop of blood left her face! She started to sway.”

The duchess placed her hand on the guard’s forearm. The tension beneath her fingertips belied the lack of expression on his face. Eamon O’Malley was worried. Gently patting his arm before removing her hand, she told him, “You were there to catch her. Thank you.”

“Do ye need me to carry her to her bedchamber?”

Persephone considered asking him to do just that, but as the maid had not been ill, her faint could be due to any number of things—personal things, none of which she would be discussing with the man shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, waiting for her reply. “I think we’ll let her rest here for a bit until she feels better.”

“I’ll head on out to me post, then. Send word if ye have need of me.”

“Thank you, Eamon. I will.” It never ceased to amaze her how much compassion and caring lay beneath the surface of the men in her husband’s guard. Their size alone would lead one to believe that they were hard men whose only thought would be fighting to protect the man they served. Persephone had come to understand the tall, muscular men used their size and intimidation tactics to their advantage when the need arose, while shielding their hearts of pure gold.

Mollie moaned softly and slowly opened her eyes. “Your Grace!” She sat up quickly and put a hand to her head.

“Easy now,” the duchess warned as she stood beside the maid’s cot. “You are probably still a bit dizzy. How do you feel otherwise?”

Her maid frowned. “Fine, but how did I get in here?”

“Eamon carried you.”

Mollie dropped her head into her hands. “I’ll never hear the end of it!”

The duchess reminded her maid, “If I were you, I’d thank him. He caught you before you hit your head on the oak table in the kitchen—or the cookstove!”

The younger woman dropped her hands and lifted her head. “You are right, Your Grace. Forgive me.”

“Do not give it another thought.”

Merry bustled back into the room. “Mollie! So wonderful to see that you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“Mortified.”

“Now, now,” the older woman soothed her. “No need to take on so much. Everyone has had a moment or two in life when they needed help. How lucky that Eamon was nearby to catch you.”

“Er...yes, wasn’t it?”

The duchess smiled. “Is your head still feeling light?”

“Nay, Your Grace. I can get back to my duties.”

Persephone straightened to her full height and proclaimed, “I should say not! Merry, would you mind asking Constance for a cup of weak tea and mayhap a day-old biscuit if we have one?”

Merry softly smiled. “I’ll see to it right away.” The housekeeper bustled off, leaving the two women alone once more.

The duchess did not want to embarrass the young woman further but needed to ask some pertinent questions, especially given that Mollie shared the duty of watching over the twins in between the times when they were waiting for the nanny or the duchess to resume their care.

Deciding to lead with that statement, as she felt it would cause the least amount of embarrassment, she said, “I do not want you to worry unnecessarily, but given that you care for our babes whenever we need you, I must be certain that you

are not suffering from anything more serious than overexerting yourself.”

Mollie nodded and waited for the duchess to begin questioning her.

“Have you been suffering from any lightheadedness or megrims lately?”

Mollie hesitated before answering, “Just a bit of a light head now and again.”

“I did not detect a fever, but from past experience, I know that fevers are normally higher at night and when we wake in the morning.”

“No fever, Your Grace.”

Persephone noted that Mollie seemed uneasy with the questioning. Mayhap it had to do with her monthly courses. When she asked, Mollie’s face flamed and she immediately denied that it did.

Relieved, the duchess asked one last question: “Nausea?”

Mollie stared at her hands. “I did have a bit this morning \_\_\_”

“And how do you feel now?”

“Fine, thank you.”

The duchess strove not to show any emotion at the answer. She would keep a close watch on the younger woman—and keep her own counsel for now and wait. A week or so would either prove her suspicions right or wrong.

She wished Jared were here. Sharing their worries with one another had often eased the worst of their burdens...but they had not shared anything since the last kidnapping attempt. Her husband had closed himself off from her, only visiting the nursery when she was not there. Now that he was gone, her worries increased. What had she done to engender such a reaction from him?

Merry arrived with a small tray. “Here we are, Mollie. Constance wants you to sip the tea slowly and make certain that you nibble on the biscuit. Not too much liquid in your belly just yet.”

“I will, thank you, Merry.”

“I’ll be back to check on you shortly,” the housekeeper promised.

The duchess sat in the room’s only chair—a straight-backed wooden chair that someone had, thankfully, put a cushion on. “Is there anything troubling you, Mollie? Sometimes when our thoughts become too heavy to handle, our bodies react in the strangest of ways.”

Her maid set her teacup on the small table beside the cot. “Is that why you seem so sad?” As soon as the words left Mollie’s mouth, she gasped and put her hands over it. Tears gathered in her eyes as she dropped her hands. “Forgive me, Your Grace! I did not mean to ask such a personal question.”

The duchess handed the young woman a handkerchief and assured her, “There is nothing to forgive.”

“But I spoke out of turn.”

“If you knew how many times I have done just that over the years, it would shock you,” Persephone replied. “Now, as to your question, His Grace and I have been through an ordeal a new parent would never dream of facing. The aftermath of what occurred is it bit more difficult to deal with than I had imagined.”

Mollie wiped her eyes. “I was mortally afraid—but did not want to add to your burden by telling you.”

The duchess sighed. “I wish that you had. We could have avoided your suffering now.”

Mollie looked away, and Persephone thought perhaps her women’s intuition *was* correct. Time would tell.

“There are moments when I wake and am transported back to those attacks—the fear is absolutely debilitating.”



“You are so brave,” Mollie rasped. “How are you able to continue with your duties as you care for your babes?”

“I have a wonderful staff and am not alone. I have Jared.” *But do you, really?* Unease swept up a chill up from Persephone’s toes. She shivered.

“I am sorry for bringing up something best left alone,” Mollie said.

The duchess disagreed. “At times, I believe it is better to speak of the things that have had such effect on our lives.” Her thoughts immediately went to the duke’s sister and the nightmares she suffered after being held at knifepoint. “If we suppress our fears and emotions for too long, we cannot help but have an adverse reaction.”

“Do you believe only women suffer from fear?” Mollie inquired. “I have yet to note His Grace showing an ounce of fear—from that first attack on Wyndmere Hall to the most recent despicable attempts to steal your babes.”

Persephone met Mollie’s gaze. “I know that they do, though not one of the men in our lives would willingly admit to such—especially His Grace and the men in his guard. They are more apt to act than react.”

Mollie hesitated, then whispered, “Do you think a man would leave, rather than face a situation he has no idea how to solve?”

The duchess froze. Was Mollie speaking of Jared? One glance at her maid’s miserable expression, and she realized Mollie was speaking of the man she loved—Finn O’Malley. “I do believe that some men would. Do not lose heart—once a man comes to what he feels is the appropriate conclusion, he will return.”

Mollie nodded. “We must give them time, then. Mustn’t we?”

Persephone slowly smiled. “I do believe we should—but not too much time.”

Her maid surprised her with her next comment. “Mayhap His Grace is still scared and worried and not willing to admit it. If he’s anything like Finn, Patrick, and the rest of his guard, he may see it as a weakness.”

The duchess fought to keep her expression neutral. How had her maid been able to reason through what had been plaguing Persephone for days? “I have only just come to that conclusion myself, Mollie.” She rose to her feet. “Rest. When Merry returns, if you feel up to it, you may retire to your room for the rest of the day.”

“But I feel fine,” her maid protested.

“Then in the morning, you shall feel even more restored.”

“Aye, Your Grace.”

The duchess’s mind was in a turmoil. Her mind raced as she wondered if she had missed her final opportunity to apologize to her husband. What could she do? What *should* she do?

Her mind cleared, and she knew what to do. *I shall send a message to London.*

She quickened her steps, dashing through the kitchen in search of Humphries. Their stalwart retainer would know who best to entrust her message to. Mayhap, if her husband were not in a great hurry to reach London, her missive may be waiting for him!



## CHAPTER FIVE

“HUMPHRIES!”

Their butler spun around, immediately on guard, prepared for the worst. “What is it, Your Grace? Is it the twins? Are you ill? Has someone been injured?”

Persephone skidded to a stop and held a hand to her breast while she caught her breath. “No, nothing like that. I need to send an urgent missive to His Grace.”

“Of course.”

“Please tell me there is a way for it to arrive in London before my husband.”

Humphries’ eyes lit with pleasure. “His Grace left his stallion home...er...not wanting to attract undue attention to himself as he traveled the road south to London.”

“I’m happy to learn my husband is taking proper precautions, but won’t Jared’s horse attract the wrong kind of attention being ridden by a messenger?”

“It likely would, but I am afraid there is no other option if your missive must precede His Grace’s arrival at your town house.”

“It is imperative.”

“Then I shall seek O’Malley’s suggestion for whom to deliver your missive. Will it be verbal or written?”

Persephone’s heart raced. Should she task someone with the message from her heart? Would they remember all that she needed to say—all that she wanted to say?

“I saw O’Malley just a few minutes ago,” the butler informed her. “While you decide how you would like your

message to be delivered, I shall speak to him...with your permission, of course.”

Relief swept up from her toes. Lord willing, she just may be able to save the shambles of their marriage! Much to their butler’s chagrin, she grabbed hold of his hand, gushing, “Of course! Thank you, Humphries.”

He waited a moment until the duchess was out of sight before he grinned. “Thank goodness one of them has come to their senses. O’Malley will be pleased with this information and request.”



HALF AN HOUR later, the messenger had been tasked with delivering two urgent missives from Her Grace—one sealed and the other verbal.

The messenger rehearsed the verbal part of Her Grace’s message that he was instructed to repeat *word for word* to Emmett O’Malley. The head of the duke’s London guard would deliver the verbal message first, and then the sealed missive from the duchess.

A short while later, the duke’s stallion lifted his head and whinnied in jubilation as they set off at a gallop. The changes of horse were as swift, as the duke had excellent horses stabled at strategic inns along the road south to London.



EMMETT O’MALLEY BEGAN pacing after receiving the missive from Her Grace. “He should have arrived by now, Jenkins.”

The duke’s London butler shook his head. “The messenger advised that the duke planned to draw as little attention to himself as possible by traveling on horseback.”

Emmett sighed. “And if he arrived at any one of the inns demanding immediate service and the duke’s best horse, that would defeat the purpose. Someone would recognize His Grace.” Before Jenkins had the opportunity to reply, Emmett

added, "I'll be getting back to me post; we won't be seeing the whites of His Grace's eyes for another day or so."

The butler agreed. "From the scuttlebutt we've heard through Captain Coventry's contacts, and those of the tradesmen traveling to and from the Lake District, we will have our hands full."

