

A BLUESTOCKING BELLES COLLECTION  
WITH FRIENDS



*Under the  
Harvest  
Moon*

Collette Cameron    Caroline Warfield  
Rue Allyn    Mary Lancaster  
Alina K. Field    Elizabeth Ellen Carter  
Sherry Ewing    Cerise DeLand  
Jude Knight

UNDER THE HARVEST  
MOON

A BLUESTOCKING BELLES COLLECTION WITH  
FRIENDS



COLLETTE CAMERON CAROLINE WARFIELD RUE ALLYN  
MARY LANCASTER ALINA K. FIELD ELIZABETH ELLEN CARTER  
SHERRY EWING CERISE DELAND JUDE KNIGHT



# CONTENTS

## Moonlight Wishes and Midnight Kisses

Collette Cameron®

### Moonlight Wishes and Midnight Kisses

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Epilogue

Social Media Links for Collette Cameron

About Collette Cameron®

## The Morning Light

Caroline Warfield

### The Morning Light

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Epilogue

About Caroline Warfield

## A Harvest Blessing

Rue Allyn

[A Harvest Blessing](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[About Rue Allyn](#)

[Coming Home](#)

Mary Lancaster

[Coming Home](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[About Mary Lancaster](#)

[Under the Champagne Moon](#)

Alina K. Field

[Under the Champagne Moon](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Alina K. Field](#)

[The Quiet Heart](#)

Elizabeth Ellen Carter

[The Quiet Heart](#)

[The Quiet Heart](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[About Elizabeth Ellen Carter](#)

[A Love Beyond Time](#)

Sherry Ewing

[A Love Beyond Time: A Family of Worth, Book Three](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Sherry Ewing](#)

[The Widow's Harvest Hope](#)

Cerise DeLand

[The Widow's Harvest Hope](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[About Cerise DeLand](#)

[Love In Its Season](#)

Jude Knight

[Love In Its Season](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Jude Knight](#)

[The Belles would like your help!](#)

[Other books by the Bluestocking Belles](#)

[Meet the Bluestocking Belles](#)

Copyright © 2023. All rights reserved to the individual authors as named.

© Carol Lynn Roddy, writing as Caroline Warfield

© Wilma Jo-Ann Power writing as Cerise DeLand

© Jacqui Carling-Rodgers, writing as Elizabeth Ellen Carter

© Judith Anne Knighton, writing as Jude Knight

© Sherry Ewing

© Susan C. Charnley, writing as Rue Allyn

© Mary J. Kozlowski, writing as Alina K. Field

© Jean Lancaster, writing as Mary Lancaster

© Wendy C. Herrington, writing as Collette Cameron®

*Under the Harvest Moon* is licensed for your personal enjoyment only and may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of these authors.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the author of that part, except for including brief quotations in a review. Names, characters, and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious situation. Any resemblances to actual events, locations, organizations, incidents, or persons—living or dead—are coincidental and beyond the intent of the author.

Cover Design by Mandy Koehler Designs

eBook: ISBN: 979-8-9855874-4-9

Mobi ASIN : B0C86Q2Y4H

Print ISBN: 979-8-9855874-5-6



MOONLIGHT WISHES AND  
MIDNIGHT KISSES



COLLETTE CAMERON®

MOONLIGHT WISHES AND  
MIDNIGHT KISSES

COLLETTE CAMERON®

A wounded veteran, Cortland Marlow-Westbrook returns to England with nothing but his dignity and the hope of a new beginning. When he unexpectedly encounters Avery Levingtone, the Scottish lass who captured his heart, he's torn between his past and his future. Although Cortland didn't respond to her letters after he left for war, Avery never forgot the love they shared. Even when Cortland publicly snubs her, she's determined to win back his heart.

# CHAPTER 1



*Summer 1815*

*Beeson Bros Apothecary & Alchemist*

*Reabridge, Cheshire, England*

Gritting his teeth and firming his jaw against the involuntary oath hurtling up his throat, Cortland Marlow-Westbrook eased off the sway-back bay gelding before gingerly unwinding the reins from around what remained of his injured left hand.

In truth, he ought to have waited longer before riding into Reabridge from Northwycke Court, the rundown and neglected Westbrook family estate—his fortress and refuge since arriving in the dead of night by coach a fortnight ago.

He might've stayed with any number of Westbrooks—the clan was enormous, warm, and welcoming—but he needed time alone to heal in body, mind, and soul. He'd visited Northwycke Court and Reabridge as a child, and for whatever reason, he sought solace in this solitary, remote place.

Besides, he couldn't abide his family's ongoing pity.

The soulful glances and pats on his shoulders and back were meant to encourage but only served to make him feel like a beaten dog. Worse were the women's perfumed hugs and pecks on the cheek as their eyes shone with sympathy, a sheen of tears, or more often, both.

War truly was hell, leaving memories and scars—physical, mental, and spiritual—which made it impossible to reclaim the

person one once was. In point of fact, the arrogant, jovial, determined young man he'd once been, who'd eagerly bought a lieutenant's commission straightaway after returning from a lengthy tour of the Continent, no longer existed.

What a pompous, immature prig he'd been in those days.

Before leaving for the Iberian Peninsula, Cortland had daydreamed about returning home a decorated war hero. He would marry the vivacious and enchanting Scottish miss who'd stolen his heart—with eyes so blue they competed with the August sky.

As the heir apparent, he'd eventually come into the Elridge earldom, and then he and his beloved countess would start a family and live happily ever after.

*Fustian rubbish.*

Cortland gave a derisive snort just short of a vulgar curse.

His whimsical fantasy sounded like a bloody fairy tale. Something silly wallflowers tittered on about.

When he'd trotted off to the battlefield in his pristine white and crimson regimentals to make a difference for king and country, naive confidence had shrouded him. A maimed, tormented shadow of his former self had replaced that man.

How swiftly his ideals and resolves had evaporated after four years of ferocious battles and the gruesome aftermaths.

A slightly bitter smile skewing his mouth, Cortland gave a firm shake of his head to dispel the horrific memories. The movement only succeeded in chasing them to a fusty corner where the foul demons crouched, snarling, teeth and claws bared, prepared to attack in another unguarded moment.

As for inheriting the earldom, that life-long expectation had been blown to smithereens.

A half-bitter, half-sardonic chuckle escaped him and earned him a bored swish of the horse's tail.

Fate had not favored Cortland.

His doddering elderly uncle's much younger third wife had birthed a male child, eliminating Cortland as the next heir. In truth, the hereditary title was an oddity, as it descended from his mother's side, not his father's—unusual in England but not unprecedented.

Never mind that the strapping, healthy babe came wailing into the world two months early. Whispers circulated the upper salons that the new countess had been forced to either accept the elderly Earl of Elridge's magnanimous marriage offer or face certain ruination. Rumor also had it that the infant's true father already possessed a wife.

For his part, Uncle Claude strutted around proud as a peacock and pleased as Punch about his heir.

Bully for him.

Uncle had waited decades to become a father. He treated his countess like a queen and his *son* like a prince. Neither could ask for more adoration and esteem.

In truth, Cortland experienced relief, not disappointment or envy, that he wouldn't inherit the title. Nevertheless, his new circumstance took a bit of adjusting to; a great deal, truth to tell. For the past two decades, everyone—including *me*—had anticipated that he'd become the next Earl of Elridge.

More fool him for making no other provision for his future.

One hand resting on the horse's withers, Cortland tested the weight on his healing left leg.

Holy sh—!

A throaty grunt escaped him as blinding pain lanced him from his booted ankle to knee. But at least he could still walk, albeit with a limp, that might or might not go away in time.

Time.

That was what he needed.

Everyone said so. Fellow soldiers. His family. The doctors—so many doctors. Well-meaning friends and acquaintances.

Time to forget the plans Cortland had made for his life. Time to recover physically from his wounds. But would there ever be enough time to purge the heinous images stamped upon his sight, embedded in his hearing, and etched in his mind?

Would he ever be able to talk about the atrocities he'd witnessed?

No, no. Not in all of eternity.

When, if ever, would the nightmares cease?

God in heaven, when was the last time he'd slept more than two or three hours straight before an insidious, tormenting recollection had him bolting upright, sobbing and screaming?

Did time heal *that*?

How could it when hell had seared his soul?

Even the chaplain who'd visited Cortland in the hospital and Reabridge's vicar, the Reverend Joshua Owen, who'd wasted no time carrying out his spiritual duties by calling upon Cortland at Northwycke Court, had urged him to give himself sufficient time to recuperate.

"Reabridge is precisely the sort of place to convalesce, Mr. Marlow-Westbrook," the good rector said over his cup of India tea. "God's own land. Good people."

However, the vicar seemed pressed for time and hadn't stayed more than fifteen minutes, revealing that a toddler had been left at the vicarage and a kindly local matron currently watched the child while the vicar made his obligatory rounds.

The man of God also mentioned that the little chap's sudden appearance had revived the two-hundred-year-old feud between the Buckleys of Lower Reabridge and owners of the Crown and Castle, and the Pownalls of Upper Reabridge, owners of Book and Bell. The Buckleys and Pownalls speculated another ill-fated romance between members of their families had produced the child.



Until it could be determined if the boy was indeed related to either family, the cleric had decided the church would care for the child rather than place the foundling in an orphanage.

Decent of the vicar.

Orphanages were notoriously ghastly.

Mayhap another family would take the boy in temporarily.

“Naturally, without proof,” the vicar said, nodding his head solemnly, “I cannot in good conscience allow just anyone to lay claim to the lad.”

For the child’s sake, Cortland hoped that he would be placed with someone who would genuinely love him.

Not above sharing a snippet of local gossip before his hasty departure, Mr. Owen had also shared that a local girl had recently disappeared. This had happened more than once over the past decades, he’d advised in an appropriately grave tone. And frequently, a Buckley or Pownall was involved, either as a suspect or a victim.

“Unfortunate that the two families haven’t learned true forgiveness,” he said in a somber and pious tone with his fingers steepled. “Their feuding might’ve ended decades ago had they been willing to put aside pride and animosity.”

In truth, the good vicar rather impressed Cortland with his ability to bring Cortland abreast of local tattle, down two cups of tea, two slices of seed cake, four lady fingers, a ginger biscuit (pocketing six more to take back to the vicarage, supposedly for the foundling) and departing in under a quarter of an hour.

As he crossed the bridge spanning the River Rea, a movement outside the vicarage drew his attention. Holding a wee blond chap’s hand, the vicar waved at several people on or near the charming arched stone bridge before disappearing around the back of the sturdy brick building.

Cortland couldn’t fault the townsfolk for their friendliness.

He glanced at the tidy white rectangle trimmed in pine green declaring this the apothecary shop. A mortar and pestle

beneath *Beeson Bros Apothecary and Alchemist. Est. 1797* stood out boldly. *Tonics and Tinctures* curved across the top, and *Powders and Potions* arched neatly underneath.

He'd taken the last dose of laudanum yesterday—*vile stuff*—having managed to make this bottle last almost a month. That was an improvement. Nevertheless, after a sleepless night, tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable and failing, he'd determined to make the trip into Reabridge to procure another bottle.

Or a tonic, or elixir, or tincture...

Whatever would ease his physical and mental pain.

Hard work would help dispel his misery, but until his leg had completely healed, putting his plans for Northwycke Court into action would have to wait.

The local doctor Paul Wagner had warned Cortland that one could easily become addicted to the laudanum. Cortland well knew that truth. Several officers and soldiers had become dependent on the opiate—their method of coping with the hellish situation that was war.

He only took a small dose as a last resort.

Nevertheless, the doctor wasn't exactly a model of sobriety himself.

Cortland would dance a jig if the man weren't half-pished during both his visits. And given Cortland could barely stand upon his game leg, that wasn't happening any time soon.

*If ever.*

After each of the physician's calls, Cortland witnessed him taking a hefty nip from a flask inside his coat pocket before climbing—more like crawling—into his gig and, with a haphazard snap of the reins, trundling on his way.

Regardless, Cortland wouldn't judge the man.

Who was he to point fingers?

How many men were dead and buried and would never see their loved ones again because he'd followed his superiors'

dubious orders?

Too many, by God.

It took a special human being to dedicate their life to treating the sick, diseased, and infirm. Cortland's step-cousin, Fletcher Westbrook—one of the Duke of Latham's adopted sons—had studied to be a doctor. Yet, according to a letter from Father a couple of months ago, Fletcher had recently given up his practice.

No one knew why.

In any event, Cortland intended to ask for a sleeping draught and reserve the laudanum for the worst nights when the pain was unbearable. Thank God those were decreasing in frequency.

Sweat trickled down his back, and perspiration dampened his upper lip.

Bloody warm day, but then it was summer.

If he weren't still recovering and didn't want to risk infection, he'd go for a swim.

A man—hands in his pocket and hat cocked at a jaunty angle—whistled a cheery tune as he strolled by.

Is his name Haskell? Bevan Haskell?

He gave Cortland a friendly nod which Cortland returned.

If he was going to stay in the area—what other choice had he?—Cortland must get to know the locals, if not precisely befriend them. Eventually, he'd require laborers, house servants, stable hands, and a steward. Also, livestock, building and farming equipment, and God only knew what else for the house's neglected interior.

The house's refurbishment would have to wait, however.

Renovating the barns and stables took precedence.

It wasn't as if he had a wife to please, in any event. Or ever would have.

He slapped the dust off his buff-colored pantaloons and, after lifting his hat, swiped his good hand across his forehead before replacing the straw top hat.

The gelding, Sully, flicked his tail and whickered.

“I know, old fellow. You’re not accustomed to being ridden. I promise, soon you’ll do nothing but laze around the meadow all day.”

The horse was one of two kept at the estate, mainly because they were too old to be of use anymore and had been put out to pasture.

Had Cortland not arrived, the horses would’ve lived the remainder of their lives attended by the lone groom, Lyonel Rankin, who also acted as a man of all work, while aging Vernon Halbert and his corpulent wife, Stella, oversaw the maintenance of the house and vegetable garden.

Were supposed to, that is.

Given the condition of the house, grounds, and outbuildings, the three employees had not earned their wages for years by any stretch of the imagination. It would take months to get the estate in order, which meant a delay in Cortland’s determination to make Northwycke Court profitable.

Gnashing his teeth against the tenacious throbbing in his hand and leg, last week he’d given the trio a choice: promptly change their ways and obtain a work ethic or face immediate dismissal.

There were plenty of locals who’d readily take their places.

They’d chosen the former, earning them a temporary reprieve.

Nevertheless, Cortland wouldn’t blink twice before terminating any of them should they fail to perform their duties with diligence and efficiency. He’d not waste borrowed monies on lazy sluggards.

However, these things couldn't be rushed. Particularly as he had no experience with farming or running an estate. He'd have to rely upon the big-heartedness and knowledge of others to aid him in this challenging endeavor.

He intended to pay a call on Sherington Manor, introduce himself, and seek any advice George Sherington might be willing to share about farming.

If he didn't succeed at this venture, Cortland had no idea what he would do.

## CHAPTER 2



*A few seconds later—still outside the apothecary*

*F*ailure wasn't an option.

"I'll only be a few minutes," Cortland assured the drowsy horse with a gentle pat as he added acquiring horseflesh, a wagon, and probably a gig or other conveyance to his growing mental list of things to do.

The familial coach and drivers that had delivered him to Northwycke Court had departed the next morn. Though if he'd requested it, his well-meaning family would've provided everything he needed.

After securing the reins to a post provided for riders, Cortland entered the apothecary. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer interior. Medicinal, herbal, and chemical aromas engulfed him all at once—scents similar to the hospital where he'd recuperated for two months, but also different. Less sterile and more earthy and inviting.

Several swaths of lavender and other pungent herbs hung from a rafter, adding to the aromatic atmosphere. A counter with an assortment of products arranged neatly atop took up most of one side of the room, and shelves containing bottles, boxes, and containers of every shape and size dominated the other.

As Cortland advanced into the establishment, his boot heels resonated on the scuffed but well-scrubbed wooden floors. At one end of the tidy shop, a slender woman attired in

green and wearing a wide-brimmed straw bonnet, partially blocked by an L-shaped shelf, chatted with a clerk.

Trying to hide his limp, Cortland approached a second clerk.

The man raised kind hazel eyes behind thick wire-rimmed spectacles. "I'm Clayborn Beeson, partial owner of this fine establishment. May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I require something to help me sleep and a bottle of laudanum."

With a flick of his practiced gaze, Beeson took Cortland's measure from head to toe. He gave Cortland a warm smile. "Recently home from the war, are you?"

Was it that obvious?

Twisting his mouth into a wry grin and resting a forearm on the polished countertop, Cortland nodded. "Yes."

The apothecary gave a sage nod. "You're not alone. We've had several townfolk returning home of late. Some seemingly unaffected and others..."

He needn't clarify his meaning.

Many townfolk never would return.

"Planning on staying in the area long?" Beeson asked conversationally.

"I'm not sure yet. I hope so." Cortland scratched his jaw, trying not to let the massive amount of work restoring the house and property would take overwhelm him. "Ideally, I'd like to turn Northwycke Court into a profitable enterprise. Crops, sheep, and dairy cattle to start."

It would take hard work, dedication, and money.

Cortland possessed the first two and a pledge from his family for the third—only as a loan, at his insistence, until he could pay them back.

Furthermore, someone—he strongly suspected he knew who—bold as brass, grazed their cattle on Northwycke Court lands and had for some time. Now that Cortland had mostly

recovered and felt somewhat stronger, he must promptly address that troublesomeness.

Perhaps a visit to the local magistrate was in order as well. To apprise the fellow of the situation in case the trespasser proved bothersome or hostile. He rubbed his chin as was his habit when thinking. Was Sherington still the justice of the peace?

Who was the magistrate?

Yes, a good idea to chat with the magistrate. Tomorrow though.

Cortland's leg ached bloody awful, and he wanted to ride home the long route to check the fence lines. He suspected Ned Brixton had removed a section of drystone wall between Northwycke Court lands and his property—the conniving rotter.

Cortland didn't know the man, but Lyonel insisted Brixton was the only neighbor with cattle and that the man was an unscrupulous blighter.

“You must be a Westbrook then,” Beeson said over his shoulder as he collected a small umber-colored glass bottle from another shelf behind the polished walnut counter. “Heard someone had opened the house.”

Naturally, in a town this small, everyone knew everyone, every house, every visitor, and all of the local gossip.

“One of the duke's sons?” asked the apothecary as he carefully measured white powder into another jar.

“No.” Cortland shook his head before resting his chin on his fist. “The Duke of Latham is my first cousin once removed. I'm Cortland Marlow-Westbrook, his cousin Joseph's eldest.”

A swiftly smothered gasp from across the store made him glance toward the other clerk and the woman, now completely visible.

No.

Don't let it be her. Please.



Not Avery Levingtone.

The auburn-haired spitfire, with the slightest Scots accent, Cortland had hoped to make his bride—his countess before everything had gone head over arse in his life, leaving him scarred and without the means to support a family.

But Fate wasn't smiling kindly upon him today—hadn't in a very long while.

It *was* Avery.

Even more impossibly beautiful than he remembered.

Cortland had memorized every precious, delicate, precocious feature. Hadn't he dreamed of seeing her again for four long years? And at this moment, she stood not more than ten feet away.

A vision in a Pomona green gown, ivory spencer, and bonnet with a flurry of matching silk flowers and ribbons. Even her reticule complemented her fashionable ensemble, as did the pearls at her throat and dangling from her ears.

She was a breath of fresh air, utterly out of place in the fusty shop.

Agony sluiced through him, and he closed his eyes.

How much more pain could he endure?

*You're not a coward, Cortland Andrew Judah Marlow-Westbrook. Nor are you a child. You are eight and twenty—a soldier who has fought the enemy face to face and hand to hand.*

*Open your blasted eyes!*

Forcing his leaden eyelids open, Cortland stared into the familiar sapphire blue, rimmed with ginger-tipped sable lashes. Her gaze frank but wide with surprise, Avery fashioned her pink cupid's bow mouth into a soft smile.

“Hello, Cortland.”

## CHAPTER 3



*Ten unbearable heartbeats later*

*Beeson's Apothecary & Alchemist*

*H*ello, Cortland.

Avery had sounded so composed, so calm and collected.

Wonder of wonders.

How could she when a myriad of winged insects fluttered about her tummy, her pulse pelted along like a frightened fox, and her breath came in labored gasps as if she'd just finished the Royal Ascot horserace?

She thought she recognized the deep, melodic timber of Cortland's voice as he spoke to Clayborn Beeson, and on leaden legs swiveled toward him as if in slow motion. Afraid to believe it was him and terrified that it was, she'd studied his broad back and noticed how he favored his leg as he leaned on the counter.

She tried to convince herself it was only a man who resembled him.

Then Cortland said his name, and a ragged gasp tore past her lips as her knees came unhinged.

It *was* him.

Why hadn't her cousin by marriage, Justina, the Duchess of San Sebastian, or Justina's Scottish husband Baxter, mentioned the Westbrooks owned property in the area?

Probably to protect Avery from further heartache.

Besides, what was the likelihood that in all of England, Cortland would venture to this quaint little glen?

Reabridge wasn't exactly a mecca of High Society like Bath.

Justina alone was privy to Avery's secret—that she'd fallen in love with Cortland that first Season.

No man had caught Avery's interest since, though she had her fair share of suitors—even four decent marriage proposals. Though she suspected the small fortune she'd inherited from her parents might've been more of an impetus to marry her than genuine affection.

The number of fortune-hungry dandies seeking wives made her leery.

Regardless, none of her *besotted* beaux had caused her heart to skip or her knees to unhinge. Nor had they kept her awake at night praying fervently for his safety. Or making girlish wishes on full, silvery moons and dreaming of stolen midnight kisses.

She wasn't precisely on the shelf at two and twenty, but neither had she any prospects.

Prospects that she was interested in, at least.

Until now, Avery hadn't minded. However, seeing Cortland brought all those stifled emotions roaring unchecked to the surface again.

He didn't say a word but stared, his mouth drawn into a taut line, his midnight eyebrows slashed together, and his impossibly dark gaze brimming with disbelief.

And... perhaps something more?

Please let there be something more.

To give her a sliver of hope that her nonsensical daydreams these past four years that Cortland would return to England, move heaven and earth to find her, explain why he

hadn't written, and declare his undying love hadn't been in vain.

In the apothecary's muted light, a myriad of dust specks floating in the air where an intrepid ray of sunshine managed to breach the glass, Cortland's eyes appeared olive-black. However, Avery remembered that the gold flecks and amber circles around his irises gave the stunning orbs an agate-like appearance in the sun.

Those eyes and his disarming sideways smile had snared her that first night when a terrified, awkward, and reluctant eighteen-year-old Scottish lass had made her *haut ton* debut. Lord, how she'd loathed the very notion. She'd fought dear Uncle Tobias tooth and nail, poor dear man.

Cortland roved his hungry gaze over her face, a concert of emotions flickering across his rugged features: Astonishment. Incredulity. Delight. Happiness. Unadulterated pleasure.

*Oh, yes. Yes!*

He was pleased to see her, after all.

It took all of Avery's willpower and determination not to kick propriety aside and dash across the room and throw her arms around him. To weep in relief and laugh from sheer joy.

Cortland was alive. He was safe. He was home.

He was *here*.

Right here, in Reabridge.

Her heart and optimism soared skyward like an eagle on the wind, only to plummet like a millstone tossed into the sea a heartbeat later as caution, guardedness, and finally, a banal, unreadable mask settled upon Cortland's countenance.

He fisted and unfisted his right hand reflexively.

She was wrong. So very, very wrong.

Dreadfully, excruciatingly wrong.

He wasn't elated to see her.

In truth, it appeared the exact opposite.

*Why aren't you as thrilled to see me as I am to see you?*  
Avery's anguished heart cried.

Four years.

Four years since Avery had seen Cortland's beloved features.

Four wretched, heartrending years without a single word.

Four years of telling herself to move on, to get over him.

One of the Beeson brothers sneezed, but Avery couldn't tear her attention off Cortland to see which one.

She'd adored Cortland—had written him every week that first year. Pages and pages of anything and everything she thought might interest him and take his mind off the war. But he'd never replied. At first, Avery had been crushed, but as the months passed, she dried her tears, summoned her resiliency, and continued with her life.

Or at least, she'd tried to.

Her heart, however, had remained Cortland's, even if he didn't want it and didn't know it was his.

Would never know because, after all, Avery did have a degree of pride, and self-preservation demanded she raise her parapets and fortifications. She'd trusted Cortland once—blindly and unquestioningly—had eagerly and naively given him her heart and then had the mangled organ callously tossed back at her slippered feet.

Studying him, she tilted her head.

A tinge of pallor edged the angles and contours of his face. Gaunt hollows emphasized his high cheekbones, and purplish shadows formed semi-circles beneath his eyes. His nose, once a straight blade down the middle of his face, now sported a lump and was slightly off-center.

Avery had overheard him ask for a sleeping draught and laudanum.

What had he suffered?

*How* had he suffered?

Why should she care?

Because even now, when he rejected her again, Avery still loved him.

If she were the maudlin type, she'd retreat to her bedchamber with a book of poetry by Samuel Coleridge or William Cowper. But she was not, and in fact, loathed most poetry. Something else that made her an oddity amongst the *ton*.

The urge to weep overcame Avery, but she wrested her emotions into submission.

Men detested tears.

Most had no idea what to do with a weeping female.

Cortland had grown sinewy and leaner. His tobacco-brown coat hung loosely on his frame. Nonetheless, his pantaloons revealed long, muscled legs.

At last, Cortland shook himself out of his stupor and offered the slightest bow.

“Miss Levingtone.”

Cold. Clipped. Formal.

Avery pulled her eyebrows together, his steely indifference cutting her to the core—leaving her raw and bleeding.

Blast him.

Obviously, *he* hadn't pined over *her*.

## CHAPTER 4



*Several tick-tocks of the mahogany-cased wall clock later*

*Still in the apothecary shop*

*G*od curse Avery for a jingle-brained ninnyhammer.

Of course, Cortland hadn't yearned for her as she had him.

That's why he hadn't bothered to respond to a single letter.

After all of this time, her heart twinged with self-disgust as much as from the pain of his blatant rejection. She should be angry—let her wrath buffer her pain.

Except that Avery was irritatingly honest with herself—had been for four years.

Cortland had made no promises or declarations before he'd left. He hadn't even kissed her—well, kissing her hand didn't count though his lips upon the back of her hand had sent delicious tingles up her arm and into unmentionable places.

She had been a gullible gooscap, assuming their relationship meant something more.

*Fool. Fool.*

When Cortland remained stonily silent, she advanced a few steps, all too aware of the Beeson brothers' rapt attention. No doubt they'd share this little scene far and wide, and speculation would run rampant. The conjecture ought to satisfy the local chinwags for at least a month, mayhap more.

Normally, nothing exciting or gossip-worthy happened in the sleepy little hamlet.

Except of late, a few significant events *had* occurred.

Someone had left an orphan at the vicarage.

Hadn't Avery heard the toddler's name was Sam?