"Aye." Emmett frowned. "Never thought to play matchmaker to Their Graces!"

"It is our duty to see that they reach an accord," Jenkins reminded him.

"Understood. They belong together. Me ma and da had more than one rough patch to smooth out over the years. Ma likes to remind us 'tis what will make a marriage strong. The disagreements and the compromising to fix them."

"Your mother is to be commended."

"She usually follows her advice with a wallop to the back of the head."

Jenkins slowly smiled. "A rare woman indeed."

When Emmett turned to go, Jenkins asked, "You will keep me abreast of any further news from your contacts?"

"Aye, Jenkins."



## CHAPTER SIX

THE DUKE WAS exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, an odd combination he had not felt in far too long. The unbidden image of his wife coming apart in his arms by turns taunted and haunted him.

He shook his head to clear it. First he had to settle the matter of whom to hire for his expanded guard. Then he could tackle the raven-haired, obstinate problem that was his wife.

“Are ye troubled with the cold?” Flaherty inquired as they entered Grosvenor Square.

“Nay. I have much to contend with now that we are here, and even more waiting for my return.”

“If I can be of any help, ye’ve but to ask, Yer Grace.”

They reined in their mounts in front of the town house and dismounted. The front door burst open, and Jenkins greeted them effusively.

“Your Grace!” he said. “Delighted to see you. Flaherty, I trust your journey was not too taxing.”

The duke smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you, Jenkins. Not at all. With Flaherty as company, the journey flew by.”

Flaherty chuckled. “I’m thinking ’twas the cold nipping at our heels that kept us flying down the road south to London.”

They thanked the stable lad who’d arrived to take their mounts to the stable where they would be pampered.

Jenkins was noticeably uneasy. Something was definitely wrong—the family’s longtime butler rarely showed emotion.

“Jenkins?” the duke said.

“An urgent missive was delivered earlier today.”

The duke paused. “I take it the missive is waiting on my desk in the study.”

His butler looked distinctly uncomfortable. “No, Your Grace. It is an unusual missive.”

“Is it not sealed?”

“The seal has not been broken. It is a two-part message, verbal and written.”

“From?”

“Her Grace.”

The duke was instantly on alert as fear slashed his gut and threatened to close his throat. He handed the butler his top hat, gloves, and greatcoat. “Where is Her Grace’s missive?”

“Emmett O’Malley has it. The messenger’s instructions were to repeat the verbal missive to Emmett so that he could convey the first part of Her Grace’s message to you.”

Though he could not imagine what in the bloody hell was so important that his wife had sent an urgent missive to Grosvenor Square to arrive before him, he asked, “Where is Emmett?”

“After the messenger left, he was pacing the hallway near the rear entrance, Your Grace.”

“Thank you.”

The duke strode to the door to the servants’ side of his town house, anxiety and guilt roiling in his gut with each step. Yanking it open, he nearly collided with Emmett O’Malley. “Emmett!”

“Yer Grace?”

The duke locked gazes with him. “You have a missive for me.”

“Aye—but I’m to deliver it in private.”

Mrs. O’Toole looked up as the men walked past her. “Welcome back, Your Grace.”

“Thank you. Mrs. O’Toole. Would you please see that we are not disturbed?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Mrs. O’Toole brushed the flour from her hands and relayed the request to one of the footmen.

After bounding up the servants’ staircase, the duke shoved open the door to his private study and motioned for Emmett to enter. His guard looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Well?” the duke demanded.

Emmett sighed, reached for the duke’s hands, and lowered to his knees. “Begging yer pardon, Yer Grace—’tis part of me instructions.”

The duke’s mind raced. Was his wife planning to leave him? Would he return home to find it empty of the family he loved?

Emmett stared at him, and the duke growled, “What?”

“Did ye not hear what I said?”

Embarrassed, he admitted he had not.

“I’ll not be repeating the whole of it a third time, Yer Grace, so ye’d best be listening.”

The man’s discomfort was equal to that of the duke. Wondering yet again why in the bloody hell he’d instructed the men of his guard to speak to him as if they were equals in private, he agreed. He may have to rethink his dictate.

“Jared me love...” Emmett paused to clear his throat. “Word for word,” he whispered before continuing. “Forgive me. I have been consumed with terror for weeks on end. Keeping me fear from ye has taxed me strength and plagued me every waking hour. I cannot keep up with me moods...”

The duke stared at Emmett’s hands, his mind racing at that last statement. Away from the tense situation, he’d wondered about his wife’s moods—they were remarkably familiar, though it had been over a year ago when last she suffered from them. “Is that all?”



“Nay, though I fear I cannot do the rest of it!” Emmett let go and flexed his hands.

The duke growled, “Just tell me the rest, and I shall later swear you delivered the verbal message exactly as you were instructed to.”

Relief flashed in his guard’s eyes. “Ye won’t insist I kiss yer hands?”

The duke’s heart leapt in his breast. She was not leaving him! He kept his expression neutral as he replied, “Nay.”

Emmett nodded. Still on his knees, he relayed the rest of the message: “Please do not set me aside. I promise to return to me former self and former temperament.” He stood and pulled the sealed missive from his waistcoat pocket.

“Former temperament would be a boon, but what in the bloody hell does her former *self* mean?” The duke paused then groaned. “Good God! She cannot mean to order bilious-colored gowns and go about wearing spectacles, could she?”

Emmett snorted with laughter. “I wouldn’t be knowing. Mayhap ye should ask Mrs. O’Toole or Mrs. Wigglesworth.”

“Later. Ask Rory and Seamus to meet us in the library in a quarter of an hour.”

“Aye, Yer Grace.” Emmett was about to close the door behind him when the duke called his name. “Aye?”

“Thank you for doing your damndest to deliver my wife’s message the way she intended it.”

“Yer welcome.”

Alone, the duke let down his guard. Heart aching, hands trembling, he broke the wax seal and read the note.

*My Love,*

*I was devastated to discover you left  
without bidding me goodbye but understand*

*your need for haste, as a storm seemed to be brewing. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me and not ask me to leave. I could not bear it!*

*I was wrong to keep my fears to myself, but I kept remembering how difficult it was after our first ball when Edward and Phoebe were injured at the hands of that madman.*

*I wanted to be so strong for you. I have failed. Please wait until you have finished your urgent business and returned to Wyndmere Hall before making your decision.*

*Your Loving Wife,*

*Persephone*

The duke was shocked—not that she had hidden her fears from him, but that she thought he would set her aside. She was his wife! His *life*! How could she even think he would do such a thing?

His earlier harsh words and decision to have Mrs. O'Malley send for the two wet nurses came back to him and shamed him. *'Tis I who should be asking for her forgiveness.*

He vowed to do just that, but first, he had to speak to his men and then meet with Coventry and King to finalize his plans of further protection.

Descending the staircase, he saw his housekeeper waiting for him. She beamed at him, and he inclined his head. “Mrs.

Wigglesworth. I trust you and Jenkins have been taking care of my staff with your usual aplomb.”

“We have.” She noted him rubbing his hands together to warm them and tutted. “I must insist that you adjourn to your library at once—the fire is quite cozy. We cannot have you catching a chill, Your Grace.” When he smiled at her, she added, “Mrs. O’Toole has been waiting to ply you with tea and an assortment of your favorite sweets. I do hope you are hungry.”

The duke chuckled. “I could eat. Please advise Mrs. O’Toole there will be four for tea. I’ll be meeting with Flaherty and the other members of my guard momentarily.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Do see that you sit close to the fire.”

He shook his head at her motherly request but did not chide her for it. She had been doing so since he was a lad. “I believe I shall.”

His aging housekeeper’s concern warmed his heart. *Wiggy*, as he used to call her when he was young, had always looked after him. It appeared that she always would.

Flaherty was waiting for him in the library and opened the door for the duke. “Have ye sent word to Coventry and King, or will ye wait until after we meet with me brother and cousin?”

“After we meet, I shall send word, asking both gentlemen to meet us tonight.”

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hall. Flaherty grinned. “I’ll fetch me kin.”

The sound of deep chuckles and inventive suggestions drifted toward the duke. The company of men he had gathered were kin—brothers and cousins. In that moment he realized how cut off he and Persephone had been from his family, and hers as well. Lady Farnsworth had not been able to make the promised trip up to Wyndmere Hall due to the ugly weather. His brother and his wife lived to the south of him in Sussex,

his sister and her husband to the north in the Borderlands. He was squarely in the middle, just as he'd been stuck in the middle of a tenuous situation that began the moment he accepted the mantle of duke.

His sigh was long and deep. The voices grew louder as the taunts that always seemed to accompany conversations between the men of his guard grew more pronounced. Had he been investing too much time in worrying about his family's safety when he should have been discussing his worries and plans to protect them with his wife?

*No!* As long as it was within his power to keep such worries from his wife, he would. She deserved a peaceful life.

*At what cost?*

The question tormented him. Their babes and his wife would be well protected while he spent his every waking hour refining his plans to continually accomplish that feat as each new threat emerged. But wasn't his absence from their lives at the root of their current discord?

His stride over to the fireplace. The fire burned steadily, giving off a warmth he did not feel. Holding out his hands to the flames, he wondered if he'd closed himself off for too long. Had his heart hardened in his bid to have a clear head where the protection of his family was concerned?

Dear Lord, let this be the end of it. His very soul cried out to return to a happier time, when he and Persephone would share their thoughts and plans for their future over that first morning pot of tea.

He slowly smiled. His darling wife required two pots before she was coherent or—dare he even think it—*pleasant*. He missed that closeness. Missed her and their babes desperately.

Drawing in a deep breath, he resolved what he must do: meet with his men, discuss the situation, then send off a missive to Captain Coventry, his London man-of-affairs and closest friend, and another to Gavin King of the Bow Street

Runners. He looked forward to laying out the plans he'd made, and would refine with the help of his staunch guard, before meeting with Coventry and King to listen to their suggestions.

Mayhap in a fortnight, he would have accomplished what he intended and hired extra men to infiltrate the different layers of society. These new members of his London guard would glean the information required to keep his family safe.

*Safe.* The word shot through his skull. He had put off spending time with his wife, holding her in his arms in his bid to keep her and their babes safe.

*What about love?* Had he traded his happiness for his family's safety?

“By God, I'll have them both!” His voice bounced off the walls of his library. Absorbing the words, and his intention to see to it that they became truth, he felt the tiniest fraction of the weight lift from his shoulders.

The burden he had been carrying since that first attack on his wife and his home had increased in weight as he braced himself, preparing for the seemingly endless attacks on his family with the aid of his fearless personal guard. With the advent of his new plan, they would put an end to the verbal and physical threats to his wife and babes.

He would accept no other outcome. He was the bloody Duke of Wyndmere! His elevated position in society should assure his success. He would do his duty to his title and be more than diligent in his bid to protect the family name and coffers he had worked so hard to resurrect from the gutter, where his brother had dragged them before meeting his ignoble end.

Being the bloody duke was a royal pain in the arse!

He was smiling when Rory called, “Yer Grace!”

“Come in, men. I'd like to go over my plan to add to my guard here in London, with your suggestions as to how many and where they would best be able to acquire the constant

stream of intelligence I require to keep abreast of threats to my family.”

Having opened the discussion, the duke relaxed as he listened to his men toss out suggestions, ignore the ones they did not approve of, and embrace the ones they did.

Three-quarters of an hour later, the duke inclined his head. “Thank you, men. I believe we are ready to meet with Coventry and King.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“YER GRACE, ARE ye certain ye wish to entertain in this weather?”

Persephone smiled at O’Malley. “It is just a dusting of snow. I am so looking forward to returning to my duties as duchess with my first guests, the vicar and his wife.”

His stern expression softened. “If ye have need of me, ye’ve but to ask.”

“Thank you. I promise not to keep our guests longer than it takes to empty a pot of tea and devour the cream tarts and butter cake Constance has prepared.”

“I’ll have one of the men on patrol report in if the weather turns. I cannot imagine what His Grace would say if he found out ye had overnight guests in his absence.”

Her heart clutched in her breast at the mention of her husband. She ignored the ache and did her best to retain the hint of a smile she’d worked so hard to show to everyone. It had been days and she had yet to receive a reply from London. Mayhap he had no intention of replying...or returning!

An unwanted vision of the beautiful, willing widows and cyprians of London seeking to lure her duke into their clutches hardened her heart. “I cannot imagine it would perturb him in the least. His Grace has far more *lofty* things to worry about than the comings and goings here at Wyndmere Hall.”

O’Malley mumbled something beneath his breath.

“I beg your pardon, what did you say?”

“Clearing me throat, Yer Grace.” He did so again. *Loudly.*

Closing the distance between them, she tilted her head back and frowned. “I can imagine what you said, having had

more than one occasion to hear the opinions you cannot help but give to those you feel incapable of thinking for themselves.”

The man’s face paled. “If I have given offense in the past, Yer Grace, I beg yer pardon.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and tapped her foot. “You know that you have!”

If she thought her words would have O’Malley getting down on one knee to beg her forgiveness, she was mistaken.

“I made a vow to His Grace to protect himself and his family with me life if necessary.”

She regretted her outburst and needed to make amends. “And have bled while doing so. We are beyond grateful and beholden to you and the rest of the Duke’s Guard.”

His green eyes danced with merriment. “Then ye’ll understand why I won’t be sharing me thoughts with yerself, Yer Grace. As they might not be fit for yer tender ears.”

Persephone’s snort of laughter surprised them both.

Before she could respond, he bowed and advised her, “I’ll report back to ye, if there’s a change in the weather.”

She was thanking his broad back as he left to do his duty. His surly response reminded him so much of Jared. What was her husband doing at this very moment? He would be in London by now. Had he read her missive and accepted her apology? Would he choose to ignore it in favor of the tempting delights of a willing widow who would make no demands on his time or tax his brain? A woman who would tend to his every physical need—giving him the pleasure he had rejected from his own wife.

*No! I shall not use this time of separation to sink deeper into morose thoughts.* She spun on her heel and retraced her steps. It was nearly time for her twins’ next feeding. After which she would dress in her prettiest frock—one of the many that had had the seams let out so she could wear them. She’d



seen no need to purchase new clothes, anticipating she would regain her former figure. Mayhap she was wrong and should purchase a new gown or two. Vowing not to think of her inability to shed the weight the midwife, and more than one of her staff, had promised would begin to magically melt off by the time the twins were a few months old, she paused before the nursery, gathered her composure, and opened the door.



PERSEPHONE Poured a second cup of tea for the vicar and his wife.

“So lovely to be invited to take tea this afternoon, Your Grace,” Vicar Digby said. “Am I to understand that His Grace is not in residence?”

Used to the rapidity with which news traveled in and about Wyndmere Hall and the village, Persephone inclined her head. “He had urgent business in London.”

Mrs. Digby sipped delicately from her cup. Setting it on its saucer, she nodded. “His Grace’s brother, the fifth duke, was constantly being called away on urgent business.”

Persephone buried thoughts of the late duke, knowing Jared’s older brother frequented the gaming hells and more in the bowels of London. She hoped her husband’s *urgent* business would not take him on a similar path.

Choosing to ignore the comment, she smiled and queried, “Would you care for another lavender scone? Constance has such a light hand preparing them.”

Mrs. Digby beamed. “Thank you.”

“They are delicious,” the vicar remarked.

The elderly couple spoke of the various families in the village and news of births—and, unfortunately, as life would have it, deaths that occurred in the last month.

Once they caught her up on the happenings in the village, she said, “I have so enjoyed our visit today. I have missed so

much during the last few weeks..." Her voice trailed off as the reasons roiled in her stomach. Ignoring it, hoping it would settle, she continued, "I would like to invite you and another couple to dine with me—an early dinner, weather permitting."

The vicar's boney chest expanded with pride. "We would be honored to dine with you, Your Grace."

"Do you think Squire Bothwell and his wife would be amenable to accepting my invitation?"

Mrs. Digby smiled. "Lucretia would be beside herself receiving your invitation." Her enthusiastic expression faded. "Although mayhap not at the moment—you see, their nephew and a friend have come to stay with them for a fortnight."

"Then I shall be sure to include them in the invitation. What are their names?" Persephone asked.

"The nephew is Anthony Bothwell."

The vicar looked distinctly uncomfortable while his wife rattled on about how charming the squire's nephew was and how sought after he was when in London. She did not mention the other man's name.

"It sounds as if the squire's nephew will make a lively addition to our party," Persephone said. "As I am certain his friend will be. What is the other gentleman's name?"

The vicar did not answer, instead changing the subject, and they were soon speaking of those in the parish in need. "The Morgan family is in dire straits after their house fire."

"When did this happen? Was anyone injured?"

The vicar's reply had her stomach threatening to rebel once more. "A fortnight ago. Right around the time..." The vicar's face flamed. "Do forgive me for bringing up such an inappropriate topic, Your Grace. I was not thinking."

Persephone fought and won the battle to calm her stomach, though her nerves were racked with tension. "Do not worry about it, though I would like to know if anyone was harmed."

“Mr. Morgan’s hands were severely burned when he pulled his family to safety.”

“Has the doctor been to attend him?”

“Aye, and left instructions that Morgan not return to his trade until the doctor was satisfied his hands were fully on the mend, with no sign of infection.”

“I do not believe I have met the Morgan family. What is his trade?”

“He’s a cooper—crafts the finest barrels and is adept at repairing wheels and such.”

Interested in the welfare of the villagers as well as Jared’s tenant farmers, she asked, “Where are they living while their house is repaired?”

Mrs. Digby sighed. “They will have to rebuild... Their home burned to the ground. The family is spread out among those in our parish who have spare rooms. Though his sons have taken to staying at his shop. They have learned their father’s trade and are filling in for him while he is on the mend.”

“Commendable,” the duchess replied while she worried over how she would be able to assist the family, as she was certain the duke would wish her to. “We have an empty cottage! I’ll pen a note, if you would kindly deliver it to Mrs. Morgan. I’m certain she will accept on behalf of her husband.”

The vicar frowned. “Do you not think it would be better to address it to Mr. Morgan?”

Persephone was quick to respond, “Nay. He is obviously in severe pain and would not be thinking past all they have lost, the work that is waiting for him, and the future of his family.”

“You are so thoughtful...so wise, Your Grace,” Mrs. Digby said. “I will be happy to deliver your note.”

Pleased that she was beginning to attend to the duties she felt were expected of her, Persephone relaxed and enjoyed the

lively conversation as the vicar's wife spoke of their grown children who now lived in London.

After a companionable visit, the teapot was empty and not one crumb of their cook's delicacies remained. With a contented sigh, the vicar rose and bowed. "Thank you for a lovely afternoon, Your Grace. It is wonderful to see you looking well, even in the duke's absence."

He turned to assist his wife. Standing beside him, she said, "Mayhap the next time, your little darlings will be awake, and I will have the opportunity to meet them."

Persephone smiled. "They do seem to enjoy seeing new faces. Mayhap a brief visit to the nursery can be arranged when you arrive at the end of the week for dinner."

"That sounds lovely, Your Grace. I look forward to it."

Lighter in spirit after a lively discussion over tea with the vicar and his wife, and offering her aid to those in need, Persephone accompanied her guests to the entryway. Humphries retrieved their coats and helped don them while waiting for the vicar's carriage.

Satisfied her guests were tucked into their carriage and on their way, she passed through the servants' door and sought out Constance to thank her for a lovely tea.



A SHORT WHILE later, Persephone returned to the nursery to spend time with her babes and their nanny—her newest friend.

She paused at the door, listening. It was too quiet for her to knock and take the chance she'd wake up her darlings, so she turned the knob slowly and peeked around the edge of the door. Gwendolyn looked up from where she sat in one of the mahogany rocking chairs, pencil in hand, journal in her lap.

Mrs. O'Malley set aside the pencil and the book and rose to her feet. Beckoning Persephone inside, she quickly noted the duchess was alone before speaking. "Your Grace, I was

wondering if I'd have to send for you or if you would stop by on your way to rest."

"You know you do not have to worry about addressing me, as I've bid you on numerous occasions, Gwendolyn. You have been a kindred spirit since the day you stepped down from my husband's carriage."

"I do not want anyone to think that I would disrespect you by not addressing you by your title, Persephone."

"Botheration! I do not give a fig what anyone else thinks. Besides, we have been through far too much together for you to be constantly *Your Gracing* me. Don't you think?"

Gwendolyn's soft laughter wrapped around Persephone like a hug.

"How was your visit? Did the vicar and his wife have any new gossip to share?"

The duchess frowned. "Yes, actually. The Morgan family lost their home to a fire." She did not mention the fact that it coincided with the last failed attempt to kidnap her darling babes. Gwendolyn was more of a sister to her, and therefore an aunt to the twins. It would be just as upsetting to her as it was to Persephone.

"The cooper?"

"Aye. His hands were badly burned when he rescued his family from the fire."