The ongoing feud between the Buckleys and the Pownalls had escalated, a town lass had disappeared—though some claimed she'd eloped—and almost daily, another person returned from the war. And then, of course, there was the much-touted and keenly awaited Harvest Moon Festival in September.

An event Avery had quite anticipated—until now.

The silence grew unbearable, thick as molasses in February and as uncomfortable as a horsehair shirt.

Avery cleared her throat.

She should say something.

*What?*

Anything to break this deafening, awkward silence.

“I'm staying with my cousins, the Duke and Duchess of San Sebastian, at Wicksens House. I'm sure you remember Justina and her husband, Baxter. She's enceinte with her second child. The babe tries to come early.”

Terrifyingly early, truth be told, which was why Avery had traveled to Reabridge from Scotland. To help with energetic three-year-old Emile and to be a support and comfort to Justina, who had become her dearest friend since Justina's Aunt Emily had married Avery's Uncle Tobias.

Two months abed already, and Justina had another six weeks before the newest Bathhurst should enter the world.

“The midwife recommended Justina drink an herbal elixir to stop her contractions. I came to purchase cramp bark, wild yam, and...”



Chagrined at her prattling, Avery let her voice trail off as she clutched the small brown paper pouch to her middle.

“Please give the duke and duchess my regards. I hope the child fares well.” With a slight nod, Cortland faced the other Mr. Beeson, presenting his back and effectively dismissing her.

Like an irritating acquaintance he couldn’t wait to be rid of.

Stupid tears welled in Avery’s eyes, and she dropped her mortified gaze to the floor lest either Beeson brother see her humiliation. Her anguish couldn’t have been worse had Cortland pulled her heart from her chest and stomped on it with his dusty boots.

*Pull yourself together, Avery Moria Yvaine Levingtone.*

*You are no mewling female.*

*Chin up. Shoulders back. Spine straight.*

“Thank you, Mr. Beeson.” Avery fashioned what she hoped was a bright smile, though her cheeks felt brittle and on the verge of shattering. “I’ll check back later in the week to see if the horsetail grass has arrived.”

“I’ll send word to Wicksens House when it does.” Phillip Beeson’s compassionate gaze almost undid her.

Lord, how she hated pity.

When her parents died, she’d nearly drowned in the emotion that well-meaning family and friends poured onto her. It had caused her to erect a wall that had not easily come down, and now and again, she longed to retreat behind it again to spare herself hurt.

Except, that was no way to live—shutting people out and barricading oneself inside.

Summoning her resolve, Avery gave Cortland’s rigid back one final glance and slipped from the apothecary. Surely it was the bright sunlight causing the moisture in her eyes, despite her wide-brimmed bonnet.

Mack, the rambunctious market place dog, bounded over to her. She paid the butcher and the innkeeper to feed him scraps and had cajoled the hostler into letting the dog sleep on an old blanket in the stable.

“Hello, Mack.”

She fished inside her reticule for the piece of cheese she’d wrapped in a bit of paper just for this purpose.

Having come to expect a treat, the scruffy dog woofed and danced in circles.

“Sit.”

Avery pointed a finger at the ground.

Barely able to contain his exuberance, the obedient dog sat, though it couldn’t quite keep its hind end planted on the ground.

“Good boy.”

After tossing the cheese to the sweet animal, Avery glanced over her shoulder.

Cortland, his gaze earnest and hungry, peered at her through the apothecary’s windowpane but looked away with the alacrity of a jackrabbit when her gaze meshed with his.

For all his taciturnity, he wasn’t as impervious to Avery as he feigned.

She would run into Cortland Marlow-Westbrook again.

It was inevitable.

Well, two could play his impersonal game.

By Jove, Avery would be as dispassionate and indifferent as he when next they met. She was over him. Once and for all.

Liar.

“Oh, do shut up,” she muttered crossly to the disgustingly accurate little voice in her head.

Tongue lolling, Mack cocked his shaggy head and thumped his even shaggier tail.

“Not you.” She patted his head. “*You* are a sweetheart.”

Unlike a certain male.

Avery would never be over Cortland.

Never.

## CHAPTER 5



*Sunday service –A week later*

*St. Beonna Church, Reabridge*

*F*ardiness did have its advantages.

*Ah, there she is.*

Having arrived late deliberately, Cortland slipped into the cool, oak-paneled sanctuary with its gleaming rows of oak pews, those closest to the altar encased in varnished paneled boxes for elite attendees. Ignoring the customary seating by rank stricture, he sank onto a hard bench in the back row.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he roved his gaze over the occupants until it rested upon Avery again. Sitting on the opposite side in the front box, she was a beacon to his tormented soul, a light dispelling the darkness that had engulfed him for too long.

If only he could have made her his as he'd planned—as he still yearned to do.

Alas, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Regardless, Cortland couldn't yank his attention from Avery—didn't want to, for that matter.

Why deny himself the pleasure?

Cortland couldn't quite disregard the conviction prodding him that while the others worshiped the Almighty, he wallowed in self-indulgence. However, his purpose for attending Sunday service had nothing to do with his immortal

soul and much less with his desire to see Avery than to corner Ned Brixton—the sly rotter.

Nonetheless, from back here, Cortland could look at his leisure and not have to disguise his true feelings toward Avery as he had the other day at the apothecary. His gut cramped in remembrance of the devastation ravaging her face at his calculated coldness.

His aloofness acted as a double-edged sword, fileting him with each callous word he uttered.

Avery hadn't deserved his cruelty, but he'd not known what else to do.

Seeing her had completely flummoxed him, tilted his already wobbly world further on its unsteady axis. As much as he longed to—Sweet Lord, how he longed to—they couldn't pick up where they'd left off.

Things had changed.

*Everything* had changed—him most of all.

It wouldn't be fair for Cortland to encourage Avery's interest. He could promise her nothing. Regardless, everything in him shouted to ignore common sense, honor, and decency and take her into his arms, the consequences and repercussions be hanged.

A fortnight after arriving at the Iberian Peninsula, he'd learned of Uncle Claude's marriage to an already pregnant woman. His parents thought he ought to know, and rightly so.

It hadn't taken much forethought or intelligence to surmise what that change in circumstances meant for Cortland. Due to a slight error in the address, his post from Avery had been misdirected. It had taken a full three months for her first letter to arrive, and Cortland hadn't responded when it did. Nor did he reply to any of the others.

And there had been many.

What could he say?

*Wait for me, my darling? Indefinitely until I can figure out a way to afford a wife?*

His future wasn't assured any longer.

How could he support a wife and family on an officer's pay?

Particularly a duke's niece?

An heiress to boot?

Ward to the Duke of Heatherston, Avery would've expected to become a countess—if Cortland had ever hinted about marriage to her.

Which, thank God, believing it presumptuous and premature, Cortland hadn't.

And then, after he'd been injured and sold his commission... Well, he'd terrify Avery with his nightmares. His dark moods.

She deserved better.

Even what he intended for Northwycke Court was a colossal gamble.

Cortland had staked everything on this venture.

He knew next to nothing about animal husbandry or agriculture. Nonetheless, it was something he could make a go of, and if he were successful, he would pay back the funds his family had advanced him.

It would take years though.

It wasn't fair to ask Avery to wait.

He hadn't been positive she even attended Sunday services, given her cousin's fragile health. However, Doctor Wagner had paid Cortland another visit a couple of days ago and, during his examination, had casually revealed that the Duchess of San Sebastian fared well at present. As long as she stayed abed, that was.

The doctor had also pronounced Cortland's calf wound healed. He'd need to stretch and strengthen the leg, but the risk of infection had passed.

Doctor Wagner had insisted on examining Cortland's hand as well. He'd recommended rubbing the scars with honey and onion extract to decrease scarring as well as performing a series of exercises to increase strength and flexibility.

Sitting in the pew, Cortland traced his forefinger over the rigid patterns of scars beneath the leather glove. It still embarrassed him when others saw the damage.

A pistol exploding in one's hand did leave a mangled mess, not to mention left one vulnerable to an opponent's attack. He'd lost the tips of his middle and ring finger and a degree of sensation in the other fingers. Neither could he completely close his hand into a fist any longer.

At first, the field doctor had wanted to amputate the hand, but Cortland had begged him to try to save it. Skeptical but compassionate, the doctor had agreed, and to his and Cortland's surprise and relief, the hand had healed: a *mélange* of puckered flesh, scars, indentations, and knots. But at least Cortland had his hand and was learning to use it again.

A portly matron wearing a travesty of a violet and chartreuse gown harrumphed her displeasure as she caught his eye while silently demanding to know why he wasn't singing. If only she would refrain from doing so, most exuberantly and off-key. He'd heard bull elephants with more vocal aptitude and ability to, on occasion, actually hit correct notes more frequently than the woman.

Perhaps that was why, despite her apparent wealth, she'd been relegated to the back of the church.

Fashioning a roguish grin, he winked.

The dame's jaw sagged to her ample bosom before she gave him a flirtatious smile and batted her eyelashes.

*Good God.*

What had he done?

Better nip *that* in the bud, post haste.

Training his gaze forward, Cortland stopped fingering his maimed hand and concentrated on Avery. Absorbing every

detail, every nuance, each slight movement from her smiles to how she slightly swayed as she sang “Rock of Ages.”

The Duke of San Sebastian sat near her, a small boy between them, probably his grace’s son.

The matron hit a particularly discordant note, rather like a dying jaguar’s scream, and two gangly youths in front of her dipped their heads together. Shoulders shaking in undisguised mirth, they pretended to follow in the hymnal, but each time the woman screeched off-key, they dissolved into laughter.

Their mortified mother pinched each of her sons on the arm and gave them a stern glare but to no avail.

Eyes closed and oblivious to the ongoing hilarity in front of her, the woman belted the song with admirable enthusiasm, even hitting the correct note every third or fourth stanza.

Returning his focus to the object of his desire, Cortland allowed his lips to slide upward of their own accord.

How could he not smile when gazing upon Avery’s loveliness?

Her cream and peach stovetop bonnet accented her shapely nape. Rather than a spencer, she’d draped a cream-colored embroidered silk scarf over her puff-sleeved coral gown.

He’d managed to avoid her for a week by not venturing to the town and, instead, sending one of his newly hired servants to fetch whatever he needed.

At present, several randy young swains ogled Avery, sending her sideways glances rather than join in the singing, and Cortland curled his right hand into a tight ball against the urge to wipe the licentious smiles from their faces. However, pummeling congregants mightn’t be the best way to get into the vicar’s good graces.

Cortland shifted his gaze, taking in each male parishioner.

Hopefully, one of them was Brixton.

It was amazing and not a little hypocritical how many dishonest people filled the pews each Sunday. Cortland was certain that practice was no different in this quaint township



than in London or elsewhere. But then, hadn't the Savior died for sinners?

Except... weren't people supposed to *stop* sinning?

Or at least try to?

The three times Cortland had called, Brixxton's snooty butler had declared his master wasn't at home. The last time—a mere two days ago—when Cortland had stepped backward a few paces to examine the house's brick front, a drapery in an upper-story window fell quickly into place.

The cowardly sod hid from him like a child caught snitching biscuits from the kitchen.

Sherington was indeed still the justice of the peace, but ill health kept him from his duties at present. His assistant was away until next week—something to do with investigating that girl's disappearance, or so the talkative clerk, Norman Fontaine, had informed Cortland when he'd stopped by the office last week. Most of the townsfolk believed she'd eloped, but the assistant could be credited for pursuing the matter nonetheless.

The wiry, buck-toothed, superstitious assistant also shared a rather unnerving legend about Jenny Greenteeth, a river hag who supposedly pulled unsuspecting children and the elderly into the water and drowned them.

“All folklore has its roots in facts,” Fontaine had insisted in an urgent whisper, beads of perspiration popping out on his pimply forehead. “This isn't the first time someone has disappeared from Reabridge.” He leaned forward. “Usually, the Buckleys or Pownalls are involved.”

The nervous clerk had so worked himself into a frenetic state that he'd locked the door and lowered the blinds after Cortland left.

What would the justice of the peace or his assistant say if he knew his clerk's propensity to gossip and belief in the paranatural? One thing was for certain; for the time being, the peace officer couldn't help with the trespassing cattle issue.

*“This isn’t the first time someone has just disappeared from Reabridge.”*

Concern pulled Cortland’s mouth downward and his eyebrows together.

Perhaps the missing lass *had* eloped.

Still, Avery shouldn’t be wandering around by herself.

## CHAPTER 6



*Another hymn later*

Of course, Cortland didn't believe in the river hag balderdash either. The missing girl might've eloped. Or mayhap—his stomach cramped at the thought—something more nefarious *was* afoot.

Perchance, Cortland should drop a hint in the Duke of San Sebastian's ear.

The matron harumphed again, and with a start, Cortland returned to himself.

The service had ended, and the parishioners filed out the double doors. He stepped aside to allow the woman to pass, his gaze fixed on Avery the whole while.

Her pretty mouth formed a small 'O' of surprise when she saw him, and she stumbled.

Holding the child in one arm, San Sebastian steadied her with his other hand. His eyes narrowed the merest jot as he raked his speculative gaze over Cortland. He knew Cortland and Avery had spent a good deal of time together during the Season four years ago.

Cortland assumed that was why his grace had extended an invitation for him to peruse a few horses the duke planned on selling. His note said he'd heard Cortland had been asking around the community about available horseflesh.

Cortland's first instinct was to refuse the duke's offer because of the possibility of running into Avery. However,

common sense prevailed. San Sebastian's animals would be well cared for and of excellent stock. As importantly, the duke was honest. He wouldn't attempt to cheat Cortland.

They were to meet at the duke's stables this Wednesday.

Still, the look San Sebastian leveled him at present, though not hostile, wasn't genial either.

No doubt, Avery had shared the scene in the apothecary shop with the duchess, and her grace had shared with her husband. And yet, his grace had still extended the invitation to view his horses.

That begged the question. *Why?*

The Duke of San Sebastian said something to Avery, and she shook her head, studiously avoiding looking in Cortland's direction again.

Cortland dipped his chin toward his grace in a brief greeting and escaped the throng before they reached him.

As tempted as he was to talk to Avery, the opportunity to speak with Ned Brixxton was a greater priority. Lengthening his stride, Cortland left the building and made straight for the vicar standing outside and chatting with the obnoxious vocalist, a distinguished gentleman who fairly shouted landed gentry, and another slender, well-dressed fellow with his back to Cortland.

At Cortland's approach, the vicar beamed and gestured. "Please allow me to introduce Philmont Albertoth, Mrs. Myrtice Biggerstaff-Methadonna, and Ned Brixxton. This is Reabridge's newest resident, Cortland Marlow-Westbrook of the Northwycke Court Westbrooks."

Ah, Ned Brixxton, at last. Perfect.

Just this side of gloating, Cortland kicked his mouth into a satisfied smile while he pinned Brixxton to the spot, silently daring the poltroon to turn tail and run with all and sundry present to witness his cowardly flight.

"Marlow-Westbrook." Mr. Albertoth nodded a friendly greeting. He seemed a pleasant enough chap of middling years

and sporting a slight paunch. “We haven’t had a Westbrook in these parts in a goodly while. I hope you’ll come to appreciate our little community.”

“I’m sure I shall.”

Cortland wasn’t sure at all, but he’d make an effort.

His future depended upon it.

He must not fail.

“Welcome to Reabridge.” Mrs. Biggerstaff-Methadonna—someone had done the woman a huge disservice with that godawful name—formed a coy moue with her mouth and fluttered her eyelashes again. Sadly, she resembled a carp—in the throes of death.

“A pleasure.” Cortland bowed, his keen regard never leaving Brixxton, who tugged at his neckcloth and shifted his feet back and forth.

Reverend Owen flushed brick red to his hairline and gave a self-conscious laugh. “Oh, you probably are already acquainted with Mr. Brixxton, as you are neighbors.”

“To the contrary, Reverend.” Cortland slid him an assuring glance. “I’ve not introduced myself to Mr. Brixxton. Regardless, he is precisely the person I wished to speak with.”

Most opportune to have witnesses to what might be a contentious situation. Cortland strongly suspected Mrs. Biggerstaff-Methadonna would not hesitate to share what she heard today, far and wide. And with her ability to project, everyone within a mile—make that five—would hear her every word.

She trained her keen attention on Brixxton, then swerved her speculative regard to Cortland.

“Oh? Is it a matter of some urgency or importance?” she asked. “A *delicate* matter?”

She fairly frothed in anticipation.

“One might say so.” Cortland kept his response deliberately obtuse.

Taking in Brixxton's nervous fidgeting and the man's gaze darting hither and yon like a cornered mouse, Mr. Albertoth raised an imperious eyebrow.

Did his nose twitch the merest bit in distaste, as if he smelled something offensive?

"Brixxton, one would almost think you are not eager to speak with Mr. Marlow-Westbrook," Albertoth said drolly.

Indeed.

"As I've called thrice and you haven't been at home to me, I am ever grateful to have this opportunity to tell you that your cattle are on Northwycke Court property. According to my overseer"—neglectful and slipshod, Lyonel Rankin hardly qualified as such— "they have been for some months—*years*, *in truth*—despite his informing you of that fact on multiple occasions."

At least Rankin had the good sense to record his attempts.

Cortland had to give credit for that, if little else.

"I have no idea what you are referring to," Brixxton stammered. Guilt fairly oozed from the ponce.

A few other congregates took notice and stopped to eavesdrop openly on the conversation.

"I'll just bet you haven't," muttered Albertoth, scraping a scathing glance over Brixxton.

Hmm, that was interesting.

Cortland had been correct when he'd detected a hint of aversion there.

The sweat beading Brixxton's pasty forehead and dribbling from his temples belied his denial. "I have never received any notice, nor am I aware of my cattle having crossed into other lands via breakages in the drystone walls."

"I do not recall mentioning how the cattle came to be on Northwycke Court lands." Cortland pinned the man with an accusatory gaze.

Flushing crimson, Brixxton hauled out a handkerchief and mopped his face. "I... that is... er... I assumed."

"As neither myself nor any other Westbrook has granted you grazing rights, have your herd removed from Westbrook lands by sunset tomorrow." Cortland straightened the cuff of his dove-gray jacket. Looking up from beneath hooded eyes, he said, "I should dislike having to involve the magistrate or justice of the peace."

Brixxton gave a terse jerk of his pointed chin before pivoting and striding away, his legs and spine stiff as a branding rod.

Cortland didn't fail to notice the man hadn't exactly agreed.

"If you'll please excuse me." Mrs. Biggerstaff-Methadonna bustled away, waving at two of her cronies. "*Yoo hoo,*" she called in a sing-song voice. "Endellion. Petronella. Ladies, you'll never guess what..."

Her voice faded as the trio put their bonneted heads together and moved farther away.

They'd smudge Brixxton's reputation beyond recognition by the morrow.

"Yes, excuse me as well." The vicar offered an apologetic smile. "I must greet my other parishioners."

He moved off, and the small crowd immediately consumed him.

"A few of us are picnicking by the River Rea before going home," Mr. Albertoth said amiably. "You should join us, Marlow-Westbrook. It would give you a chance to become acquainted with a few of the local families. If you're seeking advice on farming, you would do well to speak to Martin Bromelton."

It was on the verge of Cortland's tongue to refuse, but San Sebastian walked past and spoke to a lady dressed in the first tulip of fashion who Cortland hadn't met. Three pretty young women stood nearby, chatting with Avery, now holding a parasol angled to protect her from the relentless sun's rays.

Albertoth slid a speculative glance in the direction Brixton had stomped off in. “You and I should also discuss Brixton, Marlow-Westbrook. He might attend Sunday services to assuage his blighted soul, but the man is not trustworthy.”

Cortland canted his head.

That was interesting.

The Duke of San Sebastian approached the women. “Might I impose upon you to escort Miss Levingtone to the picnic, Mrs. Albertoth? We have a basket in the carriage.” San Sebastian adjusted the drowsy child in his arms, who bore a strong resemblance to his sire. “I’m going home to check on the duchess and put Emile down for a nap before I join the others.”

*Ah, Albertoths’ family.*

Avery slid Cortland a sidelong glance, a dare in her pretty sapphire eyes and the merest mockery framing her sweet mouth.

Did she think him a coward?

Wasn’t he?

*No, confound it.*

He was not.

“Of course, Your Grace.” Mrs. Albertoth fluttered a plump hand, causing the pink fringes on her parasol to dance. “It’s no problem at all. My daughters will be thrilled to have Miss Levingtone ride with us. They are quite taken with her London fashions and hope she can advise them about their wardrobes. And we have much to discuss and plan for the Harvest Festival too.”

Surely, an hour or two couldn’t cause any harm.

*Do not do it. You’ll only come to regret your foolhardiness.*

Aye, but Cortland might also learn something valuable about Brixton, and if Reabridge were to become his



permanent residence, he'd have to befriend the locals, sooner or later.

“I gratefully accept your kind offer, Albertoth,” Cortland said, answering the cry of his heart even while his head shouted idiot. *Fool. Imbecile.*

*You'll regret your impetuosity.*

Mayhap.

Probably, in fact.

## CHAPTER 7



*Twenty minutes later*

*The banks of the River Rea*

As Avery descended the Albertoths' barouche, she took what she hoped appeared a casual glance around the noble oaks forming a protective semi-circle on one side of the glen.

Cortland hadn't arrived yet.

She wasn't certain what she'd say to him, but as Mr. Albertoth had invited him, he'd no doubt picnic with the family.

Nothing the least bit awkward about *that*.

Four years of traveling in *le beau monde* circles had taught her to school her features and conceal the riotous thoughts tumbling about in her head. Usually, she managed to hold her tongue—though not always because, dash it all, sometimes a pompous twit needed a politely delivered set down.

Raising her face, she smiled at the golden ribbons of sunshine filtering through the verdant canopy overhead—just enough light to prevent gloominess and enough shade to shield the picnickers from the day's heat.

The Albertoth girls had chatted non-stop about the Harvest Festival in September. There was to be a parade of Morris dancers, a baking contest, dancing, a massive bonfire, a harvest supper, and even a harvest king and queen. Their

enthusiasm proved contagious, and Avery couldn't help but anticipate the bucolic event.

She'd visited the Roma on Gypsy Hill last year for their annual gathering and liked it very much.

These past weeks, she'd come to enjoy these after-service gatherings. They were so much friendlier and more relaxed than London's formal affairs. It was an ideal way to become ingrained in a community, and Reabridge almost felt like home now.

In truth, she preferred the country to London.

Had always done so.

Today, Justina insisted Avery, Baxter, and Emile attend St. Beonna Church's Sunday service, proclaiming she was perfectly fine for a few hours. Not that she was ever truly alone with a staff of seventeen who adored her and seldom left her unattended for more than fifteen minutes.

The last to arrive, Cortland pulled his older curricle to a plodding stop behind several other conveyances. The ancient horse pulling the equipage—the same one she'd seen outside the apothecary if she recalled correctly—swished its tail and whickered its discontent.

Cortland carefully descended, only slightly favoring his left leg. He made a point of murmuring something low to the horse before skimming a hand down the beast's neck and offering a sugar lump.

A very different type of lump formed in Avery's throat at his compassion for the aged animal.

She permitted her attention to drift surreptitiously lower to his booted calf.

What had happened to his leg?

A war injury, no doubt, but what precisely?

Blade? Lead ball? Broken from a fall?

Cortland raised his dark head, his even darker gaze catching hers across the distance.

Time hung suspended in a surreal, ethereal miasma.

That adage that time could stand still rambled through her foggy brain.

And it did.

At that precise moment, the world, in all its vastness, narrowed to just the two of them.

Her soul beckoned to Cortland's across those few feet—a quickening of her spirit and a yearning so intense, overwhelming, and relentless she couldn't draw a deep breath.

It was still there, that undefinable draw that had always been between them, whether Cortland wanted to acknowledge the enigmatic, fascinating, and compelling allure or pretend that it had never existed.

Regardless, something so unique, persistent, and all-consuming could not be ignored.

Surely Avery's feelings were requited.

They must be.

She hadn't imagined those magical weeks in London.

The potent, enduring memories had sustained her all these years.

Well, then, she would have to be the one to do the pursuing.

It wasn't done, of course—chasing after a man.

Men generally dominated matrimonial quests in a masculine demonstration of their prowess at stalking prey.

Oh, posh and piddle.

Fiddlesticks and flim-flam.

A giggle nearly escaped her at her ludicrous musings.

Of course, *it* was done.

All of the time, truth be told.

Only *haut ton* assemblies, routs, balls, and musicals masqueraded as hunting fields. Scandalous décolletages,

flirtatiously fluttered fans, exposed ankles, dropped handkerchiefs, and hefty dowries comprised the weapons used to snare the targeted quarry.

Regardless, Avery anticipated the challenge. Excitement tingled through her veins as she contemplated her quest. Oh, eyebrows would shoot skyward in shock, accompanied by frenetic whispers in ears and behind hands.

Brazen. Fast. Shameless.

Unrefined, indecorous, and unseemly.

Even in this provincial locale, Avery could expect those unbecoming terms and others even more unflattering affixed to her name should her intentions become known.

And surely they must, for subtlety rarely won the day. Or the man.

She honestly didn't care.

Cortland was worth the risk. The disgrace. The potential failure and resulting heartbreak.

She'd never know unless she tried, would she?

Since her arrival in London four years ago for the deuced Season Uncle Tobias had promised her parents Avery would have, she'd been avant-garde—less than conventional. Unless she wanted to spend her life as a spinster or settle for a loveless marriage of convenience, she'd have to prove to Cortland—the beef-headed, mulish bacon-brained adorable man—that they were meant to be together.

No matter what.

And if, in the end, her love remained unrequited, well, at least she would know once and for all.

Avery fashioned a radiant smile and held out her hand.

“Mr. Marlow-Westbrook. Please allow me to introduce my friends. You must picnic with us. I know for certain that Cook sent Scotch eggs and Banbury Cakes.”

Two of his favorites, if she recalled.

Yes, she would use every trick conceivable to lure him.

It was for his own good.

At her invitation, Cortland's eyes lit with a combination of amusement, suspicion, and yearning.

Avery had him just where she wanted him.

Unless he wanted to snub the Albertoths, one of Reabridge's most elite families, he must join them. To refuse would seem churlish.

"I have never been able to say no to a Banbury Cake, Miss Levingtone."

He twisted his mouth into his infamous sideways grin and gave her a scorching glance that said he knew exactly what she was about.

Whether his comprehension of her tactics made her mission more or less difficult remained to be seen.

In short order, Avery had introduced him to Mrs. Paulina Albertoth and her daughters Philina, Perlita, and Petula. The pretty sisters, ranging in age from eleven to seventeen, gave Cortland flirtatious smiles and coy glances as they nibbled the baskets' tasty contents.

Baxter had yet to appear.

Avery peered toward the impromptu road the vehicles used to reach this destination.

Perhaps he'd opted to remain home with Justina. One would think they were still newlyweds from their unrepentant devotion to each other. At times, she felt like an intruder.

Avery yearned for that kind of love.

Drowsy from the afternoon heat and full stomachs, the Albertoths and several other adults settled onto their blankets for a nap. Eleven-year-old Philina joined a few of the younger children in playing games. With her parents' permission and Perlita acting as chaperone, Petula accepted Mitch Stoneyard's offer to stroll along the shore.

“Miss Levingtone. Mr. Marlow-Westbrook, please join us.” Philina gazed at them expectantly.

Patting his stomach, Cortland grinned. “I’d welcome a chance to stretch my legs and walk off some of that delicious food.”

He’d eaten heartily, to Avery’s relief.

In the little over a week since she’d last seen him, he appeared stronger, haler. His face had lost the piqued look around the edges too.

After collecting her parasol, Avery accepted the hand Cortland extended to assist her in rising. His severely scared hand. He’d not replaced his gloves after eating, and she couldn’t help but feel this was a test of some sort.

Without hesitation, she placed her fingers on the puckered flesh and stood.

If he thought a few scars would scare her off, he’d better think again.

Avery possessed a stronger constitution and more pluck than that.

Cortland released her hand the moment she’d attained her balance.

Rather than repulsion or disgust, sympathy engulfed her, but mindful of how she’d despised pity directed toward her, she peered directly at the damaged flesh as they followed the others toward the riverbank.

“What happened to your hand, Cortland?”

A slight, refreshing breeze played with the hem of her gown and the ribbons of her bonnet she’d left untied.

Cortland shot her a startled glance, then lifted a shoulder as he held the injured appendage before him. “A flintlock exploded in my palm.”

Her heart ached to take the distorted hand and raise it to her lips. Rather than respond with feminine squeamishness, Avery furrowed her forehead. “I imagine that’s not common?”

Soldiers would all have mangled hands if it were.

“No. Amid a battle, with no time to reload my gun, I seized a fallen officer’s pistol. I don’t know why the weapon malfunctioned. Perhaps it was jammed, but this...” He turned his hand this way and that. “Is the result.”

“I’m glad you didn’t lose your hand.”

Avery deliberately looped her hand through the elbow of the same arm that bore his damaged hand.

Gazing down at her, Cortland gave her a cockeyed smile. “Me too, though it’s not without hindrances. It is still weak, and I cannot make a tight fist.”

“I think you are doing remarkably well. You’re not limping as badly today.”

Avery would pry as much information out of him as she could. She didn’t know what detail might be useful in this one-sided courtship.

“No, that wound has healed, except for a bit of residual stiffness.” Scratching his temple, Cortland tightened his mouth. Something near self-recrimination shadowed his angular features.

Was he ashamed?

“It’s not a hero’s wound either. When the gun exploded, I tripped and fell. A dying French soldier managed to lash me with his bayonet.”

Avery cocked her head and let her gaze rove over his torso. “Have you any other wounds?”

He chuckled, that delicious melodious rumble deep in his chest she’d fallen in love with. “Bloodthirsty wench, aren’t you?”

She lifted her nose in mock offense. “Not at all. I simply want to understand what you have endured.”

They’d reached the water’s edge, and Cortland bent to collect a handful of rocks. He tossed the first into the blue-



green depths, and the water rippled outward after the initial splash.

He faced her.

“Why, Avery?”

## CHAPTER 8



*A bit farther along the shore*

Avery shifted her parasol to the other shoulder to see Cortland's face clearly in the bright sunlight. She puckered her eyebrows in feigned innocence. "Why what?"

"Why are you curious?"

*There it was again.*

That unfathomable sentiment in the depths of his eyes.

He might say one thing, but his remarkable eyes said something different.

"Oh, Cortland. I think you know very well why."

She took a huge gamble. However, if someone wanted something—something magnificent and life-altering—didn't they risk everything?

Avery gave him a cheeky grin meant to disarm and entice before selecting a round, flat rock and sending it expertly skipping across the burbling water.

As disapproval bracketed his mouth, Cortland folded his arms, lifting his eyebrows into a severe line.

He had such a nice mouth.

Not too full or too thin.

Just right for kissing.

What would it be like to kiss him?

To be kissed by him?

Utterly marvelous, for certain.

In the distance, the frolicking children laughed, and farther along the shore, several people had removed their shoes and stockings and waded in the cool water.

It looked splendidly refreshing and reminded her of the many times she'd gone swimming in Scotland.

“Pray tell me, Avery. *What* do I already know?”

Did Cortland realize he'd used her given name?

Avery glanced up and down the shore, and once positive no one would overhear her, she stepped near to him until her parasol covered his head and provided a private sanctuary from prying eyes.

“Because I care about you, silly man.”

There. She'd said it.

Out loud too.

Not that she loved him.

Cortland wasn't ready to hear that yet.

“Well, don't.” he snapped, his countenance warrior fierce.

That took Avery by surprise. “Why not?”

She'd known winning him over wouldn't be easy, but that didn't mean his brusqueness didn't sting.

Did she honestly want to hear his answer?

She dampened her suddenly dry lips with the tip of her tongue.

His expression granite hard, Cortland's gaze followed the innocent movement.

“Because I'm not the man I once was.”

Sighing, he cupped his nape and kicked a pebble.

“What might've been between us is no longer a possibility. I'm not inheriting the earldom.”

“I know you're not, Cortland.”

Avery had known for years.

It mattered naught.

The title had never been important to her.

Surprise skittered across his face at her admission. “You know?”

Did he honestly believe she’d only cared about becoming a countess?

Avery shut her parasol with a waspish click, trying to stubble the indignation welling behind her breastbone. Nonetheless, ire bubbled inside her.

Oh, this obtuse man was so infuriating.

“You insult me, Cortland, if you suggest that I was only ever interested in you inheriting the earldom. It was never about that for me.”

“And just what *was* it about?” he scoffed, bitterness and disenchantment turning his tone raspy and rapier-sharp. “I don’t recall ever declaring myself, Avery. I never approached your uncle. I never hinted or intimated in any way that I meant to ask for your hand. You were scarcely out of the school room—a starry-eyed green girl. We enjoyed a Season. That is all.”

Every word was true.

Each lashed her soul.

His throat working, he absently rubbed his scarred hand and stared out over the glistening water.

“Didn’t you ask yourself why I never answered your letters?”

He was being deliberately cruel to push her away and rejecting her so she’d turn and run.

Avery knew that.

In truth, she’d expected as much.

It still wounded.

Maybe it was too soon to declare herself, but she might never have the opportunity again. Her heart nearly shattered at

the notion, and she bit her cheek to hold back a wail of despair.

“I know—I know—that what we had was special and rare and does not come along every day.” She filled her lungs, striving for poise, praying for the words that would convince him. “I refuse to demean or belittle that gift. It is something to be treasured.”

“You’ve been reading too many romance novels, Avery.”

“I don’t read romances, Cortland.”

An occasional gothic novel didn’t count, nor did Jane Austen’s books.

He shook his head, a sable tendril falling over his forehead.

“Happily ever afters are fanciful tales fabricated by fools for fools.” A rueful smile twisted his mouth, and sadness crimped the corners of his eyes. He flicked the end of her bonnet’s ribbon.

She skewed an eyebrow. “Did you plan that alliteration?”

“Moonlight wishes and midnight kisses aren’t the stuff of real life, Avery. They are nonsensical rubbish. Tarradiddles. Farcical, fluffy, make-believe stories.”

Though every heartbeat ached from his hateful words, Avery refused to be cowed or to retreat.

She’d set upon this undertaking of winning his heart and meant to see it through.

Did a general throw down his sword at the first defeat?

No. The officer might retreat to reassess the situation, but he took to the field again once he’d conceived a new battle plan.

“I’m a broken man, Avery.”

Tiredness, defeat, and hopelessness threaded Cortland’s tone.

“I cannot sleep for the nightmares that haunt me, and I’m fumbling my way about at Northwycke Court, hoping—no,

praying—that I can turn the estate into a profitable enterprise. I confess, I do not honestly know what I'm doing, but I have nothing else. Nothing.”

*You have me.*

*You've always had me.*

“Look me in the eye, Cortland Marlow-Westbrook, and tell me you never felt anything for me. That even now, you feel nothing for me. That you want nothing more to do with me.”

How would she stay upright and continue breathing if he said the dreaded words?

Would they be enough to curtail this self-imposed quest?

Anguish etching his features, he extended his injured hand, palm upward.

“Avery, I have no wish to hurt you.”

A sarcastic laugh escaped her.

He'd done nothing but hurt her for four years, whether he'd intended to or not.

“Say it,” she demanded through stiff lips—dreading the words but standing her ground.

If Cortland truly felt nothing for her, how would she win his heart?

Could she?

Was it even possible?

A wiser woman might give up, but she couldn't.

She must know. Must hear it.

“Why must you be so stubborn?” He shook his head. “I have—”

“Miss Levingtone?” Philina, frantically waving her arms, pelted toward them. “Miss Levingtone! The baby.”

*Baby?*

*Oh, no.*

## CHAPTER 9



*A half dozen excruciating heartbeats later*

Avery exchanged a shocked glance with Cortland. “No. It’s too early.”

Gasping, her hands planted on her knees and shoulders heaving, Philina croaked, “The duke sent for you. The babe is coming.”

“Justina. No. No.” Avery lifted her skirts, uncaring that she exposed her ankles and calves, and dashed toward the coaches and gigs.

She must get to Justina.

Stumbling to a stop, she glanced at the row of equipages.

Homer, one of the footmen, guided his horse toward her. “Miss Levingtone, the duchess’s time is at hand. You are to come at once.”

Why hadn’t Baxter sent a coach?

Men didn’t always think clearly when their wives were giving birth. When Justina’s time with Emile came, Baxter’s note had said *Now*.

That had been it—one word.

At least this time, Baxter had sent a footman.

How was Avery to get to Wicksens House, for pity’s sake?

Atop the mare, behind Homer?

That ought to send tongues wagging to next June.

Well, she didn't give a horse's hind end.

She stepped forward, prepared to do just that.

Cortland grasped her elbow.

"I'll take you, Avery."

How she wanted to refuse him, but now was not the time to get on her high horse. Her attention flitted to Homer for a second. Not the time to get on any horse, for that matter.

Cortland's conveyance was the last in and, therefore, the easiest and quickest to turn around.

"Thank you." She waved Homer away as she clambered into Cortland's curricule without assistance. "Quickly. Return home. Tell them I'm on my way."

Giving a short nod, Homer kicked the horse's sides and flew toward Wicksens House.

The house lay only fifteen minutes away. Yet the plodding clip-clop of the aged nag caused every minute to crawl by in agonizingly slow motion.

Cortland remained silent, his expression contemplative as he expertly guided the old horse along the track. Once they reached the brick courtyard and the vehicle stopped, Avery hopped to the ground, eschewing the step.

"Thank you again, Cortland."

Even though Justina's labor took precedence, Avery hadn't forgotten that Cortland had not answered her direct question.

She'd made the top stair before he spoke.

"Tell San Sebastian to contact me at his convenience about looking at the horseflesh he's interested in selling me."

Avery half-turned, darting her glance to the well-maintained stables and corral, then back to Cortland. "You're buying horses from Baxter?"

A forearm resting on his knee, he hitched a shoulder. "He knew I was in the market and made the offer."

Baxter's stables were full of prime horseflesh.



Cortland could do far worse than acquire his animals from the duke.

With a nod, she gained another two stairs.

“Avery?”

She must get inside.

Justina needed her.

Nevertheless, Cortland’s husky tone mesmerized her.

Slowly, afraid of what she’d see when she faced him, she pivoted on the landing—terrified of what he’d say.

Fisting her hands around her still-raised skirts, she managed a surprisingly steady, “Yes?”

“You weren’t wrong. There was something between us four years ago.”

But?

There was assuredly a *but*.

She could see it in the sadness and regret haunting his eyes and shadowing his handsome, beleaguered features.

“But.”

And there it is.

“There cannot be anything anymore, Avery. Please understand. I’m asking you to let it go. Let me go. Find someone else. For both of our sakes.”

Avery stared at him for a timeless moment.

She’d asked him for the truth, and there it was.

Blunt and as straightforward as old, toothless Mrs. McDougal in Aberdeen.

She forced herself to meet Cortland’s tormented eyes, and her composure marshaled, Avery summoned every ounce of bravery and fortitude she possessed.

“I’m just supposed to stop loving you, Cortland?”

He flinched before his countenance grew shuttered.

“Just like that because you said so?” She snapped her fingers. Drat, she’d left her gloves at the picnic. “Because you’re afraid or a coward or...”

She threw her hands in the air.

“Or I don’t know what.”

God help her. She sounded desperate and frantic and not just a little mad.

“Well, let me tell you, Cortland Marlow-Westbrook. Love, real abiding, soul-deep love, doesn’t just stop. It doesn’t blow away with the next puff of wind like dandelion down or evaporate like tea spilled on a hot hearth, leaving no evidence that it ever existed.”

Her Scots accent tinged her words.

It only happened when she became truly upset.

Avery put her hand on her chest. “Like breathing or a heart beating, love gives life, and only death can end it. And I’m not positive that true love *ever* dies.”

Expression stricken, Cortland opened his mouth, but Avery shot her hand out to stop him.

She would have her say, by Juniper.

Now, before she lost her nerve or the opportunity never presented itself again. Before whatever he had to say stripped her of all hope.

“You might be able to stop loving me. But call me a fool.”  
*Fool. Fool. Fool. “I shall never stop loving you.”*

## CHAPTER 10



*A few days later*

*Wicksens House*

As Cortland neared Wicksens House's stables, he cast a half-wary, half-yearning sideways glance toward the mansion situated majestically on a knoll. The morning sunlight cast the house in a golden glow.

What was Avery doing?

Had she seen him ride up?

How could he long to see her and at the same time dread an encounter with her?

Unforgivable blackguard that he was, he'd broken her heart not once but twice.

Afraid to respond after her heartrending declaration of love had left him wounded and bleeding, he'd faced forward, clenched his jaw, and driven away without a word. Had he stayed a second longer, selfish cur that he was, he would've leaped from the curricule, hauled Avery into his arms, and begged her to be his for all time.

Nevertheless, as the well-maintained drive bent and disappeared into the forest, he couldn't resist glancing over his shoulder.

She had remained in the same position—statue-like—frozen in pain, disbelief, and humiliation. Across the space, he felt the heartache radiating off her in great, unmerciful,

undulating waves and detected moisture on her alabaster cheeks as her attention remained fixed on him.

As if even in her agony, so precious was he to her, she must watch until he disappeared.

A moment later, the frazzled butler had flung the door open and spoken to her.

With a stiff nod, she'd slowly turned around and crossed the porch, her movements that of an old crone rather than the spirited woman Cortland adored.

He'd done that to her.

Heartlessly and callously stripped Avery of her *joie de vivre*—joy of living. To make certain she stopped pursuing him—stopped loving him.

In that instant, something had withered and died inside of Cortland too.

No, he had killed it with his cruelty. His weakness. His fears.

And sweet, unique, fiery Avery was lost to him forever.

If only he had something to offer her except years of hard work, frugality, and the possibility that one day, Northwycke would be a self-sufficient, profitable estate.

Cortland suspected Avery would've eagerly accepted those terms because she loved with pure, unconditional love. He'd spurned the treasure she'd offered, the whole while telling himself it was for *her* good.

These past days, after much soul-searching, he'd concluded that justification was a poltroon's excuse.

No one ever promised love was easy, that the roads life took one down weren't bumpy.

But to have a soulmate at your side, someone who would stand with you, support and encourage you as you endured those bumps and bruises—that was beyond value.

Cortland slid off Sully and handed a nearby stable hand the horse's reins. The gelding blew out a horsey breath and

swished his tail. After today, he and Sally—the other horse past her prime—would enjoy their dotage and neither carry him nor pull his curricule about any longer.

“Make sure he has something to drink, will you?”

“Aye, sir.” The lad grinned and shook his shaggy head. “I’ll treat the old fellow right well.”

San Sebastian must be inside the stables.

Cortland strode into the welcoming shade, inhaling the scent of horses, hay, liniment, and leather.

He’d heard via the servants—Cortland’s new butler was second cousin to San Sebastian’s housekeeper—that the duke and duchess had another healthy son.

It seemed good fortune fell into the laps of some, while others... Well, those poor souls rattled through life always wondering what might’ve been.

He’d had a bit of unexpected good fortune himself.

Brixxton had moved his cattle onto his lands without argument. His compliance had been unexpected, but after a discussion with Albertoth, Cortland understood why. If Cortland wanted to be vindictive, it was within his legal rights to demand compensation from Brixxton for his cattle grazing Westbrook lands for six years.

It amounted to a significant sum.

Brixxton had a sullied reputation in Reabridge for being a skinflint, pinch-penny, and cheat, but he’d not challenged Cortland’s authority. There was no need to involve the assistant magistrate, who’d returned to Reabridge with the welcome news that Sadie Yardley had indeed eloped.

Arching his back, Cortland inhaled a deep breath.

Since moving to Reabridge, he’d grown stronger in body, spirit, and demeanor.

He scarcely limped at all and even slept through the night now, though whether from the herbal tincture his housekeeper

brewed for him each night or because his soul had finally found a measure of peace, he could not say.

Pausing in the spacious barn, Cortland glanced around.

No sign of San Sebastian.

He flicked open his pocket watch.

Two minutes past eleven.

Replacing his watch, he leaned a shoulder against a stall, prepared to wait.

Musing over Avery's heartbreaking declaration also caused a great deal of self-examination.

She wasn't wrong.

Cortland did love her—couldn't stop loving her even if he wanted to.

And by God, he bloody well didn't want to.

The truth was, if she'd still have him and didn't object to the challenges restoring an estate demanded, he would ask her to marry him.

"Forgive my tardiness, Cortland."

His grace strode into the stables, sans a waistcoat and jacket. "When I told my eldest son that I had a meeting in the stables, he insisted on a game of ponies before I came down."

A bit of his Scottish brogue slipped through.

He grinned. "I make a deuced good pony if I don't say so myself."

A stab of envy pricked Cortland, but he swiftly tamped it down.

Just because he might never experience fatherhood didn't mean he'd entertain jealousy.

"I've only just arrived," he assured the duke.

"Let me show you the horses." His grace extended an arm, and Cortland fell into step beside him.

San Sebastian was being awfully amiable. Suspiciously so.

Was he unaware of Cortland's latest unfortunate exchange with Avery?

Out of consideration for the duchess's health, Avery might not have told them.

"They're in the corral. In truth, I hate to part with them, but I honestly do not need as much horseflesh as I have. It's unfair to the beasts. They need exercise and attention. I'm most particular who I sell them to, however."

As long as the asking prices weren't too exorbitant, Cortland hoped to gain a few animals for Northwycke Court today. Due to his family's generosity, Cortland had sufficient funds available, but prudence and thrift were always good guides.

The less he spent, the less he'd have to pay back. And he would pay back every single cent.

In less than an hour, Cortland had purchased five exceptional horses; one for riding, two for pulling conveyances, and two for working the fields. He couldn't have done better if he'd attended Tattersalls' auction.

"Thank you, Your Grace. You didn't exaggerate. They are indeed high steppers."

Cortland extended his hand, and his grace clasped it in a firm embrace.

"Baxter, please." The duke cast an approving glance around. "I don't stand on formality, particularly in the country. It's my Scots blood, ye ken. Drives the English crazy."

He chuckled, well pleased with himself.

Cortland chuckled too.

The duke wasn't wrong.

Among prestigious English social circles, one didn't bend certain rules. Addressing a duke by his given name was the worst sort of *faux pas*.

"I'll have my men deliver the horses this afternoon, if that works for you." The duke slanted his head, a question in his

gaze.

“Yes. The stables aren’t completely rebuilt, but the refurbished portion is large enough for them.” Cortland had prioritized the rebuilding of the stables.

The manor house could wait.

San Sebastian—Baxter—scratched his jaw.

“By the by, Cortland, I had all the horses reshod last month. There’s an excellent farrier in town—a father and daughter, though Gwen Hughes does most of the farriering these days. They do a bit of smithy work too. Nails, hinges, hooks, and the like.”

“Excellent.” Cortland wouldn’t have the expense of shoeing the horses straightaway.

“Let’s go to the house and sign the bills of sale, shall we?” Baxter grinned.

Avery wouldn’t like that.

But perhaps Cortland would have a chance to speak to her alone.

He must speak to her. To apologize and pray she could forgive him for his bull-headedness. It was the most he dared hope for.

“If he’s awake, I’ll introduce you to my new son.” The man fairly glowed with pride.

Fatherhood. Something Cortland wouldn’t likely experience.

What woman wanted a crippled pauper for a husband?

Besides, there was only one woman he’d ever love.

The duke slapped him on the shoulder.

“You must stay for luncheon, Cortland.”

San Sebastian was being a trifle *too* accommodating.

Cortland’s suspicion burst into full bloom.

The duke *was* up to something.



“Forgive me for my impertinence, Your Grace, but you are as subtle as a purple pig in a tutu.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Baxter cupped his nape. “May I speak frankly?”

“I prefer it.”

Cortland stopped and waited for the duke to say his peace.

Scrunching his forehead, expression contemplative, the duke clasped his hands behind his back.

In the meadow, a horse whinnied, and another answered the call.

Overhead, a hawk screeched in the cloudless sky, and still, the duke remained silent.

As if choosing his words with care, he drew in a lungful of air. “My duchess and I want Avery to be happy. She’s pined for you for four years, though she’s independent and would fervently deny it.”

Avery would.

“I realize it’s not our place,” Baxter said. “But her grace and I have discussed it at length. We think you should know. Avery’s leaving at the week’s end to return to her uncle’s in Scotland. We’ve asked her to stay, but she’s determined to go.”

No. No!

The pain couldn’t have driven the air from his lungs or been worse than if a horse had kicked Cortland in the gut.

“Where?” The word came out a harsh croak. He cleared his throat. As if signaling its agreement, a frog croaked from the nearby pond. “Where is she now?”

Cortland could not let her go—not broken and dejected.

“She was in the rose garden when I left the house.” The duke pointed toward the back of the house. “It’s beyond the hedgerow, just there. Past the boxwood maze.”

“Signing the bills of sale will have to wait, Baxter. I have something more important I must do.”

He took off at a dead run.

*To hell with pride and dignity.*

Neither would fill and warm his bed, heal and nurture his soul, or love him for eternity.

Whatever it took, Cortland must convince Avery to stay.

Not only to stay but to marry him and make Reabridge their home.

## CHAPTER 11



*Five minutes later*

*Wicksens House rose gardens*

Avery trailed her fingertips through the burbling three-layered fountain. Today would be hot again. Already the temperature rose, and the clock striking the noon hour had filtered outdoors through open windows and terrace doors.

Earlier, Justina had taken Brody to the nursery to nurse the wee bairn.

Feeling discontented, out of sorts, and out of place, as Avery had since deciding to return to Scotland and packing most of her belongings, she wandered into the fragrant gardens.

Justina and Baxter would remain at Wicksens House another couple of months until they were certain Brody could travel, and then they'd leave as well. This visit wasn't to have lasted several months, but Justina's and the babe's health had warranted a longer stay.

Not so long ago—mere weeks, in truth—Avery had considered making Reabridge her home. Something about this quaint township with its rustic buildings, arched bridge, charming market center, and kind people beckoned to her. However, now that Cortland lived nearby and had made it clear there would never be a future together for them, she couldn't stay.

She wouldn't subject herself to that torment, the pain and suffering.

She'd had enough.

Avery was good and done—defeated.

From her bedchamber window, she'd seen Cortland arrive.

Her traitorous heart had jumped with unfettered joy before tumbling to her feet, where it lay gasping and writhing in agony.

Unrequited love was the cruelest of emotions.

When he'd turned toward the house, she'd gasped and retreated into the floral draperies lest he see her spying on him.

So much for courage and fortitude.

With everything in her, Avery had believed she *could* win Cortland's heart. She would've pursued him too, but he'd made it abundantly clear that she wasted her time. The chase had been humiliatingly short-lived.

There came the point when one had to accept reality.

To do otherwise was insanity.

Cortland had determined he did not want a future with her.

Her love didn't matter.

His didn't either.

*Their* love didn't matter. He viewed it as an obstacle, an impediment to the life he wanted to build at Northwycke Court.

Without her.

What did one say to that?

It was time Avery faced the truth, no matter how painful or how much she wanted to deny it.

Cortland was lost to her.

Likely had been for years.

It was time to release the silly, enduring hope she'd clutched like a drowning woman thrown a ratty, unfurling rope. She opened her palm, letting the cool water flow over her fingers.

No more holding on.

After turning from the fountain, she crossed the flagstone patio to stop and smell a pink rose. She fingered the velvety petal as she contemplated leaving Reabridge.

Several house sparrows hopped in and out of the shrubberies around the edge of the slate pavers. One intrepid songbird flew to the topmost layer of the fountain for a bath.

Avery might take Mack with her when she left. The dog would make good company, and she fretted no one would care for him after she was gone.

“Avery?”

Every muscle in her body went taut and pain cleaved her heart.

Why couldn't Cortland have just left?

Why did he need to seek her out after his brusque behavior?

How much more could she bear and not dissolve into a blubbering fool?

“Go away, Cortland.”

She refused to turn around and feast her gaze upon him. He'd see the love she could no longer disguise—would not hide anymore.

“No. I cannot.” His tenor thickened, almost as if *he* struggled with his emotions. “Not until I've had my say. Then, if you ask me to, I shall leave.”

Dropping her chin to her chest, she permitted her shoulders to slump.

Why, Lord? Why?

I'm not strong enough for this. Not anymore.

“You were abundantly clear, Cortland. You asked me to let you go, and I have done that. I'm leaving in a few days, and I doubt we shall ever see each other again.”

Though it eviscerated her to face that truth.

His boot heels clicked on the stones as he approached. When he stood directly behind her, so close she could smell his woody cologne, he whispered raggedly, “I was wrong, Avery. About everything. I kept every single letter you sent. I still have them.”

A tiny seed of hope tried to take root, but she ruthlessly stomped on it and ground it under her heel.

No more.

Hope deferred made the heart sick, and she was heartsick. *Yes, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*

He sighed and gently took her shoulders and rotated her so that Avery faced him. He lifted her chin with his forefinger until her eyes met his tumultuous brown gaze. A storm brewed in the depths, but she couldn’t conceive the source.

Folding her arms across her chest, she canted her head. Avery would not make this easy for him. He’d spared her no mercy or grace. Simply holding her tongue against the scold tapping at the back of her teeth took all of her determination.

He traced his gaze over her features, a yearning, visual caress, and she almost yielded.

“For four years, I’ve tried to justify my behavior. Validate the many reasons I’ve believed we cannot be together.” A rueful grin pulled his mouth sideways. “And you know what? Every single one fades in the light of one unarguable, indisputable, irrevocable, enduring truth. I love you.”

Averting her gaze, Avery swallowed.

*Drat, the blasted man.*

Now he said the words her heart and soul had coveted for so long?

What, precisely, did that change?

Nothing.

Not a dashed thing.

In truth, Cortland’s confession made things worse.