"Poor man. How many children does he have?"

"Two sons, who are old enough to tend to their father's current orders."

"Anyone else injured?"

"Nay. I...er...offered them the vacant cottage to live in."

Gwendolyn's eyes widened before she smiled. "What a wonderful idea! Do you think he'll accept your offer? Men can be very stubborn about offers of assistance."

The duchess snorted. "Both our husbands are more than stubborn."

"Hardheaded," Gwendolyn added.

"I penned a note to Mrs. Morgan, as I am certain she will accept my offer. Her family will be under one roof again, and she will be able to care for her husband without the added worry of being in the way."

"Excellent notion, Persephone. I know exactly what you mean. Over the years I have felt as if I am in the way, though for different reasons entirely."

Persephone reached for her friend's hand, gave it a squeeze, and released it. "You are most definitely not in the way here!"

"Thank you." Tilting her head to one side, Gwendolyn studied the duchess before asking, "Is there anything else you discussed this afternoon?"

"I have extended an invitation to the vicar and his wife to dine with me on Friday. They will be delivering an invitation to Squire Bothwell and his wife for me." Persephone paused, remembering the Bothwells' nephew and friend. "We will actually be a party of seven."

"Seven? Have you heard from His Grace? Is he to return by then?"

"I have not, and have no idea when he will return. The Bothwells' nephew and a friend are visiting for the next fortnight, so I naturally included them in the invitation. Apparently, their nephew is known to be quite charming and an excellent addition to any hostess's table. Although Mrs. Digby is not acquainted with the friend, or his name or family, for that matter."

"Bothwell..." Gwendolyn said. "I knew of a Bothwell when last I was in London." She shrugged. "I am quite certain he is not the same fellow. Mayhap a distant cousin."

“Oh?” Persephone replied. “I sense a hesitation on your part. Out with it! What do you know?”

Gwendolyn blew out a frustrated breath. “If you must know—”

“Oh, I must.”

Gwendolyn frowned at the duchess. “The Bothwell I knew of attended a house party hosted by one of the families I was working for. The servants’ gossip indicated he was quite charming, glib of tongue, and a seducer of women.”

Persephone sighed. “Well, let us hope he is not the nephew in question, though mayhap he *is* related to the squire.”

Gwendolyn’s eyes danced with amusement. “What are the odds that you have invited a charming gentleman—or two—of questionable character to dine with you while the duke is away?”

“Botheration! How am I going to find out if they are one and the same?” The babes started to fuss at the sound of the duchess’s voice.

“Lower your voice,” Gwendolyn cautioned her. “You’ll wake the babes.”

They started to cry.

“Now *you* have woken them,” Persephone murmured as their cries gained in volume. “See if you can soothe Richard, please. Abigail is due to be fed first this time.”

She sat in the rocking chair closest to her daughter’s cradle and settled the fussing babe to her breast, knowing she would fill up as quickly as her son was wont to eat slowly.

Brushing the tip of her finger along the curve of her babe’s cheek, she sighed. “I do hope my missive arrived before Jared. I need him to understand that I have been out of sorts and am completely to blame for ignoring him.”

While Gwendolyn held Richard to her heart, she swayed, rocking back and forth to soothe him while he waited his turn

to eat. “I am quite certain His Grace has received your missive. My husband sent the messenger off on the duke’s stallion. He would most certainly cover ground faster than His Grace, who is traveling on a much slower horse.”

“I hope you are right,” Persephone replied. “The wait for his reply is torture.”

“At least you’ll have the pleasure of entertaining two handsome rakehells at your table! No doubt word will spread, reaching London before the end of the week, when he will sit at your table, all smiles and affability.”

Persephone frowned. “As I have yet to hear from my husband, I cannot think he will care.” She shifted Abigail to her shoulder and began to coax the bubbles from her belly. “There now.” She beamed at the loud burp. “That was impressive.”

Gwendolyn took Abigail and handed Richard to her. “Do you have a menu in mind for your dinner guests?”

“Not as yet. I spoke to Constance before coming up. She will have some suggestions for me in a little while.”

While the nanny changed her daughter, Persephone marveled at the contentment that filled her every time she sat down to feed her babes. There was but one thing missing—her husband, which reminded her of his last dictate to her.

“Gwendolyn, did Jared ask give you the names of the two wet nurses his physician recommended?”

“Er...yes, actually, he did. I wasn’t going to broach the subject with you unless I noticed you were having difficulty keeping up with the twins’ feedings.”

“Did you tell Jared that?”

“Not in so many words,” Gwendolyn admitted. “Richard and Abigail seem content—and for longer in between feedings. So I do not recommend any changes just yet. Would you?”



“No,” the duchess was quick to respond. “I was a bit overset by his proclamation.” Striving to maintain her calm, she changed the difficult subject completely. “Now that the twins have been fed and you’ve changed Abigail, why don’t you take a break?”

“Thank you. I believe I will.”

With Gwendolyn’s closing of the nursery door, the duchess sat lost in thought. Those that haunted her had her asking aloud, “How have we let ourselves slip away from one another?” If she added that worry to the hiring of the wet nurses, she would be distraught and unable to feed her babes.

With a shake of her head, she pushed her worries aside to concentrate on feeding her son.

She coaxed bubbles out of him, smiling when he burped louder than his sister. “Your father would have laughed listening to the two of you.”

*I hope I haven’t waited too long to apologize.*

She changed her son and laid him in his cradle. She tried not to think about what her husband would be doing in London. The moment word of his arrival spread through the *ton*, there would be a flood of invitations. Would he accept them?

Heartsick at the thought that he might just do that, she returned to the rocking chair and wondered how soon he would respond to her missive.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DUKE FELT another heavy weight shift as his trusted friends agreed with him.

The intensity in the depths of Coventry's gaze was magnified by the black of his eye-patch. "King and I have been in discussion for a fortnight," he said.

"Do you have a list of names?"

Gavin King inclined his head. "Aye. We have two lists. Would you like to discuss our choices now or after you have had the opportunity to review them?"

A troubling thought kept plaguing the duke. He had left without bidding his wife goodbye. Time had been against him. While he made the effort to find her, she was indisposed, and he could not wait.

*You could have left a verbal message for her with O'Malley.*

The sudden silence in the room had him snapping back to attention. "Forgive me. You were saying, King?"

King reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a sealed missive. "I did not expect to see you today, hence the wax seal."

"I'm glad I was able to intercept your list before you sent it off to the Lake District." The duke broke the seal and unfolded the foolscap, reading the names. "I admit to not knowing any of the men on your list."

Coventry snorted with laughter. The duke glared at him, and his longtime friend laughed harder. "Admit it, Your Grace—if you *had* known any of the names on the list, there would

be many members of the *ton* who would readily call your character into question.”

“Indeed.” Glancing at the men gathered in the library, Jared stated, “My plan is to meet with the men. Given the number of names on the list, mayhap it could be accomplished in groups of five or more.”

King was the first to reply: “I do not believe that would be wise, Your Grace. As it is, you know far more about those who would discredit you and harm your family than I am comfortable with. You could be at risk just knowing their names.”

“Are they that disreputable?”

Coventry responded, “Nay, Your Grace. Each one of these men are honorable, trustworthy, and willing to suffer any consequences if they are caught in this dangerous game we are about to begin.”

“Spying,” the duke rasped.

“Aye,” Coventry agreed. “Spying.”

“How will they communicate with my London guard?”

“We know most of them men on the list, Yer Grace,” Seamus Flaherty advised.

“I see.” The duke began to pace. “Unsavory characters?”

“Nay,” Emmett O’Malley was quick to respond. “Honest men who have not sought employment working among the quality.”

“Dockworkers?”

“Ye could say that,” Rory Flaherty remarked.

“Tradesmen?”

“A few,” Seamus replied.

Before Jared could ask how many of the men were currently employed in the gaming hells that littered London’s underbelly, King spoke up. “Your Grace. Suffice it to say, the

men have all met with myself and Coventry. Those that your London guard did not know have been introduced.”

“And approved of,” Emmett remarked.

“Ye can rest easy, Yer Grace,” Rory said. “These men will blend in with whatever level of society is required to do the job.”

Coventry walked over and placed his hand on the duke’s shoulder. “Trust us.”

The duke met Coventry’s gaze and knew without question that he would. “I do.” With a glance at those gathered around him, he felt his throat constrict. “I am grateful to you all—and to those whom I will not have the opportunity to meet. Please thank them for me.”

“We already have,” Coventry assured him.

The duke inclined his head. “Thank you, men.”

After the men filed out, the duke sat down behind his desk to read through recent correspondence. Normally all correspondence would have been sent to Coventry to weed through. Those his man-of-affairs deemed for the duke’s eyes only were sent once a week via messenger.

The knock on the library door had him grumbling, “Enter.”

Jenkins stood on the threshold with a silver salver.

The duke groaned. “Not even a few hours in Town and the bloody *ton* wants me to attend their endless round of entertainments?”

The butler’s lips twitched, but he did not smile. “It would seem so, Your Grace.”

“Could you not simply toss them into the fire?”

Jenkin’s eyes gleamed with amusement—a rare show of emotion for the staid head of the duke’s London staff. “Your Grace?”

“Where is my valet? Mayhap he could respond to them for me.”

The butler cleared his throat. “May I suggest asking Mrs. Wigglesworth to oversee the task? She has been in your employ far longer than your new valet, and it would be more seemly for her to do so.”

The duke motioned for Jenkins to take them away. “If you would. Before you even suggest it, Jenkins, I have no intention of remaining here for more than a few days and will not be interviewing candidates for a private secretary who would see to the chore whenever I am in residence with Her Grace.”

Remembering his wife’s distaste for most of those moving in the upper level of the *ton*, he rubbed a hand over his face. “Blast—mayhap I should make the time to do so. Persephone would have already tossed the lot into the fire by now...and laughed while she did so.”

Jenkins could no longer contain his mirth. He slowly smiled. “I believe you are correct, Your Grace. And may I say how very much your father would have delighted in your choice of duchess.”

The duke was touched by the show of emotion he had not seen often since he was a lad. “I believe his first reaction—were he to meet Persephone wearing one of her unfortunate-colored gowns and spectacles—would be to ask me if I had taken leave of my senses. After having the opportunity to speak with her for more than a few moments, I do believe you are right. Father would have had no choice but to fall in love with her.”

“Like father, like son, Your Grace.”

“Indeed.”

The door quietly closed behind his retainer. In the silence of the room, Jared recalled the number of years spent feeling relief that he was not in line to inherit his father’s title. He preferred working with his hands, helping the tenant farmers.