“Look at me, Avery. Please.”

The last seemed an afterthought, but he asked with such tenderness that she couldn't refuse.

He held up his injured hand. “You've seen my hand. I can use it but shall never have the same capacity as I did.” He then stuck out his leg. “My leg fares better, but my gait may always be uneven. I don't know if I can run, dance, or do a thousand other things, but I mean to try.”

She'd never cared about his injuries other than how he'd suffered. A hand and leg did not the man make.

“Why are you telling me this?” she whispered.

Rather than answer her, he went on.

“I suffer from horrid nightmares, though they've abated a trifle of late. I cringe when I hear gunshots and do not know if that will ever change. Restoring Northwycke Court will take years of hard work and dedication, and even then, there is no guarantee I'll succeed.”

“I ask you again, Cortland. Why are you telling me this? It changes nothing.”

Because none of those things mattered to her. She would have accepted Cortland blind, without legs, and poor as a pauper.

The smile he bestowed upon her would've melted iron.

How could a mere female withstand such seductive charm?

“I want you to know exactly what you are getting—what you are agreeing to should you consent to marry me.”

Avery had no doubt she looked and sounded like an idiot.

Her jaw fell open, and her eyes went wide as saucers. She shook her head over and over as she made inarticulate sounds.

Cortland's face fell into devastated creases.

“I'm too late then.” He glanced over her shoulder, his eyes haunted and jaw tense. “I'd hoped... But I understand, darling.

I do. I waited too long and inflicted too much angst.”

He cleared his throat, a rough rasp resonating through the tranquil garden.

Avery tried to collect her scattered wits, but the stupid things fluttered around like inebriated butterflies.

*Cortland said...*

*He wanted to...*

*Agree to marry...*

*Good heavens.*

Cortland wanted to marry her.

A small closed-lip smile framed his mouth as he skimmed a knuckle over her cheek.

“I hope you find happiness, Avery. I pray you are able to forgive me for the pain and suffering I caused you. And when you think of me, know that I love you. Have always loved you.”

He kissed her forehead with such reverence that tears sprang to her eyes, then made to turn.

*Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes, her heart shouted.*

Avery sprang forward and grabbed his arm.

“Don’t go. I...” She laughed. Pure, unfettered jubilation. “I was taken aback.”

Astonished. Flabbergasted. Flummoxed. Ecstatic.

And a hundred other euphoric emotions.

“Yes.” She touched his jaw.

“Yes?” Incredulity tempered with hope lit his eyes. “You will marry me. Just as I am?”

“Yes.” Avery nodded, unable to control the exuberant grin stretching from ear to ear. “Yes. The sooner, the better.”

It was Cortland’s turn to laugh. It welled out his chest and sent the birds to flight.



“She said yes!”

He picked up Avery and swung her in a wide circle, raining kisses on her face.

Breathless, giddy, and overflowing with joy, Avery clung to him.

At last, he lowered her to the ground, holding her steady but not releasing her.

“I love you, Avery. Everything about you, from your smile to your stubbornness to your blue eyes I get lost in every time I look at you.”

“I know you do.” And she did because she loved Cortland like that too. “And I love you. Now kiss me, silly man. I’ve waited quite long enough.”

“With the greatest pleasure.”

As he settled his mouth over hers and Avery’s eyes slid shut, her last coherent thought before passion and bliss overtook her was, *moonlight wishes do come true.*

## EPILOGUE



*September 18, 1815*

*Reabridge Town Green*

*Harvest Moon Festival*

With his wife of an entire week on his arm, Cortland watched the Harvest Moon Festival's Morris dancers' parade. The bells on their shoes rang out merrily, as did the calls of the townsfolk cheering them on. Handkerchiefs waving, the dancers skipped, hopped, turned, and kicked in their colorful costumes.

Woofing in excitement, Mack, now wearing a leather collar that pronounced him a vagrant no longer, ran in circles before darting over to sit at Avery's feet.

"Good boy."

She slipped him a piece of Cheshire cheese from Martin Bromelton's farm and received a sloppy lick upon her hand as a reward.

Cortland hoped to one day supply milk for the tasty cheese too. Martin Bromelton had been invaluable in helping Cortland select a quality dairy herd. He owed the man much.

Across the green, the Duke and Duchess of San Sebastian, their sons, and the boys' nurses also watched the festivities. Catching Cortland's eye, the duke dipped his chin in greeting and approval.

The Dutchess of San Sebastian chatted with her aunt, the Duchess of Heatherston, whose cornflower blue gown didn't

quite hide her swelling belly. Her doting husband, Tobias Forsythe, Duke of Heatherston, spoke with Mr. Albertoth.

Perhaps soon, Avery's tummy would burgeon with their babe. Cortland's heart skipped a beat and settled into an irregular cadence at just how that would come about. He glanced down to find her watching him.

"You're staring at me again, Mrs. Marlow-Westbrook."

She gave him an unabashed grin, the amulet she'd received upon entering the festival glinting in the sunlight. "I adore seeing you happy. It makes me happy."

"Well, I am very, very happy."

He pulled her in for a quick kiss.

"Cortland. Behave."

The mirth dancing in her eyes and her pleased smile belied any real disapproval.

"I have a mind to find myself something to eat." Cortland guided her toward the row of makeshift stands. "And find something cool to drink."

Though the middle of September, the day promised to be quite warm.

Several booths offered savory and sweet treats, and Cortland intended to sample each and every one. However, he would save plenty of room for the harvest supper tonight. San Sebastian had donated a hog, and even now, it lay in a pit cooking away.

"I have to judge the corn doll contest at one." Avery peeked up at him from beneath her wide-brimmed bonnet. The same one she'd worn that day he'd first seen her in the apothecary shop. "I want to see if any women are willing to share their recipes from the baking contest. That apple pound cake that Mrs. Kemble entered is beyond scrumptious."

She pointed to a stand about halfway down the row. "Her daughters are selling slices over there. Seed cakes, tarts, and apple dumplings too."

“Lead on, fair lady.” He slipped an arm about her waist. Such shows of affection were frowned upon in London, but here in the country, it was commonplace to see couples exchange a kiss or hug. Or two.

Yes, country life suited Cortland well, indeed.

“Avery?”

“Hmm?”

“Come with me.” He pulled her behind an ancient oak and, before she could protest, drew her into his embrace and kissed her.

With a soft sigh, she twined her arms around his shoulders, and they spent several blissful moments exploring each other’s mouths.

“Watcha doin’?”

Jerking away from Avery, Cortland pivoted until he found the source of the question. A plump little redhead licking a candy stick.

“Does she have somfin in her eye too?” Squinting at Avery, the little girl tilted her head. “That happens a lot to my sister, Cora. She always finds a boy to help her get it out though.”

“I’ll just bet she does,” Cortland murmured from the side of his mouth.

Avery burst into giggles behind her hand.

“Bye.” With a sticky wave, the child skipped away, her red hair bouncing with each step.

“Lord, she’s adorable.” A tinge of wistfulness filtered into Avery’s voice.

“We’ll have our own soon enough, darling.” Cortland winked and gave her a smoldering smile.

“Indeed, we will.” Her blue eyes went soft at the corners. “That makes me think. I saw a stunning cradle earlier. It would be perfect for the nursery.”

Even now, a babe might be growing in her tummy—his babe.

And to think, he'd almost thrown this life away. Stupid pride had nearly caused Cortland to forfeit a love so enduring it might've been a gift from the Almighty.

“Come. I'll show you.” She held out her hand, and he took it, twining his fingers with hers. “He had several other pieces that might suit the house well.”

Cortland's uncle, the Duke of Latham, had deeded him Northwycke Court as a wedding present. With Avery's help and insistence that she be allowed to use her substantial inheritance to refurbish the manor, it had truly begun to feel like their home.

With Avery at his side, forever and always, he *was* home.

At last.

THE END



When I introduced Avery and Cortland in *When a Duke Desires a Lass*, I had an inkling they might one day have their own story. Then, when I was inspired to write *Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides*, I knew they would! I mentioned a few other characters in this story who have their own books: Justina and Baxter Bathhurst, the Duke and Duchess of San Sebastian in *Wedding her Christmas Duke*, and Tobias and Emily Forsythe, the Duke and Duchess of Heatherston in *When a Duke Desires a Lass*. A detail that isn't often included in Regency historicals is that, on occasion, peerage titles descended along the female's line rather than the male's. It wasn't common, but historical precedence is recorded. Though the herbs I mentioned for treating the Duchess of San Sebastian's premature labor are used as natural remedies for female ailments, before taking any natural remedy, you should seek the advice of a physician. To stay abreast of other

upcoming releases and author news, visit my author world at <https://collettecameron.com>.

# SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS FOR COLLETTE CAMERON

You can learn more about Collette Cameron at these social media links:

**Amazon:** <http://amazon.com/author/collettecameron.com/>

**BookBub:** <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/collette-cameron>

**Facebook:** <http://facebook.com/collettecameronauthor>

**Goodreads:** <https://www.goodreads.com/collettecameron>

**Instagram:** <https://instagram.com/collettecameronwriter/>

**YouTube:** <http://www.youtube.com/c/ColletteCameronAuthor>

**Newsletter:** <http://bit.ly/TheRegencyRoseGift>

# ABOUT COLLETTE CAMERON®



*USA Today* Bestselling, award-winning author COLLETTE CAMERON® writes Scottish and Regency historical romance novels featuring dashing rogues, rakes, scoundrels, and the strong heroines who reform them. Blessed with an overactive and witty muse that won't stop whispering new romantic romps in her ear, she's lived in Oregon her entire life, although she dreams of living in Scotland part-time. A confessed Cadbury chocoholic, you'll always find a dash of inspiration and a pinch of humor in her sweet-to-spicy timeless romances®.

Subscribe to Collette's newsletter at Newsletter: [http://bit.ly/  
TheRegencyRoseGift](http://bit.ly/TheRegencyRoseGift)





# THE MORNING LIGHT



CAROLINE WARFIELD

# THE MORNING LIGHT

## CAROLINE WARFIELD

A physician, Adam Wagner is meant to save lives, not take them, but war called, and the ones he could not save haunt him. His visions and nightmares after Waterloo won't stop and the horror of it keeps him from Meg Barlow. He was close to proposing before he left. Now he can only protect her by staying away. She doesn't understand how Adam could turn his back on her so thoroughly, but she isn't about to let him get away with it. She needs him. So does his daughter.

# CHAPTER 1



*September 1815*

“*W*ake up, Adam. You’re needed.”

Adam Wagner hated it when his wife woke him in the middle of the night. Treating patients in daylight was difficult enough. Late night calls meant trouble. *Go away Agnes...* Except his wife was dead. Had been for three years.

A hand shook him roughly and the smell of strong coffee tickled his nose. “Now, Adam. Wake up.”

Adam blinked up into the frowning face of Jack Wrath his... He couldn’t remember just what Jack was. Keeper, he suspected. He groaned when he flung his legs over the bed and sat.

Jack pushed the coffee—made black, thick, and strong the army way—under his nose. Adam gagged. “Drink it my friend. This sounds important. A lad is here from the Barlow estate. Tenant’s wife struggling to deliver.” Sympathy strengthened Jack’s words. The man was nothing if not compassionate.

*Important. Of course, it is. Late night calls always are.*

Adam took a sip. When it didn’t come back up, he sipped again. “Bread,” he said. It would settle his stomach. He hoped. Or absorb all the cheap wine he’d drunk. He set down the mug and pulled on his trousers.

He finished dressing and picked up the mug. When it didn’t spill, and he didn’t stagger on the way down the stairs,

he considered it a good sign. Jack met him at the bottom with buttered bread and urged him into the chair near the door.

“I’ll fetch the gig,” Jack said.

Adam’s solid stone house had four rooms on the ground floor. One served as a surgery and one as a waiting area where a boy Adam recalled as Jim Smithson’s son paced. He ran up when Adam sat.

“You need to come, Dr. Wagner. Sal is in a bad way. Ma says the baby is sideways and can’t come,” the boy pleaded.

Adam shuddered. He’d handled many deliveries for camp followers in the army. This sort never went well. “Smithson, is it?” Adam asked between bites. “What is your name?”

“Joey, sir. Joseph.”

“Watch at the door, Joey, and tell me when Jack brings the gig around.”

Darkness engulfed them minutes later when man and boy toiled through the sleeping little town of Reabridge and out the north road toward Barlow Hall. Adam’s lantern and the bone deep memory of a man who’d grown up in these parts saw them through the murky lane to Jim Smithson’s cottage.

“‘Bout time you got here,” Smithson spat from the shadows near his door.

Adam ignored him, entering the cottage, drawn by the moans of a woman in labor. Two other women stood by the bed. One, Sal’s mother, gazed at him as if he were the Savior himself come to rescue them. The other examined him with misgiving.

He inclined his head to the second woman. “Miss Barlow,” he said.

Meg didn’t return a greeting. Once she would have greeted him with delight. Now he saw only wounded disappointment, likely worried he had turned into some sort of drunken incompetent. She was only half right.

“I called Miss Meg when my Sal went into labor, but this has been a dreadful one. Dreadful,” the mother said.

“I’ve handled routine births, Adam, but this is far outside my ability,” Meg Barlow said, turning her attention to the bed. “The baby is—”

“Transverse. I can see that,” Adam said gently probing the patient’s belly.

Meg, his Meg—no, not his any longer—could manage most births. This one would challenge any midwife or doctor. Experience and learning broke through his dark mood, even in the face of her obvious disapproval. The gifted doctor in Adam rose to the surface. “We’ll have to turn it.”

“How?” both women asked simultaneously.

“Help me get her up on her knees,” he said.

Sal appeared to be no older than sixteen. Of a father he’d seen no sign, but he brushed that aside as irrelevant. He put his mind entirely to helping this struggling baby.

He spoke gently to Sal who groaned and complained. “I know it hurts, but we need to give the little one room to move.”

Meg watched him with concern but did as he bid her. After a struggle, they had the young woman in position, supporting her head with a mount of pillows. Adam rubbed her back when another contraction seized her. When it passed, he spoke again. “Now, rock. Between every pang, rock back and forth on your knees. We want that baby to move.”

“Miss Barlow, you didn’t bring ice by any chance, did you?” he asked several minutes later.

“No. It wouldn’t have occurred to me,” she said puzzled by the way he rubbed Sal’s belly.

“There’s a cold spring out back,” Sal’s mother said.

“Excellent. Send Joey to wet some towels,” Adam said, rocking his patient with a hand on her back.

Joey returned with a frigid towel; exactly what Adam needed. He ran his hand around his patient’s belly until he located the head, gratified to feel that it had already shifted. Perhaps this wouldn’t end in catastrophe after all. He placed

the frigid towel over the little head. A sudden reaction to the cold brought a smile to his lips. "That's it my darling," he crooned, "Move yourself. Your mother is waiting."

"Miss Barlow, if you would stand on the other side, I believe you could feel the baby's hind end. Do you feel it?"



Meg did as he asked. She ran a hand gently over Sal's side, and then did it again more firmly. *There*. A firm round bump met her hand. "Yes, I feel it."

"Try to encourage it upward. The cold startled our little fellow, and he moved. We want to encourage him to move the way we want. Just put your hand under the rear and nudge it gently."

Adam's technique, an approach Meg had never witnessed before, fascinated her. It even drove aside the familiar pain his presence brought since his return from Waterloo.

It seemed an eternity. Sal rocked, Adam applied cold towels, and Meg nudged. But ever so slowly they felt movement. Adam suggested Sal rise to her knees while the nudging continued until after one particularly hard contraction the baby spasmed and slipped into place.

Meg gasped in amazement. "It worked! I didn't think—" When he entered, she had smelled the drink on him, and almost despaired. He must have been more sober than she realized.

"Ah ye of little faith," Adam drawled. "Now let's see if this one is ready to greet the world."

Within the hour, Sal Smithson was delivered of a squalling son, and Meg sagged with relief. Adam washed up and pronounced them both fit.

He paused at the door with his coat over his arm. In the light of dawn, she saw no sign of the green pallor she feared. Nor had his hands shaken while he worked. Nor had his mind failed him. His broad shoulders still filled out his shirt nicely



—too well for her peace of mind. She knew the signs of the habitual drunkard well. If living with her father taught her nothing else, it taught her that. Adam's descent into the wine bottle since his return to Reabridge horrified her, but the recent origin of his drinking gave her a thread of hope. Adam Wagner might do after all.

*I hope so. The town certainly needs him.* She swallowed hard. *I need him.*

At least she believed so. He'd been on the brink of proposing to her before he left for Belgium and the carnage at Waterloo, but, since his return, he treated her like a stranger.

She watched him drive away in his gig. *Annie needs him too.*

His daughter had been left in the care of Earl Barlow's mother, the dowager countess, since spring when Adam departed for Belgium. Meg, the earl's cousin and dependent, had taken charge of the girl. Annie deserved Adam's love and attention. Meg made up her mind to see that the little one, at least, got it.

## CHAPTER 2



The vicar's cheerful greeting, as Adam drove back to his house, irritated Adam even more than the damned sun irritated his eyes. He wasn't in the mood for sunshine and cheer. The smell of bacon and fresh bread interested him much more. Mrs. Miller, his housekeeper and cook, glanced up and then back to her work. She knew better than to speak to him in this mood. He sank to a chair at the table with a cup of coffee.

"From your grim visage I gather it was a difficult night." Jack joined him in the kitchen.

Adam grunted. "It came right in the end. Sal Smithson has a healthy baby boy, God help him."

"Spare me details." Jack smiled up at Mrs. Miller, and accepted a cup of coffee with thanks.

"The Barlow cousin attempted to assist before I arrived, but the birth was well beyond her capability," Adam said.

"Get in your way, did she?" Jack's mouth twitched with amusement.

"Some help actually," Adam muttered.

"You sound surprised."

"I shouldn't have been. She's a competent midwife. She even spared me the temperance lecture she had on the tip of her tongue when I arrived."

Jack studied the well laden plate of eggs and bacon Mrs. Miller laid before him, avoiding the need to reply.

Adam covered a wide yawn with one hand. “I hope the surgery is quiet today. If I finish by noon, I’m back to bed. Do you have any plans? Are you going to look for work?”

“I might. I’ll have to find out,” Jack said. “Do you know the farrier? Hughes?”

“Hughes? Not well. Good reputation for his work, but a bit of a tyrant in his family. His son ran off with a French émigré, I hear. Fought his father about his choice of bride and joined the army.” It happened long before Agnes died, six or more years ago.

“Hughes isn’t running the place now. His daughter is. At least, she’s the one who shod our horses. Hughes—from what I saw his mind is going. Not as bad as Pilgrim Bridgeman, my old gaffer. But close.” Jack frowned.

“You told me Bridgeman lost reality completely. He didn’t even know people.”

“Yep. That’s right. Couldn’t talk beyond a few grunts. Didn’t know his own children. Tabby used to get us older boys to take it in turn to watch him, because you never knew when he would wander off. At least Hughes still recognizes his own daughter, and he can talk.”

Adam pondered that a moment. “But, why are you asking? What do you plan to do?”

Jack looked around for Mrs. Miller, but she busied herself over the dishes. He leaned across the table and spoke quietly. “She needs a hand, Adam. She’s juggling the farrier business, caring for her father, looking after the place. She doesn’t seem to have a servant. Unless I miss my guess, she’s trying to hide her father’s condition. I already know, because I was there when he cut his foot and was able to keep him quiet while she bandaged it. I can help. Even with my useless arm, I can keep Hughes out of trouble, clean the house, put the kettle on, that sort of thing.”

Adam sat back and sighed. The fool let kindness rule his common sense, as Adam had reason to know. Adam could think of several outcomes, all of them bad. For one, some

folks would see Jack's idea as interference—and it would be. Worse. Dotty father? Unmarried man in her house all day? Bad idea. He debated saying so, but Jack wouldn't listen. "Will they pay you?" he asked instead.

"I don't need the money, and I do need something to do. No offense, Adam, but I'm not much use to you. I can't stop you drinking yourself to death, and I'd make a lousy surgeon's assistant.

Adam clamped his jaw shut, staring into space. *Jack refuses to let up.* "Do what you want."

"I'll be off, then," Jack said, pushing back from the table. "I reckon I'll just install myself and see what happens." He raised his voice. "Ta, Mrs. Miller. You be good, now."

"Damned do-gooder," Adam muttered into his coffee.

The housekeeper, who had leaned over to clear the table heard that. "He is a good and kind man, all due respect, Mr. Wagner. What would you have done if he hadn't seen you home from Belgium?"

*What indeed. I'd still be on the floor of that tavern in Brussels. Maybe he should have left me there.*

Pounding on the door interrupted the silence. Patients. *Hopefully genuine ills not malingering. With luck there aren't many and I'll be napping by noon.*

Sal Smithson's face when she saw her son came to him then. A still, small voice prodded him.

*What would she have done if you'd drunk yourself to death in Brussels?* He grunted and rose. Damned annoying conscience.

"I'll get the door, Mrs. Miller," he said, carrying his mug to the dry sink. "Sorry I was such a bear earlier." He didn't wait for her reply.



Church bells chimed one o'clock when Meg and Annie approached the Wagner front step. Meg had her doubts about this, but Annie demanded to see her father, and frankly, the man needed to hear it. It was time he paid attention.

A plump woman in a voluminous white apron answered the door, took one look at Annie, and opened her arms. "Little bird! I'm so happy to see you."

Annie threw herself into the woman's arms. "Oh Mrs. Miller, I've missed you!" She cast a guilty glance toward Meg and mumbled, "But Miss Barlow is good to me, too," before bursting into tears.

Meg remained in the small entrance hall and watched helplessly as the woman drew the weeping child into the kitchen. The door to her left was firmly shut. Three people sat in the room to her right, one a worried mother jostling a fussy baby. One, the printer's apprentice with his wrapped hand cradled in his lap, and the other a fidgeting old woman. *Patients.*

"There's a line waiting, Miss Barlow," the boy said. "Ye'll have to take yer place."

Before she could respond, the door opened behind her. "Keep that arm clean, mind you. The salve will help, but replace it every day with a clean dressing. If it still bothers you in a week, come back."

A man Meg recognized as a tenant farmer from the Sherington estate paused at the door. "Thank you ever so much, Dr. Wagner. I'll pay you after harvest. You have my word."

"Not to worry, Tom. I know your word is good. Just take care of that arm," Wagner said.

His eyes widened when he noticed Meg, fixated as if drinking in the sight of her, in her new moss green and buttercup gown. She suspected he was seeking the strength to look away, but before he could a bundle of energy dressed in blue muslin threw herself at him.

“Papa, oh Papa, I missed you. You said you would come to visit but you didn’t, and I don’t want a visit, I want to come home, even though Lord Barlow said I could stay forever, and Miss Meg is all that is kind, and...”

“Annie, Annie my love! What are you doing here? And in the middle of surgery hours. What do we do during surgery hours?”

The girl’s face dropped. “We let the patients come first. I can wait quietly in the kitchen with Mrs. Miller.” She glared at her father, and her stubborn chin rose. “I can wait.”

He glanced at Meg over the top of his daughter’s head, his eyes pleading with her to do something.

*Handle this yourself. She’s your daughter to cherish.*

Meg wouldn’t say the words out loud, but stood her ground and stared back. *Stubborn man.*

The sadness with which he gazed back at his daughter, touched her, though. “You haven’t slept,” she said.

He cast a disdainful look her way, before peering down at his daughter, groping for words.

“Can you see to my hand now, Dr. Wagner? It hurts something fierce.” The printer’s apprentice had come up to stand by Meg.

The awkward moment passed when Annie stood up straight and took command. “Of course, he can. My father is the best physician in the Midlands. I will wait in the kitchen until he is finished seeing patients.” She flounced down the hall toward the smiling housekeeper.

“Come, Will,” Wagner sighed, laying a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder. He cast a pained glance at Meg. “Please convince her to leave.”

She spoke to his retreating back. “Unlikely.” *Patients first...* She struggled to reconcile that ideal with her concerns over his daughter.



Adam grimaced. The morning had not gone well, and he had three more people to see. How he would summon the strength to see his daughter, he couldn't imagine. Facing Meg would be even harder. She had once been the light of his life, his hope for the future. But now? How could he keep from polluting their sweet innocent faces with the dark cloud that was all that was left of his heart and soul? All he wanted was sleep. Sleep and the comfort of the bottle in his wardrobe.

Will's injury proved difficult. He had crushed three fingers. Adam splinted and bound them together as well as humanly possible, grateful it happened to the lad's left hand.

"Kin you talk to Mr. Brown, doctor? Tell him I can do me work? Please." Fear for his position shown in the boy's eyes.

"I will do that. I'll check on you in three days," Adam said, ruffling Will's hair.

Alice Durbin's colicky baby was an easy interview. Mrs. Davidson's megrims, largely imaginary, took him longer. The woman demanded attention tenaciously.

They all departed within an hour leaving him with no excuses. He procrastinated at the door, watching widow Davidson trundle cheerfully home, when an unexpected visitor caught his eye.

Gwen Hughes tied up her rig at the fence and sprinted up the walk. She looked well, but looks could be deceiving.

"Do you need my services, Miss Hughes?"

"No, not exactly. Do you have a moment to talk?"

Recalling what Jack said about Hughes that morning, he ushered her into the surgery for privacy and showed her to a seat. "How can I help?"

"What can you tell me about Jack Wrath?" she asked without preamble.

Adam bit back a grin. "Has he made a pest of himself?"

“No... At least, not exactly. I— I just left him visiting with my father.”

“I’m not sure what I can tell you. We met in Belgium when I dug a bullet out of his shoulder. I wish I could have saved more function in the arm but at least he still has it. He returned the favor by seeing me home. But that isn’t what you came to ask, is it? You’re wondering if he can be trusted.”

She nodded. “We can’t be too careful.”

With her brother gone and her father failing? *I should say so.*

“Jack Wrath is a good man—as kind as they come—except perhaps for his determination to fix anything—and anyone—he thinks is going wrong. Just be honest with him. You’ll be fine.”

She thanked him with rather more relief than he expected and went on her way.

*Annie*, he thought. *One more duty.*

A bottle of wine and a comfortable bed awaited once he faced it. He stopped as soon as he turned, face to face with Meg Barlow studying him with disconcerting intensity. He could manage disapproval, but the pained longing in her expression left him adrift.

“The town depends on you,” she murmured.

“However much I might wish it otherwise, it appears so.”

“A bright, brilliant, butterfly of a girl waits in your kitchen to see her father. She depends on you too. Why do you avoid her?”

Adam glanced away, unable to bear the penetrating gaze of her deep blue eyes. “I don’t—”

“Be honest at least. It is one thing to turn your back on...” *Me.* He heard it though she let the word drop. “You find excuses not to see your daughter, and your patients provide you with plenty.”



He scowled directly at her then. “She deserves better. She deserves vitality and animation. She deserves joy. She deserves light. I have none of that to give her. To feed her hopes would be cruel.”

This time Meg looked away. She muttered something about men he might have found offensive if he heard correctly. She glared back at him. “Whatever she deserves, you’re the father she has.”