He never imagined his elder brother would die so young—or in such a manner.

Life did not give one a choice as to what one wanted. If it had, he would never have chosen to be the duke. Then again, if he had not inherited the title, would he have met Lady Persephone at the ball? Would she have fallen backward into his arms, wreaking havoc with his life, or would someone else have been there in his stead? His brother? Viscount Hollingford? Lord Chellenham?

He shuddered at the thought and then thanked God he had been the one to catch Persephone and capture her heart.

She had been through so much since that night, forced to bear witness to horrendous deeds and vicious slander. Still, she had borne it all with a grace he could not imagine any other woman possessing. When had he let the never-ending onslaught of physical and verbal attacks against himself and his family allow him to forget how very much he treasured his wife?

Picking up his quill, he put pen to paper, knowing exactly what to say to her.



## CHAPTER NINE

PERSEPHONE STROVE TO hide her worry behind a smile of welcome. She had been in the kitchen off and on all afternoon, chatting with their cook and housekeeper. All was ready to receive their first dinner guests without the duke in residence.

Had she let emotion overrule her head? Her husband's guard kept rigid control over who would be allowed onto the grounds of Wyndmere Hall. Though they had grudgingly approved of her guests, Patrick O'Malley had voiced his unhappiness with the fact that the duke was still in London.

She lifted her chin, and while she felt a modicum of satisfaction having the approval of the Duke's Guard, she was irritated that she had to request it. "I am the Duchess of Wyndmere," she murmured. "I can bloody well invite whomever I chose to our home."

"Within reason, Yer Grace," came the grave reply from behind her.

The duchess whirled around, placed her hands on her hips, and challenged, "I am quite sure you have far more important matters to attend to than adding your seal of approval to my list of dinner guests."

His facial muscles told a different story. She watched in fascination as the head of her husband's guard battled to rein in his frustration. "Your Grace, nothing is more important than your safety and that of your babes. As guests could be potential threats to your safety, His Grace has given me leave to deny any requests that I feel warrant it."

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Oh, did he?"

O'Malley opened his mouth to speak, then clamped it shut.

Satisfied that he understood she was vexed with him, she asked, “Do you intend to answer my question?”

O’Malley inclined his head and stalked off.

Persephone should have been angry with the guard for not answering her question, but knew he was dedicated to his duty and would do whatever he felt essential to carrying it out.

O’Malley’s long strides quickly added to the distance between them. She drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. *He is protecting your life and that of your babes.* It took more of an effort than she had imagined to squash thoughts of O’Malley and the way he had fueled the worry and frustration in her heart.

She had guests arriving any moment; it wouldn’t do to appear out of sorts. By this evening, talk would spread to London that the duchess had hosted a dinner party without the duke. What if it already had? Would Jared be vexed with her decision to entertain without him? Did he already know of her choice of guests?

“Botheration!”

The knock on the sitting room door had her jolting.

“You can handle a few dinner guests, Persephone,” she told herself. “Come in,” she called.

“Vicar and Mrs. Digby, Your Grace,” Humphries announced as he motioned for the rail-thin elderly couple to enter.

Persephone walked toward them with her hands outstretched. “How wonderful to see you again. I hope the roads were not too terribly difficult to navigate after the overnight snowfall.”

The vicar puffed up his chest. “Our coachman has driven through all kinds of weather over the years, has he not, my dear?”

Mrs. Digby positively glowed at the endearment. “He always delivers us to our destination intact.”



Persephone hid her smile at the image that wrought in her mind. “You are very fortunate to have such an experienced coachman.”

“Squire and Mrs. Bothwell, Your Grace,” the butler announced as he stood aside for the portly squire and his equally round wife to enter.

The duchess murmured a quiet “Excuse me” to the vicar and his wife, who quickly nodded. She moved toward the squire and his wife. “I am so pleased to see you both.”

“We were delighted to receive your invitation, Your Grace,” he said.

Persephone could not help but notice the squire sounded as if *she* were the one who should be delighted he and his wife accepted.

Mrs. Bothwell leaned close and said, “Our nephew Anthony and his very good friend Gideon Lockmead left just a few moments behind us. They should arrive very soon.”

“Won’t you make yourselves comfortable while we wait for them?”

The couples sat opposite one another on the green-and-white-striped settees. Persephone had arranged the furniture in groupings so guests would be able to easily converse as they faced one another. Two floral-patterned chairs sat on either side of the settees.

As she lowered herself onto one of the chairs, Humphries returned, announcing the arrival of Messrs. Bothwell and Lockmead.

“Your Grace.” Mr. Bothwell beamed at her. “Thank you for including myself and Lockmead in your invitation to my parents.”

“Most gracious of you,” Mr. Lockmead added with far too familiar a smile.

She hated to form opinions of someone’s character too quickly, and set her irritation aside. “Gentlemen, won’t you

join us?”

She introduced the newcomers to the vicar and his wife and offered everyone a glass of sherry while they waited for dinner to be announced.

The conversation held her interest as it began with the happenings in and around Wyndmere Village and moved on to London. Her worry that she would hear her husband's name mentioned as the conversation turned to the entertainments Bothwell and Lockmead attended kept her in a heightened state of anxiety.

Finally dinner was announced, and she led the party to the dining room. It wasn't until she was about to walk through the open double doors to the spacious room that she noted Patrick and Eamon O'Malley had positioned themselves in the room. The unrelieved black of their uniforms was a sharp contrast to the royal-blue and gold livery of the duke's footmen. Her husband had been insistent that the famed tailor Weston would create his guard's uniforms. The only adornment was the striking contrast of emerald green and gold in the Irish harp and Gaelic word *Eire* embroidered over their hearts.

Her anxiety melted away under the stern expression the O'Malley cousins wore...they were in protective mode. Understandably, they made quite an impression on her guests. Their height alone would give anyone cause to stare. In her opinion it was their broad shoulders and muscular builds, visibly apparent in the fit of their frockcoats, that would ensure her safety.

The meal was largely a success, with the only wrinkle in her evening the effusive compliments from the squire's nephew and his friend. She had never mastered the art of flirtation and was unsure how to deflect questionable comments in order to divert the conversation to safer ground.

Fortunately, Mrs. Digby came to her rescue, changing the topic. “Will we have a chance to meet Richard and Abigail?”

“I did promise that you would, didn’t I? What with the change in the weather and our plans to dine later, I had forgotten.” Persephone motioned for one of the footmen to find out if the twins were still awake.

While she waited for the reply, the conversation turned once again to London. She flinched when she heard her husband’s name mentioned as the reason Lady Stenerson’s ball had become quite a crush.

Heart in her throat, her stomach tying itself into knots, she managed to hold her head high and act as if she had not just received a direct blow to the heart.

“How long does His Grace intend to remain in London?” Lockmead inquired.

Persephone was not quite certain she could trust herself to speak. She reached for her water glass and took a sip, feeling as if she were adrift in waters she had no idea how to navigate. Why had she thought she could manage her first dinner party without her husband?

“Your Grace?”

Relief speared through her as she motioned the footman forward, enabling her to ignore Mr. Lockmead’s question.

“Mrs. O’Malley thinks a short visit would be best,” the footman said.

Knowing it would soon be time to feed her babes, she inclined her head and thanked the footman. Rising to her feet, she said, “Gentlemen, if you wish, you may adjourn to the sitting room—as His Grace is not in residence—and enjoy a glass of port there.”

The men rose, bowed to her, and were escorted to the sitting room.

“I hope you do not mind a shorter visit this evening, ladies.”

The vicar’s wife smiled. “Of course not, Your Grace. They are still so little, and their schedules can be set off-kilter so

easily and without an apparent reason.”

Mrs. Bothwell inclined her head. “I remember the squire’s sister’s tales of when Anthony was young. Our nephew suffered from colic.”

The women discussed various cures for colic on their way to the nursery while Persephone listened intently, storing the information away for future reference.



AN HOUR LATER her guests had gone, and Persephone once again rocked her son, nursing him. The gentle motion of the rocking chair soothed her. “I had no idea keeping track of conversation between six people could be so exhausting.”

Her nanny chuckled. “I am quite sure I would have no idea how to handle a conversation with *two* guests, let alone the number you chose for your first official dinner party.”

“I had intended for it to be four but felt obligated to invite the squire’s nephew and friend, as they were the squire’s houseguests.”

“Word will soon spread that you are a most gracious and obliging hostess.”

Persephone smiled as her son’s mouth went slack. “I think he’s full.” She shifted him to her shoulder and gently rubbed his back in a circular motion. His loud burp had her laughing. “I never would have guessed an infant could be so loud.”

Gwendolyn softly smiled as she handed Abigail to her mother then took a sleepy Richard from the duchess. “It has been my experience that most mothers are shocked when they first hear the rumblings and burps that follow. I will say, a good number of the infants I have had the privilege to care for were in the care of their nurses, who were not at all surprised.”

“Jared and I wanted to be the ones to care for any children we were blessed with.”

Placing him in his cradle, Gwendolyn mentioned, “Patrick has been hovering as of late.”

Persephone smiled. “It would seem expectant fathers feel it their duty.”

“He does not want me to overdo it,” Gwendolyn remarked as she lowered herself onto the rocking chair beside the duchess.

“Jared worried over every mouthful of food and cup of tea while I was expecting. Our husbands must feel so helpless to protect us. After all, we are the ones carrying their babes, and all they can see as proof of that is a belly that grows larger with each passing day. I imagine it wreaks havoc with their instinct to protect—knowing they were the ones who happily put us in that condition.”

Gwendolyn snorted with laughter. “They did, didn’t they.” Her smile disappeared as she added, “Do you think Patrick’s worry that I may not be able to carry our babe to term is a viable one?”

“No. You have a large support system here. Those who will bully you into taking care of yourself and your unborn babe.”

“Have I thanked you lately?”

Persephone’s delighted laughter echoed in the room. “Yes, you have. Now as to Patrick...let him worry,” she said. “He will no matter what you say to alleviate his worries. Besides, it will keep his mind off telling you what to eat—or God forbid, start rationing your tea intake.”

Their quiet laughter was just what Persephone needed after the hectic day leading up to the trying dinner. Rocking as she fed her daughter, she wondered at the effusive compliments the gentlemen paid her, prompting her to ask, “Do you think men flatter a woman because they believe their words to be the truth or because they have another reason entirely for doing so?”

“It would depend on the man,” her nanny replied. “His Grace and the men in his guard would absolutely be speaking the truth. I couldn’t possibly guess about anyone else, as I have never spent much time outside of a nursery until coming to Wyndmere Hall.”

“I am altogether uncertain how to counter such remarks. I admit I ignored them tonight, rather than trying to respond them. It felt unseemly to even acknowledge them.”

“Well, of course, given that it was not His Grace doing the complimenting,” Gwendolyn replied.

Relieved that her friend found no issue with the way she’d handled the rather forward remarks from Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead, Persephone shifted her daughter to her shoulder and began the soothing motion that was guaranteed to loosen any burps. The comments remained at the forefront of her mind as she began to contemplate whether there was a hint of truth in their words. Was she still attractive to someone who had never met her previously—when she was a slimmer version of herself?

“I am looking forward to changing out of this gown and donning my nightgown and dressing gown,” she said. “I know you must be just as tired, but would you mind waiting just a bit longer to retire for the night?”

“I do not mind in the slightest, and I must say, you do look as if you could sleep for days,” Gwendolyn replied. “I can sit up with the twins for the next hour until Mollie or Francis comes to relieve me. Please do not give it another thought.”

“I have looked haggard and in need of sleep since before the twins were born,” the duchess quipped. “I will be fine as soon as I change. I shall return shortly.”

The duchess quickly changed—not bothering to ring for her maid to assist her—and returned to the nursery. An hour later, Francis arrived to sit with the twins for the first of two overnight shifts.

“Oh, Your Grace! You changed already? Did Mollie assist you?”

The duchess smiled. “I managed on my own, though I may have wrinkled my gown returning it to the wardrobe.”

“I shall see to it first thing in the morning,” Francis promised.

“Thank you, Francis. I shall see you in two hours, unless Richard or Abigail wake unable to wait for me to feed them on their normal schedule.”

Francis smiled. “I promise to send for you straight away. I wouldn’t want to rouse the rest of the house by letting either of your babes cry.”

Persephone laughed. “His Grace and I have been blessed with babes who have healthy sets of lungs.” As she slowly closed the door, a feeling of sadness crept over her as her worry returned.

How many Incomparables *had* her husband waltzed with at Lady Stenerson’s ball?



## CHAPTER TEN

“I BEG YOUR pardon?”

Emmett noted the tension in the duke’s jaw and the flash of irritation in his eyes and could not wait to share the duke’s reaction to the news with Jenkins. He repeated, “Her Grace entertained a party of six for dinner.”

“Did Patrick mention who was in attendance?”

“Aye.”

“Well?”

Emmett tried to hide his smile. The duke was acting as if he were jealous. “Yer Grace?”

“Who. Attended.”

“Beg pardon, Yer Grace. I thought ye were asking an ‘aye’ or ‘nay’ question.”

“Bloody hell, Emmett! Who attended the damned dinner?”

“Vicar and Mrs. Digby, Squire and Mrs. Bothwell, and the squire’s nephew and friend, who are visiting from London.”

“I know the vicar and the squire and their wives quite well.” The duke frowned. “What of the nephew and friend? Did your brother supply their names?”

Noting the growing annoyance in the duke’s tone, Emmett was quick to respond, “Anthony Bothwell and Gideon Lockmead.”

“Any further information on the two?”

“Just Patrick and Eamon’s reaction to the younger men’s conversation and flirtatious comments to Her Grace.”



“*Bloody, buggering hell!* Why did Her Grace entertain dinner guests when she did not deign to entertain the entire time I was in residence?”

Emmett shrugged. “As I was not there during the planning, or the dinner, I’m certain I cannot say.”

The duke paced in front of the fireplace in his downstairs study, all the while mumbling to himself. Finally, he stopped in front of Emmett and commanded him, “Send a missive to Coventry at once! I need to find out just who these two men are. I cannot have my duchess risking her reputation when I am not there to protect her.”



ALONE, THE DUKE drew in a deep breath and tried to regain his control. He could not lose his temper, or else he’d act without thinking—something frowned upon when one held a lofty title.

*Persephone did not have enough time to spend with me, let alone to entertain. Why is it she suddenly has the time now that I am in London?* A sobering thought occurred, but the duke pushed it aside. He refused to consider it. His wife loved him. Hadn’t she professed so in her missives?

The bottom dropped out of his stomach as the realization hit him. “Good God! I never sent my response!”

The duke strode to the door and yanked it open. It bounced off the wall as he shouted, “Jenkins!”

The butler was just stepping through the door to the servants’ side of the town house and rushed toward the duke. “Is there a problem, Your Grace?”

“There bloody well is! Have my horse saddled at once.”

“Have you an appointment?”

The duke took the steps two at a time. “I have an urgent missive to deliver,” he called over his shoulder.

“Shall I have one of the footmen deliver it?”

“I must deliver it personally.”



JENKINS SENT ONE of the footmen with the duke’s request to the stables as Emmett approached the butler. “Is His Grace leaving us?”

“Apparently so.”

Emmett chuckled. “Tomorrow?”

Jenkin’s lips twitched as he fought the urge to smile. “Immediately.”

“Can he not wait for a response from Coventry?”

“He said he has an urgent missive to deliver.”

Emmett sighed. “He never sent the duchess a reply, did he?”

Jenkins shook his head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“His Grace is rattled,” Emmett remarked.

“Well?” the duke demanded as he pounded down the staircase. “Is my horse ready?”

“Aye, Your Grace. Let me help you with your coat.”

“Forget the bloody coat!”

“Won’t that be a pleasant surprise for Her Grace if ye arrive home out of yer head, feverish.”

The duke spun on his bootheel and glared at Emmett. “If I were not in such a rush to reach Wyndmere Hall—”

“You had best hurry, Your Grace,” Jenkins interceded on Emmett’s behalf. “There is still plenty of daylight left to reach one of the inns you favor along the road north.”

The front door opened, and Rory Flaherty frowned. “I thought ye’d be ready by now, Yer Grace.”

The duke glared at him and strode through the doorway.

Jenkins and Emmett congratulated themselves on a successful mission—the duke was rushing back to his duchess!

“Do ye think he’ll be so angry, he’ll end up putting both feet in his mouth when he speaks to Her Grace?”

“When His Grace puts his mind to it,” Jenkins reminded him, “he can be quite charming.”

Emmett laughed in his face. “Ye don’t say!”



“LADY STENERSON WAS effusive in her remarks after waltzing with the duke,” Francis told Mollie.

“His Grace waltzed with her?” Mollie shook her head. “Are all men so fickle?”

Merry overheard that last comment as she walked into the kitchen to find both maids speaking with Constance. “Constance, do not encourage these two.” Turning to the maids, she asked, “Don’t you have duties to attend to?”

Francis looked at Mollie before responding, “Aye, Merry, but we also have a duty to Her Grace to pick apart the gossip from London to get to the truth.”

“What truth?” Merry demanded.

Constance sighed. “Apparently His Grace attended Lady Stenerson’s ball the other night and danced with two very attractive widows and the lady herself.”

“I see.”

“Our plans to urge the duke and duchess back together may backfire on us,” Francis wailed.

“I shall never forgive myself if they cannot mend this rift between them,” Mollie whispered.

“What rift?” Patrick O’Malley demanded, approaching them from the rear entrance.

“Between the duke and the duchess,” Francis rasped. “Rumors are flying about the village about how entranced His Grace was while dancing—”

“Waltzing,” Mollie corrected her. “A much more scandalous dance.”

Francis agreed. “Waltzing with two beautiful widows and the hostess!”

“Ah, Lady Stenerson,” O’Malley said. “I’ve heard she’s old enough to be the duke’s mother.”

The maids gasped, but the housekeeper and the cook smiled. “Well, that’s one problem solved. Out with it, Patrick,” Merry said. “What do you know about the widows?”

“Lady Tierney’s husband of two years died in his sleep a fortnight ago.”

“Shouldn’t she be in mourning?” Mollie inquired.

“Aye, out of respect, though rumor has it ’twas not a love match, as he was twenty years her senior.”

Francis started wringing her hands. “What of the other widow?”

“Lady Morrisey’s husband perished serving in His Majesty’s Regiment,” O’Malley replied. “Five years past.”

Mollie looked at her friend. “What are we going to tell Her Grace?”

Francis shook her head. “I have no idea. She is still distraught, waiting for His Grace’s reply to her missive.”

O’Malley cleared his throat. “Mayhap His Grace’s urgent business kept him from sendin’ a reply.”

Merry picked up on the idea and assured the maids that was most likely the case. “Now back to your duties.”

“At once, Merry,” Francis said.

“Of course, Merry,” Mollie replied.

Once the maids left, Constance rounded on O'Malley. "What are you holding back?"

His face lost all expression. "Not a thing." He stalked past them and bounded up the servants' staircase.

"He knows something," Merry remarked.

"We'll have to keep Her Grace so busy, she will not have time to miss His Grace."

"Constance! That's it!" Merry declared.

"What is?" the cook asked.

"We urge her to invite Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to tea."

"Without Mr. Bothwell's aunt and uncle?"

"Aye. Having to contend with those two gentlemen will keep her distracted to the point where she will not have time to worry about His Grace."

"But those two were not very respectful when they came to dine," Constance reminded the housekeeper.

"Precisely why they should be invited to tea," Merry insisted.

"I do not understand. What are you thinking?"

"If the duchess has the opportunity to entertain those two without the buffer of the squire and his wife," Merry said, "there is no telling how outrageous their flirtations will be."

"What will that accomplish, aside from embarrassing Her Grace?"

Merry leaned close to whisper, "Patrick and Eamon will be on hand to relate every comment to His Grace when he returns in a few days."

Constance frowned. "What makes you think he will come back so soon?"

Merry slowly smiled. "He neglected to respond to Her Grace's verbal and written missives. He will be beside himself

once he hears that she entertained two rakehells, thinking the worst: that she has misunderstood his lack of timely reply and feels he no longer cares for her.”

Constance finally agreed. “If he thinks his lack of response has pushed her to do something so out of character, he will in all likelihood be on his way.”

“Lord, let us hope he is,” Merry remarked.

“You will keep me apprised of the situation, won’t you?” Constance asked.

“Of course. If you hear anything—no matter if you think it is insignificant—and you will do the same?”

“I will.”

The two servants parted, Merry searching out Humphries, while Constance waited for O’Malley to pass through her kitchen at the end of his shift. She planned to have a word with him.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A FEW DAYS later, Persephone hurriedly donned the new gown she had ordered from the local seamstress. The color was a rich, deep rose that complemented her coloring, with a sheer lace overlay in ecru.