“She’s better off at Barlow Hall. The dowager countess has said—”

“My cousins happily wave a hand to allow her residence in the empty nursery and the mercy of the maids. It is hardly the same. What she deserves, Dr. Wagner is a family.”

“I can’t give her that,” he snapped and stalked past her toward the kitchen.



*Stubborn, obstinate man! Hopeless.*

Meg bit her lip to keep from saying the words out loud. *Is that fair? Stubborn may be. But hopeless?* She prayed not.

Annie was in her father’s lap when Meg reached the kitchen, wrapping one arm around his neck and the rest of him around her dainty little fingers. Or trying to. Adam’s sad eyes were far away.

“...and then Marion, the nice maid, caught me and I jumped right down from the tree. I did not break my leg no matter what Tim—the groom—said I was going to do. I just tore the ruffle off my pinafore. Miss Meg made me sew it back on. Miss Meg says a lady must know how to care for her things. She says I was brave to climb the tree, but I must not worry people with my hoi-din-ish behavior.”

It tore Meg’s heart to watch him murmur against his daughter’s hair. “Miss Meg sounds wise. You are lucky to have her.”

Annie hopped down. "I almost forgot!" She glanced up at Meg, and put one hand on each of her father's cheeks, rough with a day-old beard. "We came here to invite you. We are going to have a tea. Nursery tea. Miss Meg said I could. I am inviting her, too." Meg noted that she was careful not to mention that the other guests were two dolls and a dog.

The little girl dug in the pocket of her pinafore and pulled out two crumpled pieces of paper on which she had carefully written out a formal invitation. "A gentleman is expected to send a reply to an invitation, but I'm here so you can just tell me you will come."

"I have surgery, remember?" Wagner said automatically.

"Not on Sunday. Even doctors close on Sunday. I made it then so you can come." She glanced between Meg and her father. "Right?"

"I'll send a proper reply before Sunday," Adam said. Meg felt certain he had no intention of being anywhere near nursery tea. So did Annie; her little shoulders fell.

"We wouldn't have to send notes if I came home. Mrs. Miller would like me to, wouldn't you Mrs. Miller?"

The housekeeper reddened. "No Miss Annie, your father knows best." Her expression belied those words. Mrs. Miller clearly found his behavior as idiotic as Meg did.

Annie appeared to be on the brink of tears if not a tantrum. Meg stepped in to put them all out of their misery. "We best be going Annie. We want to stop at the bakery to fetch biscuits for today's tea."

Meg glanced back once when they reached the door. Adam sat hunched at the table staring at his hands, or at some vision only he could see. Whatever it was, it made him miserable.

## CHAPTER 3



Adam knew he was dead inside. Confronted with a patient, the doctor in him rose up, and he felt almost alive. He hadn't failed one. Yet. Only work kept the visions that haunted him at bay. He had been at home for three weeks and was beginning to wish for an outbreak of influenza that would keep him needed day and night. If it weren't for the work, he had no reason to get out of bed.

With his last patient gone, Adam felt lost. After seeing Annie, both lost and sick at heart. He climbed the stairs planning to sleep, needing to drink, and burrowed in his wardrobe to find the wine he hid there. Meg's face kept intruding. Her words echoed in the empty room as if he heard them out loud. *You're the father she has. The father she has...*

He stared at the bottle in his shaking hand before putting it back. He gave the bed a glance and turned on his heels determined on a walk in the sunshine.

His home lay to the south of the river, not far from the bridge. A brisk walk past trees, golden brown in the September sun, brought him to the crossing. He paused mid span to watch ducks on the river. *Annie loves ducks.*

Memory of feeding waterfowl with his daughter twisted his heart, and the water trickling over rocks gave him a thirst. He clamped his jaw shut and continued across to the market square on the island.

St. Beonna Church anchoring one end drew his eyes and he shivered. Fury at the Almighty in the killing fields in

Belgium had given way to a firm decision for atheism. In spite of that, the place preyed on his consciousness whenever he was near. Images of the dead and the maimed rose up unbidden and he hurried past.

Breathing heavily, Adam took refuge on a bench in the market square, but a flash of red ribbon blowing in the wind caught his eye and the patch of grass in front of him became vast and smeared with blood. He jumped up to clear the vision and rushed past the flower seller and the green grocer. When he tried to pause at the printer, peering in the window in hopes of finding a book to distract him, he saw instead month-old newspaper headlines blaring that the Corsican had finally been bundled aboard the Northumberland and was off to a rock in the south Atlantic.

Blind flight took him across the bridge to the opposite shore without stopping until he saw The Fife and Fiddle.

“Bring me a bottle of rum. The whole bottle,” he demanded, flinging himself into a table in a dark corner in the rear of the place.

The innkeeper did as he asked and took his coin readily enough. That man’s grave expression reminded him of Colonel Morton’s examining the growing mortuary next to the surgery in Brussels. Adam drank and then drank deeper again. At some point he fell asleep.

*Did I wake up and ask for more?* He may have because there were two empty bottles on the table when voices woke him up.

“Thank ’e for coming.” That sounded like the innkeeper.

“I was tempted to leave him.” Jack had come.

“Miss Meg said we were to send for you.”

*Meg? What business am I of hers? And when did...*

“My Maud works over t’Barlow Hall. She says the lady said to call you whenever he... Well. Whenever.”

Someone lifted him, and someone else threw his right arm over Jack’s good shoulder.

They stumbled home in silence. Jack didn't speak until they reached the door. "You can't keep doing this, you know."



Adam kept to a rigid schedule seeing patients every day and seeking oblivion evenings for the two weeks after Jack half dragged him from the Fife and Fiddle and dumped him unceremoniously in his bedroom with a sharp complaint. If he didn't leave the house, he managed to avoid the Fife and Fiddle. He also avoided any risk of seeing Meg Barlow in the town.

Most days, his patient load stretched into afternoon, and Martin Pownall kept his cellar stocked with wine and the occasional case of rum. Mrs. Miller and Jack kept their expressions of displeasure to silent ones. They had no right to decide how he medicated his pain. Neither did Meg Barlow, not that she approached him. Her face haunting his days was enough. He had his life under control and how he managed it was no one's concern but his own.

One Tuesday an emergency took him out to the fields. An accident with a sickle sliced a man's arm off at the elbow. The damned fools wasted time sending for him instead of packing the man to his surgery as anyone with common sense would have done, and the victim bled to death. Faced with death and powerless to help or even ease the man's passing, his visions rose to choke him. The cries of the dying and the smell of death in the overwhelmed clinic in Brussel momentarily overcame reality, and he gagged.

Moments later the fog cleared. He turned to the wide eyes and frightened faces of farm workers staring at him and unleashed a rage driven lecture on safety and emergency.

"No more death! I can't heal death!" He peering from face to fearful face. The tirade had fallen on deaf ears. Worse, he'd behaved like a lunatic. He turned his back on the dead man and those hovering around him and stalked away.

## CHAPTER 4



“*B*ut Miss Meg, surgery hours are over. Papa needs to see me, especially because he had an emergency on Sunday and couldn’t come to tea. “Annie’s stubborn chin punctuated her determined demands, just as she had every day for two weeks since her father failed to appear for her tea party. The wretch hadn’t even bothered to send a note pretending regrets.

“Your Papa’s work means much to everyone. He doesn’t always have time for visits.” The words, partial truths twisted into a pathetic excuse, left a bad taste in Meg’s mouth, but she could see little else to say.

They strolled hand-in-hand, toward the river across the lawn at Barlow Hall and overland avoiding the town. Annie clutched a sack full of bread crusts and fragments for the ducks in her free hand. No matter what route they took or what activity Meg suggested, Annie begged Meg to take her to her father. Today was no different. The last visit had been a failure.

*Is it too soon to try again?*

“Do you think we’ll see any geese?” Meg asked, attempting to divert the subject.

“Maybe. Papa used to take me to the pond above the Sherington place to see those. I know he’ll want to hear what birds we see, don’t you think, Miss Meg? Birds make him happy.”

*I doubt it. Nothing makes that man happy lately.*

Meg's own heart pointed her at Adam Wagner, urging her to seek him out, but she wasn't about to risk Annie getting hurt any more than she had been.

When they reached the river and found a small group of mallards dabbling in the shallows near shore, Meg breathed deeply and relaxed. Annie's first toss of bread drew a pair of wigeons to complete for food. A gleeful half hour of splashing, laughing, and pointing ensued.

"Miss Meg, look! That duck has funny hair!" A large bird surfaced in the center of the river with a fish in its mouth, and shook its head. A mane of long feathers flowed back from its ruddy head.

"That's a goosander, Annie. We're lucky to spot one. Look, he's diving again. They go down to catch fish and gobble them up."

"Goose-ander. Goosander." Annie tried out the words. When she spotted the goosander surface ten or more yards down river, she danced with glee and ran toward it. The bird obviously hated attention. A moment later it was gone. Annie scooped up the empty bread sack. "We need to go home so I can draw one," she chortled.

Meg let Annie's hand pull her along, and the little one's joy fill her soul, as they skirted fields full of busy harvesters, and walked to Barlow Hall. Her gratitude to have so fully distracted Annie fell in a cloud of dust at the girl's next words.

"I'm going to make a perfect picture of the goosander for Papa. He will want to see it and hear all about it."

Meg trudged upstairs after the girl, got out colored pencils and paper, and left her in the care of the nursery maid.

After a fruitless attempt to nap in which memories of other walks along the river, Adam Wagner smiling down at her, kept intruding, she gave up and dressed for dinner early. The countess had invited Randall Clark, one of Reabridge's more prosperous business owners, to dinner. Mr. Clark—a pleasant enough, kind enough, dependable enough sort—made no secret of his interest in Meg, and the earl's mother encouraged

it. She was running out of excuses to avoid his attentions. Annie wasn't the only one struggling to accept reality. Adam Wagner chose not to change. Only a fool would cling to hope.



Sundays were the worst. Mrs. Miller and Jack disappeared, there were no patients, and Adam had nothing to distract him in the big empty house, except a book and a bottle. The second Saturday after the Fife and Fiddle incident, with a long Sunday in prospect, he treated himself to a third bottle of wine, smugly pleased he'd avoided rum, and fell into restless sleep fully dressed.

Nightmares and nausea kept him tossing about in his sleep deep into the night, until a disturbance brought him fully awake close to midnight. He rolled to a sitting position.

"Tell the colonel I'm on my way." No reply came from the dark room, and Adam came fully awake. Whatever he heard was not a summons to the butchery of the Brussels clinic. Nor was it his housekeeper who didn't live in.

"Jack? Is that you?"

He heard it again. Banging and rattling. Someone trying to get in the kitchen door. Then it stopped. Still no sign of Jack, but he felt half sick to his stomach and didn't relish running downstairs. Perhaps it was the wind. Or the intruder had given up.

A child's screech tore through the night and Adam leapt to his feet, swaying a bit and staggering to the dresser where he pulled out his army issue pistol. He made it down the stairs without falling by the grace of one hand on each wall. Silence greeted him.

The sound had come from behind the house. He staggered to the kitchen door and flung it open, the unloaded pistol at the ready, but encountered no one. He leaned on the doorway breathing heavily, scanning the yard until a quiet moan caught his attention.



A bundle in white lay under his bedroom window. He leaned in for a look before horror overcame him and he turned aside, emptying the contents of his stomach into the flower bed. Annie lay on her side clutching one arm, as pale as death.

## CHAPTER 5



Hot wax from a flickering candle dripped on Meg's hand, penetrating her sleep as effectively as the nursemaid's panic. "Wake up ma'am. Something terrible has happened. She's gone."

"Gone? Who— Annie?" Meg tossed her bedclothes aside and stood. "Tell me everything." She picked up the nearest gown and began dressing. She didn't bother with stays.

"Somethin' woke me. Don't know what. Went to seek the necessary, and decided to peek in at the little miss. Her bed is empty. Searched the nursery floor. I even went down to check the kitchen. No sign of her."

The girl wrung her hands, tears streaming down her cheek. Meg held her shoulders and spoke firmly. "This is not your fault. How were you to know she would wander in the middle of the night."

"But ma'am. What if some'un took her?"

*A horror not to be contemplated!*

But Meg had other suspicions. "Did you try the kitchen door? Cook always latches it from the inside."

"No, Miss Meg. I didn't think of that."

Moments later, accompanied by the night porter and nursemaid, Meg's suspicions grew. The door latch had been opened. Someone went out, and she was certain who it was. "You notify the earl and awaken the footmen. Alert them to search the house. Top to bottom," she told the nursemaid.

She pulled a cloak from a peg near the kitchen door, likely the cook's, not wasting time going up to fetch her own things. "Johnny, you will come with me."

"Where are we going, Miss?" the footman serving as night porter asked.

"To Dr. Wagner's house. If we're lucky we may find her on our way."

They roused a groom to hitch up the pony cart, and Meg took the reins, tooling down the path while Johnny held a lantern high. The waxing gibbous moon helped, but they saw no sign of Annie. She crossed one bridge, drove through the silent market square and crossed the other to the south bank. Light shone in Adam's surgery, filling her with dread. What could be wrong in the middle of the night?

"See to the horse and then follow me," she ordered, leaping down and running to bang on the door.

No one responded to her pounding, but when she tried it, the door opened. The sound of weeping greeted her.

She yanked open the door to the surgery. Annie, her face white as a sheet, lay on the table, one arm lying on an incomplete splint. Adam slumped in his chair weeping while Annie bravely tried to soothe him.

"Of course, you can, Papa. You're the best doctor in the country."

The little one's obvious pain, tore Meg's heart. She swept up to the girl's father and took his chin firmly in her hand forcing him to face her. "Pull yourself together, Adam. You have an injured patient. Are you too drunk to treat her?"

"I can't raise the dead," he said, wild eyed. "She must have wandered out on the field. Bled to death in the wounded cart."

"What are you talking about?" Meg asked. His dazed, faraway expression frightened her. She dropped to her knees, soothing his face in both her hands.

"Dark hair like my Annie. Caked with blood. Under two wounded men," he babbled on.

*Is he in Belgium?*

Shocked to her core, Meg took a deep breath and spoke as firmly as she could, injecting a tone of command. “Captain Wagner, you are on duty. A patient needs you.”

Still lost in a world Meg couldn’t see he went on. “I can’t leave her here. How can I leave her?”

“Look to the living, Adam. You have to let the dead go,” Meg said.

He shook, one violent spasm, and attempted to stand, blinking and looking about. “Meg. Why are you here. Not safe. You—” He took her in his arms for a moment before coming fully alert and jumping back. “Oh, God. Meg.”

“Annie needs you Adam,” Meg said.

“I’m sorry I fell. I just wanted to see you, Papa,” Annie said, pulling his attention away from Meg’s worried expression. “You will be fine. You are the best doctor. But it hurts. Please fix it.”

He went to his daughter. “I’m sorry, Annie. I...” Still, he turned back to Meg, sick at the bleakness in her eyes. “Did you see?”

“What you saw? No. Annie didn’t see it either, but we heard your words.”

Adam blanched. He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

“We’ll talk about it later. How can I help? Shall I make coffee?” Meg searched his face for assurance he had returned from whatever hell had claimed him.

He glanced back down at the table, and brushed Annie’s hair back. His hand, Meg saw, still shook. “Coffee please, Miss Barlow. This scamp woke me from a sound sleep. Then I’ll splint this. It’s a simple fracture, Annie. You’ll heal fine.”

Johnny’s horrified face told Meg he’d heard everything. She tugged him along to the kitchen. “You watch the coffee brew and bring it when it’s done,” she said, preparing the pot and placing cups nearby. “Then sit down and have a cup yourself. Johnny, Dr. Wagner is not well, but he’s an excellent

physician. There is no reason for you to tell tales at the Hall, much less the town.”

The boy nodded, but she doubted he'd heed her words.

“They said last week in the fields he disappeared into his mind,” the footman told her. “When he came back, he was angry. 'Cause Caleb died there, and he came too late to help. Called them fools for not hauling Caleb to him so it was faster.”

Disappeared into his mind... *How often does this happen?* She hurried back to the surgery.

She found Adam holding the hand of his daughter's unbroken arm, staring at a drawing of a goosander, while Annie told him all about their encounter with the bird.

“Do you see the long red hair? It was so funny, all wet and blowing in the wind,” Annie said. “Then it dove back under. All the way! It disappeared. The other ducks don't do that.”

“Most of the common ones just dabble, don't they,” Adam said with a strained smile.

“I knew you'd want to know about it. That's why I drew the picture. Miss Meg wouldn't bring me so I had to come myself,” Annie said sticking out her chin.

“You should listen to Miss Meg. Ladies do not pay calls in the middle of the night, and they do not try to climb up to gentlemen's bedrooms,” he said.

“Your father is correct, Annie,” Meg said joining Adam at the girl's side. She let herself feel the warmth of his closeness. She breathed deeply, but the smell of unchanged linen and stale wine masked the woodsy male scent she once enjoyed.

“But I'm not a lady yet. I'm a little girl. And he isn't a gentleman. He's my papa,” Annie argued. She wasn't wrong.

“Little girls are supposed to listen to their fathers and obey their... Caretakers.” Adam sputtered to a conclusion.

*Is that what I am?* Meg wondered.

There'd been no formal arrangements made. He left Annie at the Hall when he rushed off to war. It was meant to be temporary. Meg in fact had no legal standing. Neither did the earl or his mother. *The situation can't go on.*

Johnny brought a tray then, with two coffees. "I found some biscuits in a jar," he said, nodding at the plate.

"Good idea. Patients are always happy for a biscuit," Adam said.

"So are hungry footman dragged out in the middle of the night. Help yourself. I'll call you when we're ready to go." Meg added. Johnny scurried back to the kitchen.

If Adam noticed her taking ownership of his kitchen, he didn't say. He sipped coffee gingerly, one hand on his belly.

"Are you able to do this, Adam?" Meg whispered, her back to Annie.

"I think so. It isn't delicate surgery," he replied.

It took longer than it normally would, but he managed. Stopping at every expression of pain to study his daughter's face did not help.

Meg, hovered at his side until he dispatched her to brew willow bark tea. Returning, she followed his exact directions to add a drop of laudanum in the tea and held Annie up to sip it while Adam slumped in his chair.

"Take some home for yourself. You may need it," he murmured.

"Nonsense. I'm perfectly able to manage," Meg said. She studied him a long while as he sat there, head down, hand clutching a childlike picture of a goosander.

"You best get back," he murmured at last.

*I can't leave you alone like this.* She had no right to say the words, no right to impose her care on him. Even if she stayed, would he let her into the dark world he appeared to inhabit? Still, she had Annie to protect.

“Your father is right, Annie. We must go. The Hall will be in an uproar looking for you. You frightened many people,” Meg said. Even at that she was tempted to send the bairn with Johnny, but knew she could not.

Ten minutes later Johnny handed Annie, bundled in a blanket up to Meg, showing excellent care for the arm. He took the reins and deftly turned the cart back the way they came. Meg glanced back at the house. She couldn't help herself. Light still flickered in the surgery.

*If Adam slips back to Waterloo regularly, it explains much.* It was more than she knew before. Meg determined to learn more and find ways to help.



*We'll talk about it later...* Adam had no idea how much Meg heard or if Annie heard any of it. The thought made him ill. *She's wrong if she thinks I'll speak of it in the cold light of day. Or at all to her.*

It had been a close call in any case. He hated that Meg witnessed him in so weak a state, but it was better she had come. *God only knows how long Annie would have lain there in pain while I was lost, utterly lost, if Meg hadn't pulled me back to reality.*

The flashbacks and hallucinations had gotten worse. He'd never had one with a patient before, at least not one he could help. He had looked at Annie, pale as death, and suddenly all he could see was the child in Belgium. Dead due to the ambitions of one emperor and the stupidity of mankind. He couldn't hold it off. The vision had engulfed him. He could feel the darkness lurking in nearby ready to take him again.

The front door opened, closed and latched.

“Meg? I told you to leave.”

Jack appeared in the door to the surgery. “You left the front unlatched again,” he said. “What are you doing up? You look like you were dragged through a gravel pit.”

“I could ask the same of you, sneaking home in the wee hours. Miss Hughes, I assume? You are courting scandal. What time is it?”

“Courting, yes. And betrothed.” Jack grinned. “Four-thirty, and you didn’t answer my question. Was Miss Barlow here? Should I be shocked? Should her cousin the earl pay you a visit?”

“No! She was respectably chaperoned.” *If a footman is adequate chaperonage.* “It was Annie. She ran off and tried to climb up to my room. Broke her blasted arm. Meg came looking for her.”

Jack pulled up a chair. “Did she break it badly?”

Adam shook his head. “Shouldn’t have been difficult to set it.” He shivered at the memory. “The thing is, I looked down at her, and then I was in Brussels, outside that hellish clinic and the wounded wagons were coming in, dead soldiers in every one of them.”

“Wait, what do you mean you were there?” Jack demanded.

“What I said. As real as you are this moment. My Annie disappeared, and I was staring down at a dead child. Hit with shrapnel. I couldn’t help her. I—”

“Adam, look at me. I’m guessing that is an actual memory.”

“Yes, but memories are distant. This is, it’s... Real. I’m there. Sometimes, I can’t get back. I— My mind may be unraveling.” He had relied on his mental faculties for success his entire life but now...

Jack put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Nonsense. Your mind is not unraveling, but the visions, Adam. How often does this happen to you?”

“I don’t know. Coming more often I think.”

“Is that why you drink?”

Adam shrugged. “In part. Even nightmares are less real than the visions in day time. It isn’t helping though. Night or



day.”

“Then stop. It isn’t helping, it makes you ill, and it is keeping you from your daughter.”

Adam surged to his feet. “My daughter deserves a father who isn’t cursed. Go to bed, Jack.”

“Rid yourself of the drink, Adam.” Jack’s voice followed him up the stairs to his room.

It was almost dawn, Adam could see. Had maybe three hours to sleep before patients demanded his attention. He rooted in his wardrobe and found a bottle of wine. He stared at it in the shadows for several minutes, Jack’s voice echoing in his head. *Then stop...*

Perhaps the pestilential, irritating man was right. He put down the bottle, fell onto his bed, and dropped into an exhausted sleep.

## CHAPTER 6



Annie slept soundly with a bit of laudanum, and the nursery maid sat nearby seeing to mending, while Meg prowled the earl's library. Stafford Houghton Barlow, Sixth Earl Barlow was too much a man of action to focus on books, but he knew his duty to the estate. Ford had served as steward of the estate before his older brothers died, and his deep devotion to horticulture and estate management was well represented in the library. Either he or his father must have also enjoyed history. The classics were well represented as well, but Meg struggled to find what she needed.

The grandfather she shared with Ford was reputed to have a great interest in medicine, at least before he came into his title. In fact, it was he who sponsored Adam Wagner's studies at the University of Edinburgh. Surely that would be reflected somewhere in this massive collection.

A fruitless hour later, she pushed the wheeled ladder to the last set of shelves and climbed to the top and was not disappointed. She fingered her way past books on general domestic medicine, making a note to check them later. She passed treatises on various diseases and disorders until she came to books on diseases and disorders of the mind. The first three she checked showed little promise.

Excited to find two editions of Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Meg eagerly took down the newest only to have her hopes dashed. It appeared to have nothing on the despair of soldiers or those who've suffered great trauma.

Finally, a passage in *A Treatise on Insanity* by Phillippe Penel caught her eye. The book certainly appeared more humane than some of the others. She closed the book. Nothing in it or any other spoke of the vivid return of morbid memory, but he did write of turning men lost in their own despondency to joyful things.

A new passion is sometimes generated in consequence of which melancholia may be cured...

Work certainly seemed to help Adam. As long as he was helping patients, he kept darkness at bay. Penel also understood the futility of trying to argue a sufferer out of their very real suffering.

Perhaps what Adam needed was to have someone simply acknowledge it. *Yes, what you saw was horror...*

The idea had merit and she had no other ideas. Did the others have similar problems? She needed to speak with Ford. Or with Jack Wrath.



Adam awoke the next morning with a pounding headache, trembling hands and a need for drink. The bottle he'd abandoned the night before sat on his dresser, as if calling to him. He rubbed a hand along his stubbled face.

*Does drinking keep my visions away?* It didn't. Even when it brought oblivion, nightmares replaced day horrors. *Maybe Jack has a point.*

He left the bottle where he found it and went in search of morning coffee. Mrs. Miller eyed him up and down from his stockinged feet, past his rumpled shirt and waistcoat, to his unshaven face and, if he guessed correctly, bloodshot eyes. She shook her head, but didn't say a word as she handed him his coffee.

She'd been ready. Good woman, Mrs. Miller. *You ought to appreciate her more.*

"No patients today, Dr. Wagner. It's Sunday."

*Sunday.* He'd spent the past few hours in bed in an alcoholic haze. Before he could think about that, a knock disturbed the peace of the morning. Since it came at the kitchen it wasn't a patient. Tradesman? Mrs. Miller hustled over.

Johnny, the Barlow footman, peered past the housekeeper, gazing first at Adam and then nervously away. "A, ah, message for Dr. Wagner. Will there be a reply?"

Mrs. Miller waved him into the kitchen and handed the message to Adam. It contained a familiar childish scrawl.

*Papa. Mis Meg sez I cant go to the arvist fistval twomurrow because my arm is broke. Pleez come tel her I cin. Annie.*

He almost laughed. Whatever had gone on in recent months, her spelling had not improved. He suspected the previous invitation had been inspected and corrected by Meg. This one had been slipped out. He tossed a sardonic glance at Johnny, Annie's accomplice. His devious daughter was manipulating him to visit and evading her nursemaids.

"What do you have to do with this, young man?"

Johnny shifted nervously. "Miss Annie wishes to attend the festival ever so bad, Dr. Wagner. The whole town will be there."

Adam grunted. *Meg is overly protective. Merely being out won't hurt Annie.* He reread the note. *Come,* it said. *Not likely.* Whatever shifted between them last night he intended to avoid Meg. It hurt too much to see her, to want what he couldn't have, not while his mind continued to fail him.

"Give me a moment," he said. He went to his office and wrote his response on the bottom of Annie's note.

*Do as Miss Meg tells you like a good girl. Papa.*

He removed a sheet of foolscap and wrote a second note.

*Miss Barlow,*

*Annie has evaded your nursery staff and prevailed upon a footman to send a message to me in an attempt to circumvent your dictates. Kindly speak to her about it. As to whether or not she may attend the Harvest Festival, I leave that to your authority.*

*Doctor Adam Wagner.*

*PS. If you do allow her to attend, do so briefly. You'll want to take care her arm isn't jostled. A.*

He returned to the kitchen and instructed Johnny to deliver both notes, admonishing the lad, who continued to stare at him avidly as if expecting to witness madness again, to take any future attempts by Annie to disobey directly to Miss Barlow.

“Mrs. Miller, this is a lovely day. I believe I'll take a walk along the river.”

The housekeeper beamed at him. “You do that, sir. It will do you no end of good.”

A half hour later, shaved and tidied he set out to do exactly that.