Turning her back to Mollie so her maid could button the back of her gown, she asked, “Tell me again why I let anyone talk me into inviting Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to tea?”

The maid fumbled with the top button. “Entertaining is a way to meet those who visit and live in the village, Your Grace. His Grace would be pleased that you are taking care of this vital task while he is in London.”

“I am not quite certain inviting two gentlemen who are more apt to spout effusive compliments than engage in intelligent conversation would be his first choice of those I should invite to tea.”

Mollie stepped back. “All buttoned up, Your Grace.”

The duchess turned around. “Thank you, Mollie. You and Francis have been such a help to me since my husband has been away.”

“It is our pleasure,” Francis said as she motioned for the duchess to sit. “Let me just add a few more pins to secure the topknot I’ve fashioned.” Pins in place, she stepped back and eyed the duchess’s coiffure. “I think I should pull a few strands free, so they frame your face.” After doing so, she stepped back next to Mollie. They both beamed at the duchess. “There. You look lovely, Your Grace.”

“Thanks to your insistence that I order a new gown—and your help with my hair.”

“You do want to look your best for your company—and His Grace when he returns.”

The light went out of the duchess’s eyes. “If he returns.”

“Of course he will return,” Mollie assured her. “I am certain he misses you and your babes.”

“You will see,” Francis added. “But for now, you should repair to the sitting room, as your guests are due to arrive soon.”



THOUGH SHE WOULD rather be anywhere than the sitting room, waiting for two gentlemen of questionable reputation to arrive for tea, the duchess did as they bade and soon found herself on tenterhooks. Why hadn’t her husband responded to her missives? Had he truly fallen out of love with her? If he had, what could she possibly do or say to change his mind?

“Your Grace.” Merry swept into the room. “I thought you could use a bit of company while you wait.”

“Are you planning to chaperone me?”

“Yes. I believe it would be proper, given that His Grace is not at home.”

“Thank goodness. I am quite uncomfortable at the prospect of entertaining them...and am quite certain I would have nothing to say to Messrs. Bothwell and Lockmead. Confidentially, they cannot seem to hold a thought longer than a moment or two and have absolutely no idea what is happening outside of their gentlemen’s club, or the ballrooms of the *ton*.”

“Your Grace, I don’t want to you to worry. His Grace—”

Merry was interrupted as Humphries intoned from the open doorway, “Mr. Bothwell and Mr. Lockmead to see you, Your Grace.”

The duchess and Merry rose from their seats. “Welcome, gentlemen,” the duchess greeted them. “Won’t you sit down?”



They waited for her to return to her seat before Lockmead sat down beside her—too close for propriety’s sake, or her own. His leg was alarmingly close to hers. She noted Bothwell choosing the settee across from them as she scooted over, putting distance between herself and the brazen young man. Lockmead offered a toothy grin as if to imply he thought she was interested and being coy.

Before she could stop him by placing her hand on the cushion between them, he moved over and once more pressed his thigh snug against hers. Unease skittered up her spine. She looked up to find Merry’s gaze riveted on hers. Would her housekeeper speak up, or was it up to Persephone to do so?

Botheration! She had no idea how to handle such a debacle. What to do? Call him out for ignoring propriety and demand he move over?

At the knock on the sitting room door, Merry smiled and rose to her feet. “Ah,” she said, as if everything was as it should be. “Our tea has arrived.” She directed the footman to place the large tea tray on the table between the settees and leaned close to speak to him.

A look of alarm flashed across his features and was gone a heartbeat later. If Persephone had not been watching their footman so closely, she would have missed it. What had Merry said to the man?

A few moments later, she had her answer.

“Yer Grace, I’ve an urgent matter to discuss with ye,” O’Malley announced as he strode into the sitting room. “If ye’ll excuse us,” he all but growled at the man bold enough to sit too closely to the duchess.

When O’Malley offered his hand, alarm speared through her. *Had something happened to Jared?* Persephone grasped it tightly and replied, “Of course, Mr. O’Malley. If you gentlemen would excuse me. Merry, please serve our guests and entertain them in my absence.”

O'Malley all but dragged her into the hallway and around the corner. "What are ye thinkin', lettin' that excuse for a man sit so close to ye?"

Her eyes welled with tears, but she blinked them away. "For your information, I had already moved over...twice, but he kept moving closer. What would you have me do? Demand he sit somewhere else?"

"Aye, 'twould have been an excellent notion."

She bowed her head and confided, "I am not as adept as my sister-in-law, or Lady Calliope or Lady Aurelia, at navigating these treacherous waters."

O'Malley urged her to follow him into the smaller sitting room and bade her to sit. "Give yerself a few moments. I did not mean to sound so harsh with ye, Yer Grace."

"Didn't you?"

"Sometimes me temper gets the better of me. I could not countenance ye lettin' a man brush his leg against ye."

This time a single tear escaped. "Thank you for coming to my rescue so quickly, Patrick."

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and retrieved his handkerchief, offering it to her.

She blotted her eyes and twisted the cloth in her hands. "I did not want to invite them to tea, you know."

"I suspected as much. Whose idea was it?"

"Merry's—maybe it was Constance."

"Well, I doubt—"

*"Persephone!"*

She jolted to her feet and flew from the room toward the sound of her husband's bellow.



“WHERE IN THE bloody hell is my wife?” the duke demanded as he stalked toward the sitting room. Flinging the double doors open, he glared at the two men sipping tea with his housekeeper. “Who in the bloody hell are you?”

One man set his teacup and saucer on the table in front of him and rose to his feet. “Lockmead, Your Grace. Delighted —”

The duke turned away to demand of the other man, “Who are you?”

“Bothwell, Your Grace. My uncle is—”

“Where is my wife?”

“Jared?” The duchess stood in the doorway, pale and uncertain. “You came back.”

“Of course I came back. I live here.” He walked toward where she stood on the threshold looking as if she had seen a ghost. Unnerved, he inquired, “Have I interrupted your tea?”

“Not at all. I am so glad you are here, even though I thought you would send word of your imminent arrival.”

“I was pressed for time,” he remarked, brushing a lock of hair from her brow. “I have missed you.”

“You have?”

Her question had him frowning at her. “What kind of a question is that?”

She eased one step back from him, and then another. “An honest one.”

“Welcome home, Your Grace.”

He turned to accept the greeting from their housekeeper. “Thank you, Merry.”

She rose and slipped past them to speak to the footman stationed right outside the sitting room. As the footman rushed off, she advised, “A fresh pot of tea will be delivered momentarily, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Merry.”

He offered his arm to his wife. She hesitated for a moment before slipping her arm through his.

“Yer Grace,” O’Malley said from where he stood just outside the room. “A word.”

From the tone of the man’s voice, Jared knew it was important. “If you’ll excuse me.”

The duchess inclined her head and walked back to her guests, this time choosing a chair to sit in.



MR. LOCKMEAD FROWNED at her. “Is there a reason you chose not to resume your seat next to me?”

Now that her husband had returned and seemed pleased to see her, she felt her world shifting back to where it had been before the duke left for London. Her confidence having returned, she stated, “I always have a reason for everything that I do, Mr. Lockmead.”

“Your Grace!” Francis rushed into the sitting room. “You are needed in the nursery at once!”

The duchess quickly rose and followed her maid out of the door and up the staircase, leaving the two men to take tea with the duke when he returned, if they chose to do so. She did not give a bloody damn what they did. Her gumption was returning with a vengeance, and it felt wonderful!

She didn’t bother to knock. Dashing into the room, she froze at the sight before her. Glancing from one sleeping infant to the other, she spun around. “They are asleep.”

“And will continue to be as long as you do not wake them,” her nanny remarked. “Is there something you needed?”

“Francis said I was needed at once.”

Gwendolyn shook her head. “Those two.”

“Francis and Mollie?” the duchess questioned.

“Aye. I sensed they were up to something when she mentioned you invited those two gentlemen to tea today.”

“Tell me what is going on.”

“Did I hear that His Grace has returned?”

Persephone sighed. “Yes, and he was about to join our guests for tea when Patrick waylaid him, and then a few moments later, Francis rushed into the sitting room to fetch me.”

“The plot thickens. Mayhap you should give His Grace and the others a little while longer before you return.”

“To tell the truth, I’m happy to escape.” The duchess sat in one of the rocking chairs. “Mr. Lockmead has appallingly bad manners.”

“How so?”

“As soon as I sat on the one settee, he sat beside me—crowding me.”

Gwendolyn’s expression showed her surprise. “What did you do?”

“I moved over and was about to place my hand on the cushion next to me so he would not sit there, but he moved too quickly and had the appalling manners to press his leg against mine...again.”

“Then what happened?”

“Your husband announced he needed to speak to me—privately.”

Gwendolyn’s lips twitched. “What did Patrick have to say?”

“After he all but dragged me around the corner to the smaller sitting room, he had the audacity to ask why I let that man sit so close to me.”

“How did he know about that?”

Persephone stared at her nanny for long moments before she sighed. “Merry must have noted my discomfort and asked the footman who delivered our tea to find Patrick and inform him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Jared returned.”

“Did you have a chance to speak with him?”

“Barely,” the duchess remarked. “Then Patrick appeared in the doorway a second time, asking to speak to Jared.”

Gwendolyn smiled. “Of course he did. He will want to report what he was told by the footman before the duke confronts your guests about their improper behavior to his duchess.”

“My husband would never do such a—”

Her words were cut off by her husband’s bellow echoing through to the upper hallway. “The head of my personal guard will escort you off the premises!”

“I...er...it appears you are right, Gwendolyn.” Persephone stood quickly and smoothed her skirts. “I had best present myself.”

“Why don’t you wait...” The nanny’s voice trailed off at the sound of heavy footfalls approaching the nursery.

Persephone walked to the door to intercept the duke before he could wake their babes. “Richard and Abigail are still asleep,” she whispered.

The duke nodded and stepped into the room behind her then slowly walked over to the twins’ cradles to see for himself. Satisfied they were asleep, he turned around and held out his hand to the duchess.

Unsure what he wanted other than for her to follow him, Persephone put her hand in his. After a quick word to her nanny, she let her husband lead her from the room.

He closed the door quietly behind them and tugged on her hand until she once more began to follow him. He paused in front of their bedchamber and drew her closer. "I need to speak with you...alone."

Uneasy with his urgent tone, unsure if he were about to hand her heart back to her, she inclined her head in silent agreement. He opened the door and stepped aside so that she could enter first.

He closed the door behind him.

Her eyes rounded at the snick of the lock. "What is so urgent that you need to ensure our privacy by locking the door?"

Jared closed the distance between them and went down on one knee. "Forgive me for not responding to your missives. I was so caught up in meetings with my men and Coventry and King—"

She snorted and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "Do you not mean you were too busy waltzing with widows?"

The expression on his face changed to one of confusion. "If I did, it was because my father had often told my older brother it was part of the duties of a duke to attend balls and such when they were asked by certain members of society."

"Lady Stenerson is one such person?"

"Aye," he replied. "She was a good friend to my mother. When no one else would travel to the Lake District to visit her when she fell ill, Lady Stenerson did."

Immediately contrite, Persephone reached out to her husband, relieved when he grasped her hand and the heat of his skin warmed hers. "Forgive me for jumping to conclusions. I did not know."

"How could you unless I spoke of it?"

Persephone tugged on his hand, and he rose to tower over her once more. Not knowing how to bridge the gap that had grown between them, she took one step and then another until

there was not a breath between them. Looking into his brilliant blue eyes, she rasped, “Forgive me for not sharing my fears with you and for not making the time to spend with you to see to your needs and your comfort.”



HE ENVELOPED HER in the warmth of his embrace and dropped his chin to the top of her head, drawing in the heady scent of lilacs she always wore. “Forgive me for not doing the same, my love. I was ashamed that I could not protect you or our babes—”

Persephone put her fingertip to his lips. “You and your men surrounded us with your loving protection.”

“I could not stop the onslaught of attacks,” he said. “I have failed.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand. “My love, you cannot control the minds and deeds of those out to destroy us. You hired sixteen of the bravest, strongest, most capable men to surround your family with a web of protection. You have *not* failed!”

“Then why have you been avoiding me?”

“Why have you been spending your nights elsewhere?” she countered.

The duke waited for his wife to answer his question, while his duchess waited for him to respond to hers. When he realized neither one would be the first to give in, he chuckled. “We are a pair, aren’t we?”

“I cannot seem to lose the weight I gained, and I know my shape is off-putting, but once the twins are weaned—”

“I cannot wait that long to return to your bed, Persephone...if you still want me there.”

A lone tear streaked across her cheek, and she dashed it away. “It is you who cannot stand to be in the same room with



me. My overblown shape and jutting breasts have you turning from me.”

“You could not be more wrong, my love.”

“I’ve watched you clench your jaw and turn around and leave a room if I am in it!”

“If I did not, I would have tossed you over my shoulder and found the nearest empty room and locked the door!”

Her eyes rounded with surprise before she slowly smiled. “Then what would you have done?”

He turned her around, unbuttoned the top of her gown, and slowly lifted it over her head. “Placed you on the nearest surface—settee, chair, desk...and made mad, passionate love to you.”

She helped him remove his frockcoat, waistcoat, and cambric shirt. “What if the nearest room was the storeroom? What would you do?”

The duke divested her of her chemise, swept her into his arms, and gently placed her on their bed. His gaze never left hers as he took off his boots and quickly rid himself of his trousers. Kneeling on the bed, he rasped, “I would kiss you senseless until you were all but melting into my arms.”

“And then?”

He positioned himself between her legs and pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, the valley of her breasts, as he slowly slid into her welcoming warmth.

No other words were necessary between the lovers as they began the dance as old as time, urging one another to the heights of passion until they both cried out as they found their release.

They lay linked together, heart to heart, as they slowly regained their breath. “Have I convinced you how much I love you?” he asked.

Persephone purred. “Mayhap I need a bit more convincing.”

The duke laughed as he rolled onto his back with his wife straddling him. When her gaze met his and she tightened around him, he ceased laughing while she drove him beyond reason until he could no longer hold out. He lifted his hips off the bed, plunged deep, and pumped into her warmth until his release shattered him. Her cries of ecstasy told him she quickly followed.

Rolling her beneath him once more, he pressed his lips to hers and chuckled.

She pinched his side. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Nay, wife. I’m laughing at the thought that you were too tired to make love to me.”

She tucked her legs around his waist and wiggled until he told her to be still. “Why?”

“I have yet to have my fill of you, wife.”

“Thank God. Will you make love with me again?”

“Indeed.”



THEY WERE JUST drifting off to sleep when she heard her twins begin to fuss. Her breasts began to tingle, and she pressed her hands against them to stop her milk from dripping all over her husband.

“I did not mind, you know,” he said.

“Mind?”

“Aye, the night you were snuggled atop of me, and Richard cried—”

“And I leaked milk all over your chest.”

He nodded. “It was warm—I never gave a thought to the fact that it would be warm.” He gently tucked a silken strand behind her ear. “I am quite certain it is a comfort to our son

and daughter as they suckle at your delightfully bounteous breasts.”

Her mouth dropped open as she struggled to respond.

Abigail began to wail, and the duke touched the tip of his finger to her chin. “You, my love, are even more beautiful today than the day you landed in my arms.”

“But my weight...my figure—”

“I would not change one thing about you, Persephone.”

“You are certain?”

“Aye.” He pressed his lips to hers as he helped her to don her chemise and dressing gown, then quickly dressed in his trousers and shirt.



WHEN HE FOLLOWED her to the door, she stopped and asked, “Where are you going?”

“With you, my love. I believe our nanny and the head of my guard could use a few hours alone, don’t you?”

Reaching for his hand, she smiled. “Aye—once their babe is born, they will have less time to spend together.”

The duke opened the door to the nursery and followed his wife over to the cradles. Richard was crying louder, so he picked up Abigail.

Watching the love of his life—his wife—feed their son, he felt a wave of happiness well up inside of him, until he felt as if all of the doubts, insecurities, and shadows had been forced from his soul. “Have I told you lately that I love you, Persephone?”

She lifted her head. “I was afraid I’d never hear you say those three words again.”

“I never meant to neglect you, love.”

“I know. You were bound and possessed to single-handedly fight off any and all miscreants, and dregs of society,

who thought they could destroy the life we have.”

“I should have delegated more duties to Patrick and his men.”

Persephone eased their son against her shoulder and rubbed his back until he burped.

“In a few years, our son will win contests with that belch,” Jared said.

Persephone’s laughter twined around his. The harmony of their laughter was a happy, joyful sound.

When their daughter began to fuss in his arms, he gently placed her in his wife’s arm, while scooping his son up in his. This time he lowered himself into the rocking chair beside her. The soothing motion felt wonderful after he’d exhausted himself in their bed.

“You do realize that I would never give you up.”

Her gasp of surprise was echoed by the uncertainty in her warm brown eyes.

“You doubt it?”

“I...er...well, that is to say—”

“How could I have not noticed that in my insistence to control every aspect of your protection, I would be slowly cutting into the bonds between us? Will you ever forgive me?”

“I already have, Jared. I should have told you how I felt from the first, instead of letting those worries eat away at me until I was unsure of every word out of my mouth—and worse...every word out of yours!”

He reached across the space between the rockers and twined his fingers with hers. “All is forgiven. We have learned just how tenuous love is, if left untended. How hard words seem, when no one takes the time to temper the tone with which they are delivered. Let us start anew, right this moment, and vow to diligently tend to our love. Every day. Will you

work with me, tending our love and our family, watching it grow, my love?”

Tears welled up and spilled over as Persephone promised, “I will tend our love and our family...and now that you mention watching it grow, I believe I know the reason why I have been unable to lose weight.”

“It is of no matter, Persephone—”

“Well, it should, unless you are not ready for an addition to our family.”

The duke’s mouth fell open and only a garbled sound emerged.

Persephone’s delighted laughter filled the nursery. “An appropriate response from the man who will become father to three in about seven months.”

Jared was finally able to clear his throat to speak. “Are you certain?”

“Aye, when the first wave of nausea struck the last few mornings in a row.”

“What are you doing entertaining guests when you should be resting!” he growled. “I’ll not have random villagers and their relatives tiring you when you need your rest and to rebuild your strength.”

“I am fine now that I know why my emotions have been all over the place.”

He slowly smiled. “Ah, that would explain your reaction to the lack of tea of a morning.”

“’Tis beastly of you to tease a pregnant woman.”

“Forgive me, my darling.” He chuckled when their daughter’s burp eclipsed their son’s in volume. “Let’s put these two to bed. You must be exhausted.”

Persephone brushed the tip of her finger along the curve of their daughter’s cheek and then their son’s. “Sleep sweet, our darlings.”

The duke swept her into his arms and held her to his heart as they left the room. “Promise me you will not overdo it. You need all of the rest you can get right now with another babe growing inside of you.”

She tilted her head to one side and stared at him before smiling. “What if it’s two?”

The duke’s steps faltered, but he did not ease his grip on her. “You have a wicked sense of humor, wife.”

“Just thinking of all the possibilities, husband.”

“You still have not given your word, Persephone.”

“Botheration! Fine. I promise to rest a bit more each day, if you promise to relent and let Constance brew my customary two pots of tea in the morning.”

“Fine, then. Two pots of tea it is. But under the physician’s advice, it must be weaker tea than you would care for.”

“Is that the only condition you have?”

“It is.”

“I agree. Two pots of weak tea, until the physician advises that I may have a bit stronger brew in the morning.”

The duke paused in front of their door, turned the knob, and pushed the door open with his shoulder. Stepping over the threshold, he said, “You are my life, Persephone. Never doubt my love for you again.”

His lips captured hers in a kiss of love and devotion.

“I promise not to doubt your love again, even if you grouse and growl at me.”

The duke was laughing when their lips met again. This time he plundered. When she went limp in his arms, he broke the kiss. “I never growl.”

The couple’s delighted laughter echoed through the still, quiet halls of their home. The sound of it wrapped its occupants in the warmth of their love and the promise of a

future where problems would be shared, doubts would be dispelled, and love would conquer all.

The End

## About the Author

*Historical & Contemporary Romance “Warm...Charming... Fun...”*

C.H. was born in Aiken, South Carolina, but her parents moved back to northern New Jersey where she grew up.

She believes in fate, destiny, and love at first sight. C.H. fell in love at first sight when she was seventeen. She was married for 41 wonderful years until her husband lost his battle with cancer. Soul mates, their hearts will be joined forever.

They have three grown children—one son-in-law, two grandsons, two rescue dogs, and two rescue grand-cats.

Her characters rarely follow the synopsis she outlines for them...but C.H. has learned to listen to her characters! Her heroes always have a few of her husband’s best qualities: his honesty, his integrity, his compassion for those in need, and his killer broad shoulders. C.H. writes about the things she loves most: Family, her Irish and English Ancestry, Baking and Gardening.



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