Meg didn't blame the Dowager Countess Barlow for throwing her together with Randall Clark. An aging spinster cousin dependent on the estate would eventually be a burden to a virile young man, and a bigger one when he married. If his face when Baroness Wright arrived that afternoon was any indication, that might happen sooner than they had expected.

The countess meant it kindly, and Randall Clark, though not of the highest rank, was a perfectly acceptable suitor. A business owner who could comfortably support her was almost as respectable as a physician after all, and it was time Meg stopped pining for a man who insisted on pushing her away. When Mr. Clark asked her to walk out with him on Sunday, she accepted.

Mr. Clark escorted her from church into the brilliant autumn sunshine. It glowed off his tawny hair, before he clapped his hat on his head and turned toward her with a proud smile. His green eyes were bright enough, and he was handsome in his way. Meg couldn't help but think those green eyes lacked the comfort she never failed to find in Adam's deep brown ones. Her answering smile wobbled, and she bobbed her head to look away.

"Shall we walk along the river? I understand you frequently enjoy it," he said.

"How thoughtful! I would like that very much." Memories of walking there with Adam, days full of bright flowers, laughter, and hope crowded in. She pushed them back out. She wouldn't long for what she could not have.

The square was already in the throes of preparation for the next day's Harvest Festival. The maypole ribbons fluttered in the breeze. Children chattered excitedly about the coming festivities, giving Meg's heart a twist. Annie would be desperately disappointed. She begged to go, but Meg believed it was too soon after her injury.

Vendors who'd spent Saturday putting up booths hovered between adding details and observing the sabbath. Her escort's nose wrinkled at the sight. "I don't blame you," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" Meg had been preoccupied and suspected she had missed something.

"I can tell by your face you find this town fête business distasteful."

*But it is a delight!* She loved town festivals. Last year, she'd struck up a conversation with Adam Wagner over the Morris dancers and spent the rest of the day and most of the evening at his side. He courted her ever after. Until Waterloo beckoned. Whatever had been between them died there, and she saw no way to resurrect it. If Clark saw something in her expression, it was disappointment. This year there would be no Adam nor Annie either.

"You don't care for the festival, Mr. Clark?" she asked.

“It is well enough in its place, though it brings less trade to established businesses than one might hope, and it disrupts town routine for a full week between preparation and clean up. One can only hope the revelry does not slip out of control.” He managed to inject world weariness into his tone.

“The daytime is full of fun for little ones, but the celebrations after dark can be a little...” *Delightful in their own way.* She had danced into the night with Adam last year.

“Yes. And more than a little disreputable. I would be pleased to accompany you, Miss Barlow, if you wish to linger into the evening. I imagine a lady would not care to be unescorted at such an event.”

“No, certainly not.” It is much more fun with an escort—the right escort.

“So may I see you there?”

“Certainly!” Why didn’t that please her as it ought?

They passed through the square and across the south bridge in silence and turned up the path along the river. Late fall wildflowers lined the banks, and trees shaded their way. Meg determined to enjoy this lovely day, but she struggled.

Sporadic conversation wore on Meg’s supply of patience. They exhausted weather as a topic rather quickly. When she asked his favorite author, he allowed that business left little time for reading. She dared not bring up the Harvest Festival again.

“It is good to have our soldiers back,” she said at last.

He stiffened. “Reabridge has more than its share of heroes, one gathers. So many rushed off to Belgium, we are blessed not to have our population decimated. Unfortunately, some of us had to remain behind to see to the commerce of the town.”

*Oh dear. I’ve offended him unintentionally.* She searched for a safer topic and found none.

Clark began to drone on about prices and crops. Meg murmured meaningless sounds in response, trying to decide how soon she could ask to turn around.

The words were on the tip of her tongue when a familiar figure approached, going the other way, and her heart raced. The wind ruffled Adam's hair, the walk had put color in his cheeks, and his beloved eyes were clear and sober. She rejoiced to see him in better trim than she had in weeks.

"Good afternoon, Miss Barlow. Clark," Adam said inclining his head.

Mr. Clark pulled Meg's hand, resting on his arm, subtly closer and his posture stiffened. He put his free hand over hers, both enclosed properly in gloves. She gritted her teeth to keep from yanking it away. "Good afternoon, Wagner. I don't believe I've seen you out since you returned from Waterloo," he said.

Adam's eyes never left Meg. The warmth in them sent an answering shaft of heat through her whole body.

"Though of course, one understands your surgery continues to attract local traffic," Clark went on.

Adam pulled his gaze to Meg's escort. "Yes, but they do let me out on Sundays," he said. "Enjoy your walk." He passed them and continued on his way, his long stride driving him swiftly toward the bridge.

"Goodness. Has he always been that curt?" Mr. Clark shook his head.

Meg could only follow the man she loved with her eyes.



## CHAPTER 7



Seeing Meg on Clark's arm cut through Adam like a French saber, and he felt like a fool. He ought to rejoice to see her entertaining a suitor's attention. Clark's behavior made it clear that's what he was. Adam couldn't get away fast enough.

He crossed the bridge without thinking, his mind on Meg. He didn't begrudge her moving on. He'd certainly raised her expectations and then disappointed her. What else could he do? She deserved better than what he had become.

He came to the green and stopped. He found himself caught between the Fife and Fiddle and St. Beonna Church. He'd wasted too much of himself in one, and had turned his back on the other.

He glanced around the green, panic rising. The last time he sat on the bench he'd seen the blood and guts of the battle. Today however, preparation for the Harvest Festival filled it.

*Did Meg get my message about Annie? Would she come tomorrow?* Memories filled him—sweet, for once. Meeting Meg over the pie judging at last year's Harvest Festival and striking up a conversation over the Morris dancing. Discovering her deep love of history and literature. Laughing and talking all afternoon. Dancing under the harvest moon, until they found a private spot by the bridge for an innocent kiss.

"Oh Dr. Wagner, thank goodness!" A voice cut into his reverie. A very young, frantic looking woman stood next to

him. "My Geordy is bleeding fierce."

The physician-surgeon in him drove out grieving. He followed her to where the family had been setting up a table to sell baked goods. A boy of about six clutched a piece of rag to his hand. The cut was neither deep nor wide but the howling of the boy had clearly terrified his mother. He doubted it needed stitching but knew from experience that mothers were rarely satisfied with soothing words.

The woman hugged her son and carried him behind Adam on the way to his surgery. When he crossed the bridge, he kept his eyes firmly to the left toward his house lest he see Meg on the arm of Clark again.

Two stitches and a bandage slightly showier than necessary took him twenty minutes. The woman's gushing flood of gratitude almost brought him to a blush, but he accepted the pennies she offered rather than insult the woman. "I thank God you've returned to us safe, Dr. Wagner. The town missed you."

He saw her out with a frown. *God? Did some almighty being bring me back from hell to Reabridge? If so, he deprived me of every joy. If he exists, why did he allow that horror of Waterloo to begin with?*

The urge to drink rose. *It doesn't help, Wagner, remember?*

He sought his sitting room, seeking peace to quiet the voices in his head. He doubted a return to the town would help. He tried catching up on professional reading. He tried a novel. Poetry was worse. Meg's face kept interrupting the words. He loved her still, and his whole being shook with it.

The image of Randall Clark's possessive hand on Meg's turned his stomach. He loved her enough to let her go, to keep her far away and untouched by his visions and demons, but did he love her enough to see her marry a Reabridge man, to have children with him, children she'd bring to Adam to care for? No, not to Clark.

At the thought of his demons a faint odor engulfed him, growing stronger. It was the smell of sick, the smell of men in

agony, the smell of death and blood. He leapt to his feet blinking to keep impending visions at bay and fled the house.

It was full dark when he staggered away from The Fife and Fiddle, sent on his way by the barkeep, carrying a bottle of rum. He reached the square, decorated and ready for a joyous celebration, one Adam couldn't bear to join. Rage rose in him, rage he intended to direct where it belonged. He staggered toward Saint Beonna.



The morning of the Harvest Festival dawned clear and sunny. The countess had provided Meg with a maid, but it was too early to disturb the girl, and Meg was too restless to wait. She dressed comfortably in a periwinkle walking dress that she knew flattered her, but which was both easy to button up the front and comfortable for a day like the festival.

She slipped down the stairs hoping to find kitchen staff stirring. Tea and toast would suit her fine, and she could make it herself if need be.

“Oh Miss Barlow, thank goodness!” Johnny, once again assigned as night porter, hastened over when she reached the ground floor. “This just came for you and the lad says the vicar is quite agitated, but wouldn't say why.”

*The vicar? At this hour?* She didn't recall any pending births. She flipped the note open and gasped.

“Kindly send round for the pony cart. I have to go to the town.”

The young man hastened to do as she asked while she ran back to her room to fetch her bonnet and cloak. She scribbled a note for Ford and left it in the breakfast room.

Johnny offered to come with her, but Meg declined. Twenty minutes from the time she got the note, Meg and the vicar's messenger were tooling down the road to the still sleeping town.

She climbed the steps of St. Beonna, and peered into the darkness. A candle flickered on the left toward the chancel, drawing her.

Adam Wagner slept on the marble floor of the Lady Chapel, an empty rum bottle next to him, the statue of a long dead knight laid out beside him. Vicar Owen had pulled up a chair. The candle was his, as was, she suspected, the blanket that had been lain over Adam.

“I thought it best to let him sleep it off,” the vicar said, rising. “And I’m certain mine isn’t the face he’ll wish to see when he wakes.”

Adam jerked in his sleep.

“His sleep has been restless. Twice he shouted ‘why.’ I suspect he came here to have angry words with God. He wouldn’t be the first.” Vicar Owen peered down at him sadly. “I hope it helped. If you need me, I’ll be at the vicarage until noon when the festival gets underway.”

The vicar left, his heels making a sharp noise on the tiles of the aisle. Meg scraped back the chair. That or the conversation roused the sleeping man. He blinked up at the ceiling, and Meg thought she heard him mutter, “No lightning then.”

Too angry at him to give in to laughter at that, she simply glared down at him while he came fully awake. It took a few minutes until his eyes focused and he sat up with a start. “Meg! What—” He laid his head in his hands. “I thought he was supposed to send angels.”

“What makes you think I’m not one, sent to blast a trumpet and shake some sense into you?”

He blinked up at her sheepishly, and glanced up at a shaft of rainbow light through a stained-glass window. “Is it morning?”

“You mean, ‘Did I sleep on the floor of the church all night?’ Yes.”

“I feel like a fool.”

“Good because you are one. You’re wallowing in melancholia, shutting out all those who care about you—me chief among them—and destroying the fine life you have here.”

He rose and wobbled. She surged up and almost reached out to help him. Almost. He leaned against the wall but wouldn’t meet her eyes. “You don’t understand. You can’t know—”

“Oh, I understand perfectly well. You have horrible memories and terrifying nightmares. Some at night; some in the daytime. Hero that you are—or think you are—you keep them inside. You don’t let anyone in to help, and you don’t let them out lest your words sully my ears or Annie’s or Miller’s. Or Jack’s come to that. Have you described what you see to Jack?”

“Some,” he mumbled.

“Not enough. You act as if the greatest cataclysm of our age happened to you and you alone. It didn’t. It impacted everyone in this town one way or another. Yes, the pain and the horror belong to those of you who were there, but don’t think the rest of us got off unscathed. Every woman pushed away is a victim of that war. Every child whose father walks away from her, too. You have to turn the memories loose. If you refuse to talk to me, find someone you can share them with. It’s like lancing a boil. If you don’t get the infection out it could kill you. It *is* killing you.”

Meg couldn’t bear his shocked expression at her scold. Her breath heaved. She wrapped her arms around her middle protectively and gazed at the lady statue. She swallowed deeply to get control before continuing more quietly. “Melancholia can be treated, doctor. Exercise, proper diet, surrounding yourself with things—and people—that bring you joy.” At “people” she glanced at him and then away again. “Above all you need to share your problems with someone.”

He had no answer. He continued to study his feet.

“Can you walk? We need to get you home before you have to wander through the Harvest Festival in that state. I’ll fetch

the vicar to get you help.”

She fled the church lofting a prayer that her words penetrated his stubborn skull. One thing she knew for certain. She would be by herself for Harvest Festival this year, but she was determined she would not go through another one alone.

## CHAPTER 8



Tuesday morning the surgery sat empty, oddly quiet for a weekday. Adam suspected it was because people were resting after their celebration. The vicar's man of work had accompanied him home, rumpled, sober, and ashamed. He'd gone to bed sober and at least hadn't slept in his clothes this time. He pulled trousers up over his wrinkled shirt and put on his waistcoat, stumbling down to the kitchen.

He lingered, unshaven, over breakfast, still horrified to have been found unconscious from drink in the church of all places. Yet, he'd managed twenty-four hours without taking a drink. Jack had been right. The drinking made his problems worse, but he still had no idea what to do about them. Perhaps Meg was right, too.

"You're up. Are you ready?" Jack stood in the door. Oddly, Gareth Ardleigh stood with him.

"What do you mean ready?"

"People are here to see you," Jack said.

Adam rose with a groan and stretched his back. He put on his coat and followed them down the hall. "Is something amiss, Ardleigh? How can I be of help?"

Before Ardleigh could answer they stepped into the surgery's reception area and Adam froze. Earl Barlow leaned one elbow on the mantel piece. Martin Bromelton, a farmer Adam knew, sat clutching the hand of a young woman Adam recognized from Brussels. Wasn't she married to a soldier? Cortland Westbrook, the Elridge heir, sat next to another

young man he recognized, Brandon Worthington. Thom Owen sat next to him. Soldiers all except the lady. They'd all been there. The woman had too.

“What is this?”

“Miss Barlow invited them. I concurred. And before you ask, yes. They all know you slept on the church floor Sunday night. You seem to have left pieces of yourself in Belgium. Your common sense for one. Do you really think you're the only one with horrific memories? Tell these good people what you told me.” Jack didn't plan to take no for an answer.

Adam froze, but he saw nothing but sympathy gazing back. “I— I can't...” Jack rolled his eyes and moved in with Ardleigh to take a seat and gestured pointedly to the empty chair by the hearth. Adam sat as he was bid, but couldn't look at them. “What I mean is I can't get it out of my head. The death. The waste. I'm a physician, meant to save life, not hurry it on its way. I'm a failure. I'm a fraud.”

The young woman with Bromelton swallowed hard, clutching the man's hand. “We did the best we could,” she said, “Those of us treating the wounded, cleaning up the aftermath.” A nurse. Of course. “We couldn't save them all.”

Ardleigh spoke up. “It's the whole bloody business of war. We do our duty, they do theirs, and in the midst of all the dutiful are the madmen who enjoy it. Not that I don't enjoy a good fight, God knows, but...” He took in a breath. “Not just what they did to us, or what we did to them, but what they did to each other.” He rubbed his unshaven jaw. “I'm not making sense I guess, but when I close my eyes, I see the vultures pawing through bodies on the killing fields, pulling out teeth to sell. When I finally found Thad Sherington's body... Damn, but I wake up every morning and wonder why I'm alive.”

Adam's head bobbed up. “When you say you ‘see’ them, what do you mean. Is it a memory or a nightmare?”

“Tell them, Adam,” Jack said. “Describe what you told me.”



Before Adam could speak, Thom Owen barged in. “Waterloo was hell, but the Peninsula was worse. My nightmares are of the Sack of Badajoz. Women raped. Children murdered. I don’t know if it’s a nightmare or a vivid memory but it takes over my mind in the night. I’m back there. Our soldiers are attacking a woman and I can’t stop them no matter how hard I try. Or if I succeed, there’s another woman and another. I wake up weeping and begging for forgiveness, but no one can give it to me.” He finished with a shuddering breath.

“You have to forgive yourself,” Ardleigh murmured. “That’s all any of us can do.”

“Does it happen in the daytime? These nightmares as you call them?” Adam asked.

“What do you mean?” Thom asked.

Adam told them then, describing blood in the market square, the cries of the dying, the smell of death, and the overwhelmed clinic in Brussel that overtook and paralyzed him when he didn’t expect it. “I’m not remembering. I’m there,” he finished.

“Maybe not exactly, but we all have horrors,” the earl murmured. “Not one of us is immune.”

“They come to me in the night,” Jack said. “The eyes. Twenty-five years of eyes. Men I fought besides. Men I led to their deaths. Men I killed. The poor souls, men and women, left to lie like trash in the streets of a sacked town. The children are the worst. The eyes of children.” He covered his own eyes with his hand. “Will I ever stop seeing the poor staring eyes of dead babies?”

Jack had never shared that with Adam in all the weeks they lived together. What a thing to carry!

“The children are the worst. There was a girl...” Adam peered around; all of them leaning forward, listened avidly. “The wounded wagons inevitably had many we couldn’t help. We off loaded one to find a dead man on the bottom. I saw hair under his shoulder. Long dark hair the color of...” Adam

choked. “My Annie’s hair. The color of Annie’s hair. An orderly pulled the dead man away and there was this child in a ragged dress, riddled with shrapnel. Blood everywhere. I don’t know who she was or how she came to wander into a fire fight, but now when I look at Annie I— How do I explain such horror to my daughter? Or to a woman?”

Some of the men nodded in understanding. Others shook their heads in denial. What had Ardleigh said? *We have to forgive ourselves.*

The dam had broken and memories poured out of the men for well over an hour, all of them relieved to share with the only people who truly understood after weeks, each in their private hell.

Worthington had been staring at his feet all the while the men talked. He couldn’t look up. “I stumble along from the horror that damn war has cost me every day of my life. The shrapnel left in my leg is a grim reminder that although I still live and breathe upon this earth, I am far from whole. A cripple, for certain, but the screams of the dead and dying haunt my dreams and even my waking hours. They never go away no matter how much time passes. And now... I am trying to figure out how to move on and court a local woman who should be dancing and enjoying life instead of possibly looking to a lifetime of seeing to my welfare and sour mood when this damn leg pains me.” There was muttered agreement to that.

“Aren’t we an arrogant bunch?” The earl said at last, “Deciding what our women can and can’t take? I’m not saying we need to burden them with the ugly details in our memories, but do we have a right to shelter them from the damage done to us? Don’t they have a right to make their own decisions?”

*Is that what I’ve done to Meg? Taken away her right to make her own choices?*

A messenger put an end to their discussion. Mrs. Bicton-Morledge had gone into labor. His friends left, having agreed with shocking relief that they needed to meet periodically to check on one another, and Adam left to see to his patient, more

at peace than he had been in months. One question stayed with him.

*Have I been fair to Meg?*

## CHAPTER 9



“*Y*ou’ve a caller, Miss Meg.” Johnny’s avid expression put her on alert.

“Mr. Clark?” *Pray not*, she thought. He hadn’t taken her rejection at the Harvest Festival well.

“Dr. Wagner,” Johnny whispered handing her Adam’s card. That indicated a formal call. Not a medical emergency.

A formal call. *Dear God. Here I am in my oldest work dress.*

“I’ll be down shortly,” she said. “Show him to the blue drawing room.” She scurried off to her room, foolish hope lodged in her throat, interrupting her maid who was putting away clean linens.

“Help me into a morning gown. The blue one flocked with daisies, I think.”

A half hour later she left her quarters dressed and coiffed with a blue band threaded through her hair. It took all her self-control to keep from running. Adam had come to call. To call! She almost forgot to tell the maid to follow.

The maid knew her duties. She followed Meg into the drawing room and carried her mending to the farthest corner in silence. The idea she needed a chaperone with Adam tickled Meg.

He waited in the middle of the room, and Meg devoured him with her eyes. She was certain he had been pacing. He

glanced at her maid briefly before greeting her. “Thank you for receiving me, Miss Barlow,” he said.

She offered her hand and he bowed over it. “Welcome, Dr. Wagner. Shall I ring for tea?”

*Please say yes.*

His hesitation before nodding was so faint that she would have missed it if she wasn’t so aware of every inch of him. No sign of drink clouded his visage or breath. His hair had been neatly trimmed, and he wore a pressed suit, silk waistcoat, and smartly tied cravat. As a man might when he called on a lady. Her heart beat frantically, a little bird trapped in a sunny room.

She gestured to a plush chair with a shaking hand and took the dainty one with an embroidered seat across from him. It had been three days since she found him on the floor of the church. Two since her cousin the earl and the others had confronted him at his surgery. Neither Jack nor Ford told her what happened. Both thanked her for suggesting it. Perhaps her idea helped some of the men. *Did it help Adam?*

“Did his lordship tell you about our meeting?” he asked as if reading her mind.

“No. At least not beyond... That is, Jack and I thought—”

“It was your idea, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. “What I meant to say is that Ford thanked me, but told me nothing about what was said.”

“We all agreed that was best,” he replied.

“All?”

“Several of the men were there, and they all emptied their darkest secrets. Nothing that was said will leave that room.” He looked bleak momentarily. “You were right though.”

“Right about what?”

“Right that speaking about the wars would help. All of us. We’ve agreed to talk regularly, those of us that can.”

“I’m glad.” She swallowed. Hard. “And did it? Help *you*.”

He smiled sadly. "I haven't had a drink in three days."

"I'm glad."

"I haven't had an episode, either, Meg, but that doesn't mean I won't. I'm relieved that I'm not losing my mind as I feared, but I suspect such things will happen again when something sets off the memories. I'm not healed, if that is what you hoped."

Her heart fell. *He's come to tell me to give up.*

A scratch at the door signaled tea. She rose, happy for the distraction. She added tea to the pot and covered it to steep. Cook had kindly sent butter cakes as well, but Adam declined one.

Meg forced a smile to her face. "What do you plan to do?" she asked.

"Get better," he replied fiercely. "I will do my best to stay away from the drink, but I can't promise."

"No one expects you to promise anything."

That seemed to give him confidence. "I've been considering things. The drinking is a day-by-day decision. I want to see more of Annie."

"You mean to leave that darling girl here? Adam, I—"

He raised a hand to quiet her. "No. I mean to bring her home, but not yet. I thought if I saw her more, newer, happier memories might drive out my ugly thoughts. Let her get used to me as I am. When I'm confident I won't go back there around her, we can move her home."

*We.*

She had a twinge of hope. "That seems like a sound plan."

"It might work if you are with us. When I see her. I thought we could begin with a picnic. Perhaps she can find that goosander to show me."

*With him!* "She will be ecstatic to have as much of her father as you can give her."

“The thing is Meg, I know I have no right, but I saw you with Randall Clark. Is there an understanding I should know about?”

She shook her head. “I’ve told the gentleman we will not suit.”

His smile, explosive joy darkened by fears, wrapped itself around her weary soul.

*Can he possibly about to propose?*

She glanced over at the maid. “Mary, please go up to the nursery and fetch Miss Annie. Tell her she must put on clean clothing.” That should take a while.

Adam spoke as soon as the maid left. “I want—and again I have no right—to ask you to wait for me,” he said, hope a living thing in his eyes.

“Wait?” The word almost stuck in her throat and came out more harshly than she intended.

“I was ready to propose last winter, Meg. I’m ready now but that wouldn’t be fair. You heard me a moment ago. I am not healed. At the same time, you have a right to make up your own mind. Let’s wait and, in a year, if you still want, we can —”

“No.”

His face fell.

“My mind is already made up. I’ve known since I met you at that Harvest Festival. I decided yesterday that I’m not going to another one alone. If you are proposing, I say yes with all my heart.”

He opened his mouth to argue and closed it again, worry marring his face where joy should be.

She rushed on. “We can have a long betrothal. If in a year—after the next festival—either one of us has cause for worry, I will cry off. If not, we’ll marry. But I won’t wait to announce to the world that I belong to you.”

His intent gaze slowly softened. “Miss Barlow, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

He appeared ready to add an if or a when. She didn’t let him. “Yes,” she whispered in a rush. She rose and locked the door.

Adam rose as well. “Meg?”

She walked into his arms. “I love you, Adam Wagner. Now kiss me.”

He did. Well and truly. As her body melted against him, Meg knew she’d won.



## EPILOGUE



*One Year Later*

Another Reabridge Harvest Festival had come and gone. Adam spent this one with his beloved and his daughter. Someone had taken the maypole down, and most of the booths had been folded by the time Adam strode across the island in midafternoon the day after the fair.

The entire town had been eager to toast his pending nuptials. He'd managed to avoid the drink while respecting the well-intended gestures. The rapture of Meg in his arms under the full moon the previous night had more than made up for it.

It also made him even more impatient for his wedding night. *Tonight.*

Annie tugged his hand. Her adorable pink gown and new bonnet had delighted her. She positively glowed. "You look happy Papa. Are you looking forward to the cake?"

*Cake. Yes.* "I am," he said with a grin.

Annie and Meg had had many discussions about what cake to serve at the wedding breakfast. It was to be held at Barlow Hall.

Jack waited for them at the church door with his Gwen. They left their ladies to await the bride and greeted the vicar.

He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply.

"Ready?" Jack asked.

“Yes.” It had been a long year. He’d managed to stay sober mostly, but there had been two or three memorable lapses. Meg’s forgiveness and encouragement made all the difference. “And no. Tell me again what you told her about the nightmares.”

““They can’t be helped. I always wake up. Your face beside me helps.’ Tell me you already had that conversation! It’s too late now.”

“Yes. A few times.” He signed. The nightmares and hallucinations still came, but they were fewer, and when they did, he usually recognized them for what they were before they took hold of him. Meeting with other veterans made a difference. So did Meg’s determination to displace them with happy memories.

He glanced back at Annie grinning from the rear. She’d moved home a month after he proposed to Meg and had thrived, putting his fears and insecurities to rest.

The church doors opened then and light flooded in. Meg swathed in some delicious peach-colored concoction entered on the earl’s arm. She wore her own Reabridge amulet proudly, but it was her radiant face focused on Adam alone that drove out the last ghost of his fear and filled his heart with joy.

Annie bounced down the aisle, proud and delighted, and slipped into the front pew next to the earl’s wife, Vicky, cradling her newborn, the earl’s pride and joy, his mother, Dowager Countess Barlow, and Vicky’s aunt, the Comtesse d’Vaux.

At last Ford, as he had come to call him, placed Meg’s hand in Adam’s with a grin, giving her into Adam’s keeping.

*And I into hers, he thought. We’re in each other’s keeping.*

He never remembered the words of their vows, the vicar’s admonition, or Jack handing him the ring, so fixated on Meg’s face was he. The joyful applause of their friends registered on the fringes of his awareness.

Throughout his life, however, what he felt walking out of the shadows into the light that day with Meg on his arm glowed in memory. He had been made whole and knew he would never have to face obstacles alone. They did so together, and overcame them all, growing old in the light of their love after a life of service to the people of the shire.

THE END

# ABOUT CAROLINE WARFIELD



Award winning author of family centered romance set in the Regency and Victorian eras, Caroline Warfield has been many things: traveler, librarian, poet, raiser of children, bird watcher, Internet and Web services manager, conference speaker, indexer, tech writer, genealogist—even a nun. She reckons she is on at least her third act, happily working in an office surrounded by windows where she lets her characters lead her to adventures in England and the far-flung corners of the British Empire. She nudges them to explore the riskiest territory of all, the human heart.

She has a particular weakness for returning soldiers. You can find many more of them in her books. Look for *Wounded Hearts*, *Dangerous Secrets*, *The Reluctant Wife* and more.

*Learn more about Caroline at:*

**Website:** <http://www.carolinewarfield.com/>

**Email:** [warfieldcaro@gmail.com](mailto:warfieldcaro@gmail.com)



# A HARVEST BLESSING



RUE ALLYN

# A HARVEST BLESSING

## RUE ALLYN

### **What can the son of an English vicar and the daughter of a French Comte possibly have in common?**

After Waterloo, Captain Thom Owen is uncertain what to do with himself. Then fate casts Charité du Pessac and her aunt in his path. No gentleman would abandon a damsel as brave and kind as Miss du Pessac, but how can he help her? With no clear solution in mind, Thom escorts the ladies home to his father.

Charité's aunt believes her niece and the Captain are engaged, and Charité fears the Captain's father will not welcome them. She is French after all, and while the captain might not object to her nationality, others—like his father—might disapprove of a marriage between former enemies.



# CHAPTER 1



*September 1, 1815*

*The Vicarage, Reabridge, Cheshire*

Captain Thomas Paul Owen recommended the ladies remain in the carriage and approached the vicarage door. Memories threatened to swamp him.

His mother holding his hand as they followed Papa to church. Then, a year later, following his father alone.

The years of silent meals and disciplined study. Thank heaven he loved to read. His mother may have died, but his father did his duty by his son. Successful study was praised. Failure received frowns and a warning to try harder.

As he'd grown older, he'd tried to discuss topics his father categorically said were wrong. Those attempts had met with many a supperless night. Until the final disagreement that had sent him from home.

Thom raised his hand to the knocker. His heart raced, and his empty stomach knotted. He clutched the iron ring in the lion's mouth, waiting for the familiar and fearsome dizziness to pass.

His father's last words to him rang in his ears. "Don't do this, son. God forbids killing for good reason. War and taking others' lives can break a man's soul."

He'd turned his back on his father and had gone off to fight Boney along with his childhood friends. Too many of

them had died. Those few who survived returned home broken in body or spirit or both.

Thom was one of those. War had broken him—part of him, but he could never confess such to his father. The Reverend Joshua Isaac Owen, Vicar of Reabridge, saw everything through the lens of unshakeable faith. It would give him no pleasure to say ‘I told you so.’ Nonetheless he would say it, and Thom had no wish to hear it. His soul might be held together by a thread, but he had some pride.

Finally steady, he rapped the iron ring on the wood three times. More than once in the journey from England’s southeast coast, he’d told himself this was a bad idea. But he had exhausted all options. Others depended on him now. He must swallow his fears and his remaining shreds of pride to seek help for them.

The door opened and a young man stared into the twilight at Thom.

“May I help you, sir?”

“Yes, you may. However, first tell me who you are and where is Stewart.”

Stewart had been the vicar’s man of all work since before Thom was born.

The current man lifted his chin.

Thom supposed he could have been more diplomatic in his query.

“I am Fields, Sir. Stewart is my uncle and retired to live with his sister in Cheshire.”

“Thank you.” Thom cleared his throat. “I need to see Vicar Owen. And the next time you see your uncle, give him good wishes, from Captain Thom Owen.

The man’s chin relaxed and his eyes widened slightly. “You’d be the vicar’s son?”

“I am.”

“Then by all means, come in. Come in, sir. Mr. Owen has just now sat to his supper, but I am certain he will wish to see you.”

Thom put his cape, hat and gloves on the chair and followed the servant to the dining room.

“Sir, I beg pardon for disturbing your supper, Captain Thomas Owen is here to see you.”

Thom pushed past the servant. “Thank you, Fields. I’ve come home, Father.”

Vicar Owen set down his spoon, blotted his lips with a napkin, and stood. “I suppose you expect I’ll welcome my prodigal son with a fatted calf and shower you with gifts?”

“I have no expectations of you, Father. However, I have hopes that you will aid some ladies in need.” He had also hoped that time had dulled the painful edge of their parting.

“You dare to bring your women to your mother’s home?”

“They are not *my women*, Father.” Throughout the journey he had ruthlessly repressed any feelings that might stir for the younger of the ladies.

“Indeed, we are not, sir.”

Miss Charité du Pessac spoke from behind Thom.

He moved to the far side of the table to let her into the room. Lady Faith Afton, her aunt followed.

*Why didn’t I hear them?*

“You should have remained in the carriage,” he murmured as the women passed.

“Nonsense,” Lady Afton said. “You told us your father is a vicar. He’ll not turn aside hungry beggars.”

She didn’t look much like a beggar. Her ensemble was of the first stare, save for being twenty years out of style. The elegant, if slightly worn, outfit of deep blue velvet with matching cloak and shoes fit her perfectly. “Now take my cloak. This house is decidedly warmer than that coach.”

Thom did as bid, handing the clothing to Fields.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Owen, but as you can see my aunt and I are quite respectable.” Miss du Pessac had removed her cloak, bonnet and gloves as she spoke and gave them to the servant who moved from the door to accept them. She then took a chair to the right of the vicar.

Thom’s father looked down his nose. “Precisely who might you be, and why do you believe you would be welcome in my home?”

Thom nearly grinned. His father was about to be surprised. Indeed, Thom had personal experience of Miss du Pessac’s determination.

Her aunt chose that moment to move to the chair beside her niece. Thom sighed and assisted the older woman to sit.

“Father, may I present, Lady Faith Angelica Afton of Faversham and her niece Miss Charité Estelle Benéntia Marmont du Pessac. Ladies, my father, the Reverend Joshua Isaac Owen, Vicar of Reabridge.”

His father studied the two women for a long while before he spoke to the waiting servant.

“Fields, tell Mrs. Appleberry we have unexpected guests and will need three more of each course. You may bring the soup immediately. Then go and assist the coachman. Show him where to put the carriage and stable the horses. Make certain he is offered supper and inform him he may sleep in the stable. Provide him with a blanket.”

“Yes, sir.” The servant left.

His father looked at Thom. “Well, don’t just stand there. Sit”

Thom ground his teeth. He would not rise to his father’s baiting before the ladies. He took a chair at the foot of the table from which leaves had been removed. While his mother lived the table had always been set for ten or twelve, as guests were forever stopping by. “Thank you for the invitation, Father.”

They ate in silence, save for Miss Afton's incessant prattle. She spoke about every item of news—worthy or not—without stop.

Thom cared nothing about scandals and social tidbits, but he casually wondered if Charité's aunt memorized scandal sheets like the Teatime Tattler.

*She's a lonely old woman, what else does she have to occupy her time?*

When the syllabub arrived, his father cleared his throat.

Miss Afton subsided.

“Ladies, Thomas, where are you planning to spend the night? And how long will we have the pleasure of your company in Reabridge?”

Charité and her aunt looked down at their plates.

“We have no plans to leave Reabridge, Father. I had hoped you would offer the ladies your hospitality, as they have not yet determined where they would like to live.”

His father harrumphed. “This is a bachelor household Lady Afton, Miss du Pessac. Propriety prevents me....”

A thin wail interrupted him. “*Aimeé.*”

Charité's head snapped up, and she stabbed the vicar with a glare. “That is a child crying. You have a child in this house? Where?”

“I do have a charity case living here. The boy is not quite two and sleeps in the old nursery on the third floor.”

“And you left him alone?” She scolded. “Tell me his name.”

“Sam. His surname is yet to be determined.”

“Hmpf.” Charité stood, threw down her napkin, and swept out the door as fast as her skirts permitted.

“My word? Is she like that all the time, Lady Afton?”

The old woman shrugged. “I do not know. We have only recently met. Charité's mother was my much younger sister.

Hope had entirely too much determination. She married that Frenchman against our family's wishes. I'd no notion I had a niece until she and your son turned up on my doorstep. As surprised as I was to learn of my young relative, I am delighted that she accepted your son's proposal. Thomas is such a kind young man. I know they will be happy together."

The vicar's brows lifted, and he turned a gimlet eye on Thom.

"I can explain, Father."

"Indeed. Explanations can wait until we have our brandy." His father rang a hand bell that, for all of Thom's life, stood before the place setting at the head of the table.

"Yes, sir." Fields stood in the dining room doorway.

"Please prepare three bedchambers. Our guests will be staying. Once the rooms are prepared, have the luggage brought up from the carriage, and send to Lower Reabridge for one of the Pakenham girls to act as maid for the ladies."

"Wait." Thom rose and stopped the man as he turned to go. "Two chambers. I'll not be staying here."

"I know you and I have much to resolve, Thom, but you are my son." His father's mouth thinned.

*Is that disappointment or anger in Father's eyes?*

"As you were about to say earlier, Father, this is a bachelor household. As Vicar you could house a young lady and her aunt without question. However, I feel strongly that Lady Afton's and Miss du Pessac's reception by the citizens of both Upper and Lower Reabridge will be much more pleasant, if I reside elsewhere until ... until some issues are resolved."

His father's shoulders slumped.

*He's simply tired.*

"Two chambers, then." the vicar said. "Lady Afton, perhaps you would follow my man. He will show you your room. Afterward, he will go to the nursery to inform Miss du Pessac as to the location of her chamber."

Lady Afton looked from the vicar to Thom then nodded and rose. "Of course. I will see you both tomorrow."

The lady's footsteps faded on the stairs.

"Will you have brandy?" His father asked.

"No, thank you. I must be going. I want to arrive at Barlows' before they retire."

The Barlows were one of the preeminent families of Reabridge. The earldom was ancient, but Thom had never let social status deter him from a potential friendship. His mother had been a good friend of the countess, and visits between the two families had been frequent and boisterous. Thom could not recall a time when he had not known Ford.

Now 6th Earl Barlow, Stafford James Houghton Barlow and Thom had galloped stick horses, slain imaginary dragons, and saved the entire town from disasters of all sorts in the halcyon days before they were shipped off to school together. They'd joined up to fight Boney in the same week.

Even when rank and assignment had separated them, they'd kept in touch and had promised aid of any sort no matter the cause. Thom had confessed to Ford his doubts about being welcome at the vicarage. Ford had insisted his friend stay with his family, even if Ford himself was from home. He'd promised to write immediately and inform his mother to have a chamber ready for Thom at a moment's notice.

"Ah, you and Lord Barlow were good friends. Is his family expecting you?"

"I am invited, if that is what you mean. Although they do not know the exact date of my arrival."

His father resumed his seat and stared at the spoon he twisted in his fingers. "Will you stop by tomorrow?"

Thom frowned.

*Father is not a man given to nervous behavior.*

"I will come as often as you wish."

His father looked up, some emotion lighting his eyes. “Come after breakfast tomorrow. I’ll send the ladies off on an errand. You and I need to talk about your, er, fiancée and a number of other items. Much has changed in Reabridge since you left. And some things have not. If you are to stay as you claim, you must know how things stand.”

An extended conversation with his father was one of the last things Thom wished. However, it was inevitable, so best to have it over soon.

“I will arrive at eleven.”

“Thank you. Please give my regards to Lord Barlow and his family.”

“I will, of course. Goodnight, Father.”

After retrieving his possessions, Thom made his way to the stables.

He found the coachman snoring but felt no compunction about waking him.

“What is it, sir?”

“I want to settle up with you. Thank you for your services.” Thom gave the man his last pence.

The man counted the money. “Thankee, sir. You’re right generous.”

“Goodnight then.” Thom set off to walk the mile or so to Barlow Hall wondering how he would support himself.

He hadn’t expected to be traveling home with two women in tow. However, given the events in Bajadoz, he could no more refuse to help Charité du Pessac than he would refuse to help Barlow, were his friend in need. She’d practically saved his life. Even if he did not owe her that debt, he was not cruel enough to abandon a respectable woman on the Dover docks when he had hired the last carriage.



## CHAPTER 2



*September 2, 1815, The Vicarage*

Charité woke to the pat of a small sticky hand on her cheek.

“Eat.”

She opened her eyes to smile at the golden-haired, blue-eyed cherub. Last night she’d found him crying and frightened in his bed. She’d had to fight him a little bit to get him into her arms, but still weeping he’d settled the moment she began to rock him. An hour later she’d laid him in his bed and went in search of the nurse’s cot.

“Good morning, Master Sam. We will eat soon. First, we must wash and dress.”

The boy tugged on her blanket. “No, eat.”

“Yes, soon. Come.” She rose from the cot then lifted the lad. “Let’s make ourselves presentable.”

The boy looked a question at her.

“Never mind. We’ll just get ready to eat.”

Sam smiled. “*Oui*, eat.”

She nodded as she set him on a low stool near the nursery wash basin. She dampened a cloth then bent to wash his face.

“*Non*,” he protested and squirmed away, giving her a glare.

“Hmm.” She smiled at him and knelt to his level. “Watch me.”

She stroked the damp cloth over her face and made satisfied sounds. As she washed her hands, Sam stared then made a grab for the cloth.

“*Moi.*” He scrubbed at his cheeks, mouth and hands. “*Bien?*”

“*Bien, very good.*” She agreed. “Now I wonder where your clothes are?”

Sam slid off the stool and ran to a chest of drawers several feet away. He patted the highest drawer. “*Couches.*”

She stood, opened the top drawer. “Ah, clouts.”

“*Couches!*”

Thank heaven language would not be a problem. Sam’s few words were uttered in the very familiar accent of the area in France where she had been a child.

“*Oui, Master Sam. But also clouts.*” She retrieved one of the cloths from the drawer, along with more clothing found in the next drawer down.

“*Claw-ets?*”

She nodded and pointed at the floor. “Now lay down and help me get you dressed. *Aide-moi à t’habiller.*”

The boy complied and soon they were both ready. She descended the stairs holding Sam in her arms. He plucked at the gathers on his pale-yellow frock. They bypassed the dining room and went to the kitchen.

“Ah, there ye are, Master Samuel.” Mrs. Appleberry was thin, but rosy-cheeked and cheerful. “This be ye’r new nursemaid?”

Cheer was all well and good, but Charité was a stranger to the cook. She doubted Mr. Owen had spent time last night telling his staff much about her when he knew so very little himself. She held out her hand and introduced herself.

“Good morning. I am Miss Charité du Pessac. I arrived last night. When I heard Sam cry out, I went to him immediately. A frightened child should never be left alone.” She knew that

from personal experience, but the cook did not need to know the tragedies Charité had lived through. All she needed to know was that Charité was an ally and a safe person for Sam to be with.

“Well, now.” Mrs. Appleberry wiped her hands on her apron before accepting Charité’s hand. “I can agree with that. Sam here has had a rough time of it as I hear tell from what the Vicar has let fall to ears all over Upper and Lower Reabridge.”

So, the vicar gossiped. Purposefully, Charité hoped. She’d met clergymen who related every thought and piece of information, simply from loneliness.

Was Vicar Owen lonely? How many years had Thom Owen been gone to war? How had his father, a widower, ended up taking care of Sam? What would the vicar think of her precipitous exit last night? Had Aunt Faith repeated that ridiculous story of an engagement between her niece and Thom? Would the vicar understand when he learned the truth?

She prayed he would, for she refused to lie to anyone.

Mrs. Appleberry gestured to the table in the center of the big room. “Sit you down over there, and I’ll bring you both some porridge. The honey pot’s already on the table. Master Sam is fond of some in his porridge.”

Charité rarely indulged in sweets herself. When she and her governess had fled the attack that killed her parents, there had never been money enough for more than the barest necessities. She settled at the table, securing Sam on her lap with one arm.

The porridge arrived.

Sam clapped happily. “*Bouille.*”

“Yes, Sam.” She responded as she spooned honey onto the food. “Porridge.”

“Po’dge? *Non, Bouille.*”

With the patience of nearly seven years’ experience caring for young children, Charité nodded.

“*Bouille est Française. Porridge is English.*” She consumed a spoonful humming satisfaction when she swallowed.

Sam reached for the spoon. “Po’dge!”

She let his hand rest on hers as she scooped up more porridge and conveyed it to his mouth. “Yum.”

“Yum,” Sam nodded and pushed her spoon-laden hand toward the bowl.

Between them, they cleaned the bowl.

“Harrumph.”

Charité looked up into the vicar’s unsmiling visage.

Sam, leaned into her, burying his face against her shoulder.

“Sam.” With her crooked finger, she lifted the boy’s head. His lower lip trembled. “You must say ‘Good day’,” she continued. “*Dis bonjour*, to Mr. Owen.”

That lower lip firmed. “*Non.*” And Sam once more hid his face.

She lifted his head again. “*Oui, dis bonjour et merci.*”

Sam stared narrow-eyed at the vicar. “*B’jo’ci.*” Then he immediately turned his face to her shoulder.

Eyes wide, the vicar bent to the level of Charité and Sam. “You are very good with him, Miss du Pessac. *De rien, Sam.*”

Mr. Owen placed a gentle hand on Sam’s back.

The boy turned watery eyes on the man. “*Me parles?*”

The Vicar nodded then straightened before taking a seat beside Charité. “I had forgotten, mademoiselle, how easily frightened young children were. Thank you for reminding me. Mrs. Appleberry. I will have my eggs and toast here.”

Still clinging to Charité, Sam watched the vicar’s every move.

“Might you be willing to accept a position as Sam’s nurse, until we discover who his family is? I could pay you a bit.”

“I will consider it. Please tell me about him and how he came to be here.”

“Four days past, a couple arrived here. They had been traveling in France, and were now on their way home. While in France, they stopped for refreshments in a village—the husband who related this story could not recall the name. While there, the local priest approached them and asked them if they might know the family of an orphaned child.”

“That was very good of him.” Charité murmured, as she rubbed Sam’s back.

The boy’s head began to droop.

“The child had been found several months prior beside the body of a woman presumed to be his mother,” the vicar continued. “She had died, the priest believed, of fever. The village had taken the baby in; one of the women volunteered to be wetnurse for the babe. The priest had kept the mother’s belongings to give to the child when he was older. He’d also named the child, Samuel.”

Charité nodded, rocking back and forth with Sam against her shoulder. Nothing about the story thus far was exceptional.

“The priest showed the couple a letter, a locket and an amulet that had been found with Samuel’s mother. The letter was in English, but otherwise unhelpful. Nor did the couple recognize the images inside the locket. However, the wife did recognize the amulet as one given to every girl from Reabridge on the occasion of the Harvest Festival closest to her sixteenth birthday.”

“That is intriguing.” One-handed, she sipped her tea. *As well as*, she thought, *a bit worrisome*. Her stomach twisted and she wished she’d not taken the tea. How could an amulet given to every girl in the town help to identify Sam’s family? No, as a means of identification, none of the items Vicar Owen mentioned were sufficient. She wasn’t about to allow the little boy to go to strangers who might only take him out of an imagined sense of duty. *And how is Sam staying at the vicarage any different? Isn’t the vicar caring for the boy simply because it is his duty? I doubt very much that I would*

*have any say in where and with whom this darling boy is placed.*

“Because they knew the amulet and Reabridge, the couple agreed to bring Sam here with them, if one of the women from the village would accompany them as his nurse. They begged us to take Sam and find his family. I called a meeting of the town families, but none were willing to accept Sam without more definite proof. I then agreed to take the boy in until we could determine who his family was.” Vicar Owen sat back, his narrative at an end.

“Poor child.” Charité smoothed Sam’s hair and gave him a small squeeze.

He lifted his head from her shoulder and regarded the vicar with doubt.

Mr. Owen laid into the eggs the cook set before him.

“He needs a mother,” Charité said. “I will be happy to care for him. Do you think it will take long for you to determine who his family is?”

“I am not certain. I’m hoping for sooner rather than later. Nonetheless, I am prepared to raise Sam myself, if need be.”

“That is very generous of you, Mr. Owen.”

“It is the right thing to do, generous or not.”

Charité nodded.

“Would you like more tea, Miss?” the cook asked. “And a cup of milk for young Master Sam?” Mrs. Appleberry tousled the child’s hair, and he smiled up at her.

“*Lait.*” He clapped his hands.

“Very good, Sam,” the vicar said.

“In English, Sam. Milk, please,” Charité informed him.

Sam frowned up at her “Mik?”

“Excellent.” She kissed his cheek.

“Surely it is too soon to be teaching him English,” Mr. Owen remarked.

“I do not think so, Mr. Owen. He will hear English more often now and needs to accustom himself to using it. It is not as if I intend formal instruction for so young a child. However, children learn by imitation. If I speak English to him, he will begin to speak it as well. Fortunately, I am from the same area of France as Sam and can use familiar words to soothe him when he becomes upset. I may even know some of the same lullabies his nurse used. We’ll find out tonight.”

“I understand you spent the night in the nursery.”

Mrs. Appleberry placed tea, mugs and milk before them.

Charité poured and helped Sam with his cup.

“I did, and since I have decided to accept your offer to care for him, I would prefer to remain close to him.”

“I will have your luggage moved to the nursery.” Mr. Owen sipped his tea.

“Thank you.”

The cook approached. “Sir, I’ll remind you I need to be going to the market today.”

“I’ll have the funds for you in my office when you are ready to leave.” Mr. Owen said.

He stood, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ve a number of projects that need my attention. I wish to speak with you privately, Miss du Pessac about ... about... Last night your aunt said...”

“Ah, I see my aunt has told you the Captain and I are engaged,” Charité said quietly. “It is not true, sir. She misunderstands and refuses to accept our protestations.”

“We can discuss the matter at lunch.”

“I will take lunch with Sam but will join you for tea and later for supper, if that is satisfactory?”

“Most satisfactory. Until then.” He bowed and left.

“Mrs. Appleberry, is the market very far?”

“Not at all, Miss. It is almost on our doorstep.”

“Wonderful. Could Sam and I accompany you? We both need some exercise, and I would like to become familiar with the town.”

“I’ll be leaving at half after ten.”

“We’ll be ready. Thank you for breakfast.” Charité set Sam on his feet. “Come now Master Sam. Let us make ready for an adventure.”

“Venter?”

“Yes, Sam. Adventure, *Aventure*.”

The boy still looked confused.

“*Une marche*. We will go for a walk.”

Sam nodded his understanding. “*J’aime*.”

As they prepared for the outing, Charité’s thoughts drifted to Captain Thomas Owen. He’d come into her life during that horrifying time at Bajadoz when he was but an ensign. They’d literally saved each other’s lives. He’d seen her safe on her way to deliver the children she had charge of to their family. She’d thought of him often in the intervening three years. When she’d made the decision to contact her mother’s family in England, she’d wondered idly if she would meet the charming ensign again. Not very likely. Then she’d arrived in Dover and despaired of getting a coach to take her to Faversham on the promise of payment when they arrived.

She was negotiating with the driver of the last remaining carriage when her charming ensign had appeared. Now a captain, he was as agreeable as ever. He had insisted she ride in the coach, while he rode up top with the driver. Faversham, he had claimed was not far off his planned route. At the time, neither of them had expected to cross the breadth of England together.

*I pray Aunt Faith has not caused too much trouble, with her tale of an engagement.*

Thom wasn’t married. Charité discovered that much during the first days of their journey. He might have a sweetheart, or be promised. Although he’d said nothing. Then



again, why should he? They were strangers, mostly. She'd already voiced the truth to Mr. Owen. It wouldn't take much to clear up any remaining misconceptions.

She turned her mind to Sam and their coming adventure. The little imp had already managed to wriggle his way into her heart. No doubt, she would come to love him quickly.

Of course, she loved all children. It was only her duty as an adult to care for them and keep them safe. Sam was her charge now, and she would be his safe harbor in what must be to him a very strange world.

## CHAPTER 3



*September 2, 1815, The Vicarage*

Thom rapped the vicarage door knocker promptly at eleven o'clock. He adjusted the ill-fitting coat he'd borrowed from a stock of civilian clothes kept at Barlow Hall. While he was entitled to wear his regimentals, he felt strongly that the uniform no longer represented him accurately, nor he it. He may be in need of employment, but he would not trade on his service or the reputation gained during the war. He would earn what he needed on his merits, starting with his father. His greatest wish was to reclaim the calm trusting relation they'd had before he enlisted, before his mother died.

"Good morning, Fields." Thom handed the man his hat and gloves.

"It is indeed a fine day, sir. Although a bit chilly for early September."

"I am here to see my father."

"I believe Mr. Owen is in his study. Please follow me."

"Fields, I grew up in this house. Unless something has changed drastically, I can find my way."

The man gave a nod. "As you wish, sir."

Thom ambled his way towards the study.

The scents, beeswax and citrus, remained the same. Not a speck of dust was in sight. The quiet that as a child he'd always thought presaged great adventures to be had in the

woods of Upper Reabridge or the orchards of the lower town was the same as well.

The paintings on the corridor walls were of good quality but not master works. Especially not the last one across from the study. It was his first rather crude attempt to draw more than stick figures. The image was of his first pet, a spaniel with the unimaginative name of Charles, asleep and cuddled before a fire with the vicarage black and white cat, Socks.

His father had found the drawing when, a year or so after his wife's death, he went through her things, selling some, giving away others, and packing what remained into boxes stored in the attics against the day when his son might want them.

Why Father had kept this picture and had it framed, Thom did not know. His parent had never spoken a word about it. It had simply appeared in this spot, and there it remained.

The study door opened. "I heard you marching down the corridor. Will you come in, please."

Thom looked at his father whose frowning lips and wrinkled brow bespoke either disappointment or confusion. Nothing in Thom's memory allowed for confusion, so it must be disappointment. "Yes, sir. I apologize if I caused you any inconvenience. This corridor holds many memories for me."

The vicar cast an eye over his son before his expression softened. "For me as well, son. Come sit down. I had Fields bring tea earlier. Will you have a cup?"

The study, too, stimulated memories. Thom had spent many evenings before the fireplace in one of the armchairs with a table between. He would read while his father worked up his next sermon at the desk on the far wall. During winter, the wind might howl in the trees, and the mementos on the small shelf would rattle. The rest of the year the window stood open, allowing the scent of lilacs and lavender his mother had loved to fill the space.

He seated himself in the chair closest to the single window. His father did not need to sit in the draught that perpetually

flowed from that direction when temperatures turned cold.

The vicar poured, and with cup in hand launched the conversation. “What is this about your engagement to Miss du Pessac?”

*Tell the truth. Anything less is unworthy of both myself and Father.*

“The engagement began as a misunderstanding on the part of Miss du Pessac’s aunt, Lady Afton.”

“How did that come about?” His father tilted his head and lifted one brow.

*Thank heaven he has not jumped to conclusions.*

“I first met Miss du Pessac during the sack of Bajadoz.”

His father shuddered. “We heard about that. The papers both praised and decried the actions of our army after that city’s surrender.”

“We suffered great losses to win that victory. However, I do not believe that excuses the pillage and rapine my fellow soldiers imposed on the populace. I was one of many officers who spent close to three days restoring order and discipline.”

Amazingly, his father did not take the opportunity to chastise. “In what way does this relate to Miss du Pessac?”

“She’d taken refuge in the cellar of a ruined house along with two children to whom she was governess. A group of our men saw her when she emerged to see what went on. They moved to attack her. I intervened. Even so, one of the attackers managed to get behind me. Miss du Pessac found a weapon and ran the man through before he could do me harm.”

His father’s eyes widened. “How horrifying. I regret the man’s death, but I owe Miss du Pessac much for saving your life.”

“I was grateful as well. When the attackers were dispatched, I escorted her and the children to the command post then saw them safely on their way to the children’s relatives on the southwest coast of Spain.”

“And how did she come to be sharing your coach in England?”

“I did not imagine I would see her again. However, the day I arrived in England, I managed to hire the last available carriage on the Dover docks. A woman approached the driver. I had my back turned at the time, but I recognized her voice...” Thom’s words trailed off, and he stared into nothingness.

His father waited in silence.

*Does he understand how memory can interfere with conversation?*

Thom put his teacup aside. “I will never forget a moment of that terrible time in Bajadoz.”

His father nodded.

“Miss du Pessac was pleading with the driver to ask his passenger if she could share the carriage as far as Faversham.” Thom rubbed his jaw. “I immediately offered her the interior of the carriage and rode on the box with the driver.”

“You always had excellent manners.”

“Thanks to you and Mama.”

They fell silent at the mention of the woman they’d loved dearly.

“And what went forward at Faversham?” Curiosity crinkled the corners of his father’s eyes.

“We arrived about midday. We could see the house was in great disrepair. After much knocking on the front door, Lady Afton opened it for us.”

“I gather she had no servants?”

“Right. Her jointure is small, and her entire family had passed on. She’d been living alone for nearly three years. She’d dismissed all the servants, maintaining only the kitchen and what had once been the housekeeper’s chambers so as to conserve what funds she had. We introduced ourselves to her, and because we arrived together, she leapt to the conclusion

that Miss du Pessac and I were betrothed. Upon learning of my destination, Miss Afton further assumed that her niece and I were bound for Reabridge so you could officiate at our wedding.”

His father actually cracked a smile. The expression made Thom long for the days when his mother lived, and laughter filled the house.

“The plight of women left without support in England is regrettable. I do what I can here in Reabridge. Fortunately, most widows and spinsters have some family who can help. The few who don’t, perform light work for the parish.”

“And of course, you pay them from your living.”

His father’s lips lifted in a wistful smile. “Correct. I have not and will not live in luxury while others suffer.”

Thom would never have called life at the vicarage luxurious, but neither had he wanted for anything as a child.

“Have I made Lady Afton’s situation worse by bringing her here?”

“She still has her jointure?”

“Yes. Although, she saw her solicitor before we left Faversham. He told her it would take several days, perhaps weeks, before the funds could be transferred to a Reabridge bank.”

His father nodded. “And she has her niece now. Miss du Pessac seems a quite capable woman.”

“She most certainly is.” Thom straightened and smiled.

“Yet you have done nothing to disabuse her aunt of the engagement she assumed existed between you.”

His father folded his hands together, and Thom felt the penetration of a clerical stare.

*Each time he believes me tempted to falsehood, he employs that stare.*

“No.”

“Why is that?” The hands relaxed, and the stare vanished replaced by a raised brow and clear-eyed question.

“At first, I agreed to continue the false engagement because Miss du Pessac believed the truth would distress her aunt to the point where she would refuse to permit them to continue the journey with me. However, they could not remain in Faversham.”

“That is understandable. Did you plan to continue this, er, false engagement when you arrived in Reabridge?”

“Father, such had never been my intention nor that of Miss du Pessac.”

“Hmm.”

“However, I came to know that lady quite well during the trip from Dover to here. She is an amazing woman, capable, determined, generous but not excessively so.”

“She is quite pretty.”

Heat rose to Thom’s face. “You noticed.”

“I’m older, Thom. Not dead, or made of wood.”

Thom smiled. “Well, she is much more than a pretty face, I assure you.”

“She would have to be to survive on her own in Spain, even if she was far from any battle after Bajadoz,” his father asserted.

She is also wise and very fond of children.” Something stirred Thom to champion Miss du Pessac’s character.

“Indeed, I joined Miss du Pessac and young Sam for breakfast this morning.” His parent related some of that encounter.

“So, you’ve had opportunity to form an idea of her character.” Anxiety tightened Thom’s voice, and he leaned forward.

“I have. I was favorably impressed and offered her a position as Sam’s nurse. The position will only last until the child’s family is identified,” his father explained.

Thom relaxed. "Thank you, father, that is kind of you."

"The offer was not completely unselfish." His father folded his hands and lowered his head before looking up again.

Now was Thom's turn to raise a brow.

Father related the events that led to Sam's residence at the vicarage. "I've only had Sam here for four days. But the nurse who came with him from France refused to remain. She worried for her family and left for home within the hour of seeing Sam settled." He sighed.

He sighed. "The child took me in dislike and has been nothing but a great inconvenience. I've been forced to impose on the good will of the matrons of Reabridge proper to care for the boy while I go about my duties. So young a child adds to the daily burdens born by those good women."

"Why did you take him in? Why not leave him with a good family?"

Father shook his head. "None of Reabridge's ordinary folk wanted the child. They already have large families to care for."

"And the Pownalls and Buckleys?"

His father gave him a solid stare. "Nothing has changed there."

"So, they are still feuding. As I recall, it was the matriarchs who constantly fanned the flames." The feud had been so woven into town life, that Thom wondered what would happen if it ever ceased.

"They continue to do so. It was clear from conversations with them that Sam would be used as a weapon in their battles. No, the vicarage was the best place for the lad. Now with Miss du Pessac's help, he will be well cared for until we discover to whom he really belongs." Father's voice lifted in hope.

"I'm glad you and Miss du Pessac have come to this agreement. She needs whatever funds she can get. She's said nothing, but I could tell, as we traveled, she was quite worried



about how she would manage to care for herself and her aunt.” Thom frowned and leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“I can see you’d like to help her?” His father leaned in as well and placed a hand on Thom’s shoulder.

“Am I so easily read?” He smiled ruefully.

His father dropped the clasp on Thom’s shoulder and smiled as he sat back. “I’m your father. I’ve been reading your expressions since you were a babe.”

“I should have remembered that. The truth is I would help Miss du Pessac if I could, but I’ve nothing to offer her. I’ve no money left from selling out. Traveling across England with two ladies cost more than traveling alone. If I had hope of work, a permanent position, I could perhaps offer some sort of assistance.” He stood, pacing to the window and back.

His father rose too. “I’d no idea you were without funds. Please, let me...”

“No,” Thom raised a hand. “I’ll not take your charity.”

“You are my family, Thom.” Worry clouded his father’s gaze.

Thom reached to reassure him, but the older man stepped aside. “Father, as family, you should respect my decisions. I know how little money is available to maintain the vicarage and the church. All my life you have given away as much of your salary as you could manage to live without.”

“And that charity prevented me from giving you so many things other children had.” His father’s shoulders fell.

“I was always happy and never lacked for necessities.” He looked his father in the face. “The way you raised me, makes me proud to claim you as my father.”

“You didn’t seem so proud when you left for the army.” His father’s chin firmed, and he straightened.

“Nor were you proud of me. I’m sorry if my decision hurt you. Although I’ve come to see war as a great tragedy, I would not make a different choice.”

*Can Father hear the worry in my voice? I could not know if he would welcome me home or not.*

“I’m sorry as well, son. I prayed for your safety every day and was fully prepared to find you a completely broken man when you returned. But you aren’t.”

*Is that pride gleaming in his eyes?*

“Don’t imagine that I am unaffected by the things I’ve seen and done.” He paused considering what he should or should not say to his father, who seemed to have changed as well. There was little left of the judgmental man who’d sent his son off to war with a warning that his soul would break.

“I’d planned never to speak of the war to you or anyone. There are too many painful memories for me to begin to describe them. But there were good times too—the camaraderie of friends, stories, meals, and plans for the future.” Thom’s face heated to hear how emotion roughened his voice.

“So, your soul is not completely broken or heaven forbid dead?” His father asked.

“Wounded, perhaps,” Thom smiled. “I doubt I could speak to you as I have nor could I feel anything for Miss du Pessac were my soul deeply injured or dead.”

“What exactly do you feel for Miss du Pessac, son?” A one-armed hug accompanied the question.

“I wish I could say for certain. It is unlike any feeling I’ve ever had. She impressed me in Bajadoz. My relief at seeing her again in Dover surprised me, but as we traveled, each day I learned something new about her that made me dread arriving at Reabridge.” The journey had gone more quickly because of those daily discoveries.

“Dread? Really?” His father released him and stepped back.

“It wasn’t arrival here so much as Miss du Pessac no longer needing my help,” Thom confessed.

“You want her to be dependent on you?” There was that clerical stare again.

“No,” Thom shook his head. “I want her to need me a little bit. I want to be useful to her. To help her achieve her dreams.”

“You may be in love, Thom.”

“How can I be certain? How will I know she loves me back? She owes me a great deal, but I don’t want what she owes me. I...I want her. What will I do if she does not return my affections? At the same time, the thought of being always with her frightens me.” He stared back at his father.

“It is a father’s privilege to advise his children, so please listen carefully. Do not speak of your feelings to Miss du Pessac until you are certain of what those sentiments are. Instead, let your conduct speak for you. Your actions will show both of you where your true emotions lie.”

“Now,” his father continued. “What are your plans for your future?”

The mantle clock chimed one o’clock.

“I’ve a number of appointments today, Father. We will have to discuss my future plans at another time.”

“Of course. Come home for supper? I’m certain the ladies would like to see you and have someone other than a prosy old vicar to whom they can relate their day’s adventures.”

Thom moved in to hug his father. “You are neither prosy nor old. Yes, I will come to dinner. Thank you for the invitation.”

Thom left, calling to Fields for his hat and gloves. The upcoming appointments were essential to his future. He would speak with the head of every prominent family seeking support or funds or both for a school he hoped to establish.

This morning, as he’d wandered the town, his gaze had been drawn to the children running free in the market place where so many parents labored. He supposed it was Charité’s influence that had him watching the children. Some helped their parents, but just as many, especially younger ones, ran

about playing at some game and causing havoc amongst the folk attempting to stroll around the market stalls. Wouldn't it be better, he pondered, if those children were in school learning the tools to be especially helpful to their parents. Reading, writing, arithmetic. Nothing too complicated, just ordinary skills needed for a good life. Latin, Greek and the sciences could be added as the students grew older and some expressed interest.

As he had walked to the vicarage, he noted the top of the mill that had operated to the southwest of Lower Reabridge for several hundred years. While in France, Barlow, who'd kept in touch with his family, had written to Thom about the death of the Reabridge miller and the cost of getting flour brought into town.

Were the mill and its adjacent storage building still idle?

Were they in good enough repair to be used?

If so, and if he could find a man to run the mill, the school could be started on the lower level of the warehouse building. The upper levels could remain as storage for the mill. He began to feel very excited.

*I loved learning when I was young. I still do. Even during the war, I learned as much as I could about the places we went and the people we met.*

Sharing that learning with his fellow soldiers had been fun too. It didn't feel like teaching, but if he could share what he learned with others.... Well, it seemed like a fine idea to him. A teacher's salary wasn't large but one could make a living at it. First, he needed a school to teach in.

Yes, he could go to Chester or some other urban center where schools were already established, but Reabridge had a need he could see. He prayed the leading families in the area would share the same vision. Charité would like it a great deal if he helped to organize a school. And perhaps if the school flourished, in a year or so, he could offer her a decent life.

## CHAPTER 4



*September 2, 1815, Reabridge Proper*

Charité gave a ha'penny to a boy to carry her parcels to the vicarage then hoisted a tired cranky Sam into her arms.

“There, there, little man. We’ll be home soon,” she soothed.

“*Veux Aimée.*”

“I understand,” Charité stroked his back. “Did *Aimée* sing to you? *T’a-t-elle chanté? Fais dodo, coles mon p’tit frere. Fais dodo t’auras du lolo,*” she sang the lullaby so familiar from her own childhood. Before she finished the first two lines, Sam slept.

“Let me carry the boy,” offered Mrs. Appleberry. “He’s a big fellow for one so young.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Appleberry, but I love the feel of a child in my arms. I’d not trade carrying Sam for a king’s ransom. I’ve been a governess for many years now, and miss having children around me.”

“I can tell you are good for the lad, Miss. Should you get weary of that load. I’m happy to help.”

“I love all of the children for whom I’ve cared. I’m not certain I’ll know what to do with myself once Sam’s family is found. Do you happen to know if any of the gentry near Reabridge are in need of a governess, or perhaps a

companion? I could do that too, though governess is my preference.”

The cook frowned in thought.

What would she think if she knew Charité was the daughter of a Comte? Probably nothing much. All sorts of people fell on hard times. Still, Charité preferred to go by Miss du Pessac. It raised fewer questions and was much simpler.

“I’m sorry I am, Miss, but I can’t think of any local families who would need a governess or a companion. How are you at sewing? Tillie Timbledon is the local mantua maker. I know she needs a seamstress.”

Charité made a face that combined both smile and grimace. “I appreciate your help, Mrs. Appleberry, but my stitchery is indifferent. Good enough to be able to teach young girls the basics, but not up to the standards of a professional dressmaker.”

“That’s too bad. I’ll keep my ear to the ground and tell you the minute I hear of something.”

They fell silent until they neared the vicarage.

Charité followed Mrs. Appleberry into the kitchen, then made for the stairs. “I’m to have tea with Mr. Owen. Please tell him I’ll be down as soon as I settle Sam and clean up a bit.”

She’d just placed the covers over Sam and crossed the room to wash and change when her aunt entered the nursery.

“I hear you are to have tea with Mr. Owen.”

“How did you know that? Please sit.” She indicated the rocking chair where she had rocked Sam to sleep last night.

“Mr. Owen asked me to come up to watch over Sam while you the two of you speak.”

Charité lifted her brows “Perhaps he paid attention when I took him to task for leaving Sam alone at night.”

“You were quite upset. It would be difficult not to pay attention,” her aunt remarked.

“I did nothing but tell him the truth when we heard Sam crying. This morning, I spoke with Mr. Owen briefly. He asked me if I’d spent the night in the nursery.” She’d been surprised at his interest.

Lady Faith’s eyes went wide. “And what did you tell him?”

“The same as before. No child should be left alone at night, least of all one who suffers nightmares as Sam did.” Charité wished she sounded less like a scold.

Aunt Faith rolled her eyes. “Heaven help us. I’ve known you for less than two weeks, and I already know you have the most disturbing penchant for speaking the bald truth. You would do well, niece, to moderate how you present your truths. Not everyone finds unvarnished veracity appealing. Did you never have employers who did not appreciate what you told them?”

Charité frowned. “No, I don’t believe so. I’ve had a number of employers, but most of them were concerned with keeping their children safe from Napoleon’s armies and the other less obvious dangers posed by the rule of *le petit empereur*.”

“Such as how he stole your childhood home and ordered the deaths of your parents?”

Charité was certain her aunt did not mean to raise memories of that horrible time.

“I should never have told you about that. I’m sorry for causing you any distress.”

“The news of my sister’s demise did not surprise me.” Aunt Faith’s voice grew sad. “I mourn her loss, of course, but she’d been gone for many years. It is tragic that she and your father managed to survive the terror only to run afoul of Napoleon. I’ve wondered since the day you told me of my sister’s fate how you managed to escape.”

That was something more positive Charité could speak to. “Papa had advance warning of the arrest orders. He sent me and my governess off to her family with all of the money he

could gather. He gave me his signet ring and a letter as well. He told me that if I ever had the chance to reclaim my heritage, the ring and letter would be my proof. I never saw my parents again. I learned of their deaths from my governess. She helped me mourn not just the passing of my parents, but the loss of everything I'd known throughout my childhood."

Faith stood and opened her arms to Charité. They hugged tightly. She was certain her aunt understood.

When they stepped back, Faith resumed her seat and tilted her head. "Napoleon is defeated once and for all. Have you considered petitioning the French King for restoration of your heritage?"

Charité's brow wrinkled. "I gave it some thought over the past few years. I doubt I will make a petition. I can scarcely recall that life and am quite content as I am."

"You would not have to depend on the good graces of an employer," her aunt offered.

"Perhaps not, Aunt. However, I've never relied on an employer's good will. I've made certain I did the best possible job and put money aside should anything ever cause me to lose my current position. It's a policy that has stood me in good stead several times since my first employment as a governess." She wished she had some of those savings now.

"Well enough," Aunt Faith replied. "I hope you will not mind if I leave you a small bequest in my will."

"That is a long time in the future, I pray. Let us speak no more of it." The last thing Charité wished was to think of losing the aunt she'd so recently found.

"As you wish, child." Her aunt set the chair to rocking.

Charité finished washing then donned her one afternoon dress. "Could you do up the back of my gown, Aunt, while I put my hair in order."

"Of course." It took nearly as long for Faith to secure the back of Charité's dress as it did for Charité to finish arranging her hair.



“There.” She patted the last curl into place. “How do I look?” She turned a pirouette, ending in front of her aunt.

“A perfect picture of a lady. Mr. Owen mentioned something about hiring a town girl to help us. But I’m not certain I wish to be more beholden to him. Perhaps after my jointure is transferred to a local bank, I may pay some part of her salary.”

“Hmm,” was Charité’s only reply.

The nursery clock chimed three.

“You’d best be going, niece. It won’t do to keep our benefactor waiting.”

When Charité hesitated, her aunt waved her off. “I will send for you on the instant, if young Sam needs you.”

“Thank you, Aunt. Now take care of yourself and Sam.” Charité pointed out where everything was, then left.



As she approached the parlor, she heard raised voices.

“I tell you, that child belongs at Pownall House. He is the exact image of my great, great grandmother, Lucy Pownall. A portrait of her as a child hangs in our sitting room for all to see. You’ve seen it, vicar. Tell that Buckley female you’ve seen the similarities.” The shrill tones fell silent.

“Now, now Mrs. Pownall. Yes, I have seen the portrait, but while there is some resemblance, I could not say with certainty that your ancestor and Sam are related, based on that portrait alone.”

“Hah.” A second female voice boomed. “That boy looks no more like your illegitimate grannie Luce than he resembles Martin Clark’s prize sow.”

Drawn by a desire to aid Mr. Owen, Charité tiptoed to the door and observed.

Very little differed between the two grey-haired viragos save that Shrill Voice wore blue and Booming Voice wore green. Shrill stepped forward with index finger pointed coming within a hair's breadth of her opposite.

"Lydia Buckley, how dare you..." The index finger poked at Boom's ample chest. The woman in green retreated. "... malign my ancestor Lady Lucinda Westbrook." Shrill advanced, and that finger poked once more. "She deserved the respect of everyone in Reabridge..."

Boom retreated another step to be matched by Shrill and another dart of the finger. "...for the tragedy she suffered just because some nobleman chose to deny the marriage for which Lucinda had written proof."

Boom had space for only one more step backward. But she did not retreat. She glared at Shrill, grabbed the wrist attached to the offending finger and twisted.

"AOWH," Shrill howled.

A push followed the twist, and Shrill stumbled backward straight into Mr. Owen who'd approached the battling besoms. He and Shrill teetered on the edge of falling to the floor and wrecking a low pie crust table in the process.

Charité leapt into action, arriving in time to steady the vicar, allowing him to put Shrill back on her feet.

Boom advanced, retribution in her eyes.

Charité had seen such a look on the faces of the soldiers who attempted to attack her in Bajadoz.

Mr. Owen settled Shrill in an armchair. "Are you well, Mrs. Pownall?"

Charité placed herself between Boom and her target then extended her hand. "I'm Miss Charité du Pessac."

Boom blinked, but she also stopped.

"I don't believe we've met, Mrs. ...?"

"Buckley. Mrs. Lydia Buckley of the Crown & Castle. Who are you and how dare you stand in my way?" A puff of

garlic accompanied the objection.

“As I said, I am Miss Charité du Pessac. Mr. Owen has not had time to inform you, and your friend yet....” She glanced over to where Shrill wept noisily into the Vicar’s handkerchief. “I am hired to be young Master Samuel’s nurse until his family can be identified.” She gestured toward a card table and chairs at the opposite end of the room from Shrill.

Mrs. Buckley sat.

Charité pulled up a footstool and kept her attention focused on the older lady. Mr. Owen appeared to have Mrs. Pownall in hand. “I understand you have an interest in Samuel’s well-being. I can assure you I have over seven years’ experience caring for children of a variety of ages. I have never been dismissed from any household where I was employed, and I have excellent references that I can produce should you wish to see them.”

“I beg your pardon. Are you suggesting I hire you as nursemaid to Samuel? Aren’t you the woman who is betrothed to Thom Owen? Do you think your future husband will continue to allow you to work? The Owens may not move in the highest circles, but they are gentry nonetheless.”

Charité felt the blood drain from her face but issued a bright laugh. “Any talk of an engagement between myself and Captain Owen is precipitous and should not be spread about. As for you hiring me to care for Samuel, I suggest nothing of the kind, Mrs. Buckley.”

Charité infused her voice with the tone and rhythm she used when soothing distressed children. “I am already Samuel’s nurse. Employed by Mr. Owen. It is my job to ensure the boy’s safety and security, since he, as yet, has no family to do so for him. I will guard him with every fiber of my being until such time as Mr. Owen assures me he has found a safe, secure, and loving home for the child.” Charité stood, forcing the older woman to look up.

“You understand of course, the trauma Samuel has suffered traveling across France with strangers, albeit kind ones. Only to be left with other strangers.”

Mrs. Buckley nodded.

“Good. The child is overwrought with grief and shock. He could not possibly tolerate an environment as noisy and busy as a coaching inn. I did hear you say you are associated with an inn did I not?” Hopefully, she’d given the Buckley matron something to think about.

Mrs. Buckley swallowed and nodded. “Th...the child would not live at the inn, you understand.”

Charité patted the older woman’s shoulder, and with a hand on her upper arm encouraged her to stand. “Very wise. Best to let Samuel remain here until his family can be identified with absolute certainty.”

Mrs. Buckley complied. “But...?”

Charité took the woman’s elbow, guiding her through the parlor door and down the corridor to the front entry. “I thank you so very much for stopping by to chat with Mr. Owen and ask after Samuel’s circumstances. He is doing quite well, all things considered. In a week or so, I expect he will be ready to meet the local people who have his best interests at heart. I look forward to seeing you then.”

She had the front door open. Mrs. Buckley stepped out, but turned around.

“Good day, madam, and thank you for visiting.” Charité closed the door in the woman’s face and turned the key in the lock. Next, she made her way back to the parlor, arriving just as Fields brought Mrs. Pownall into the corridor.

The older woman forced Fields to halt and fixed her gaze on Charité.

Mrs. Pownall narrowed her eyes. “I saw what you did with Mrs. Buckley, and I thank you. But I warn you do not try that conversational mesmerizing nonsense with me. I am Mrs. Theodosia Pownall, mother to the current owner of the Book and Bell. Mind you, not so easily bamboozled as a weak-minded Buckley. I only leave Samuel in your care because Mr. Owen assures me the boy is content now. Guard him well,

Miss du Pessac. If harm befalls that child, you might well suffer the consequences.”

The woman turned on her heel and followed Fields.

Charité did not bother to watch but went into the parlor to find Mr. Owen, sitting in one of the armchairs a tumbler of amber liquid before him. He fanned his face with a folded newspaper. “Whew. Thank you very much for your help, Miss du Pessac. I do not care to think what might have happened had you not appeared when you did.”

When he moved to stand, she waved him back and took the other armchair.

“I gather the dispute between those two women is of long standing?” Charité asked.

“The Pownalls of Upper Reabridge and the Buckleys of Lower Reabridge have been feuding off and on for generations. No one is sure what started the fuss, but we’re fairly certain it had something to do with an attempt to deny business to a competing inn.”

“Does either family have a legitimate claim to Samuel?” she wondered.

“I’ve seen nothing yet that convinces me he might be related to either one.” Mr. Owen nodded and sipped his drink.

Charité inhaled relief. “I’d not want to see him placed with either family, if those women are typical representatives.”

“The older generation is much more combative than the younger ones who are coming to realize that the animosity is bad for business. The ill will, however, is close to a tradition, and I honestly believe they carry on hostilities simply out of habit.” He sighed.

“That is a habit which must change—not just for Sam but for the good of all who live and wish to prosper in Reabridge.” Charité worried not just about Sam’s future, but her aunt’s and her own.

“Wise words. If you can help me achieve that you will have accomplished a miracle.” Mr. Owen toasted her with a

lift of his glass.

“If we bend our minds to it, we may come up with some ideas. Let us give it a day or two to think on. Meanwhile, I believe you had something you wished to discuss with me.” She smoothed her skirts and waited.

“Ah, yes.” The vicar drained his glass and gestured at the tea service, which had endured the entire row with no harm.

“Shall I pour, sir?”

“Please.” Mr. Owen studied her. “As Thom’s father, I have a right and a duty to ask what is the actual relationship between you.”

She handed him his cup, took hers in hand and sipped. “Yes,” she said, lowering her teacup to her saucer. “Any decent parent would feel as you do. In truth, there is nothing beyond friendship between Captain Owen and myself.”

“Your aunt has declared otherwise.”

The vicar sipped at his tea and bit into a biscuit.

Charité decided the unvarnished truth was best. She related the incident of her first meeting with his son in Bajadoz. Her face heated a bit as she explained the encounter on the Dover docks and the captain’s help.

“I hesitated to accept his offer to escort Aunt Faith and me to Reabridge. I already owed Captain Owen my life. I did not want to be so much deeper in his debt.”

“Then,” she continued. “My aunt mistakenly thought we were bound to Reabridge to marry and she accepted the captain’s escort. I could do little but go along. I had no desire to countermand the wishes of an older woman whom I’d just met. It would have embarrassed her needlessly and left us in dire circumstances.”

Mr. Owen presented his cup, and Charité refilled it.

“Thom assumed a great deal to promise my assistance.”

Charité nodded. “But he was correct. You have helped me and Aunt Faith tremendously. When the time comes that I

must give up Samuel, I will have a small nest egg with which to start a life here in Reabridge. As for my supposed engagement to Captain Owen, I will explain to Aunt Faith that we have mutually decided not to marry. No one need know there was any talk of marriage, mistaken as it was.”

Mr. Owen sipped then set his cup aside and leaned toward Charité.

“I very much fear it may be too late to stop any gossip about a betrothal between you and Thom. Your aunt, Miss du Pessac, must have spent too much time alone in the years before you were reunited with her. She, um, enjoys having an audience and does not watch her tongue carefully. She’s spent considerable time in the kitchens under pretext of wishing to save Fields the trouble of bringing her tea. I’ve heard her babbling at Mrs. Appleberry. Though I have not paid close attention to what she said.”

“Oh dear.” Charité’s teacup tilted. She righted it and put it on the piecrust table before any damage occurred. “That must be how Mrs. Buckley learned of the engagement. I told her that any such talk was precipitous and suggested she not repeat the rumor. However, if Aunt Faith has been talking indiscriminately, the entire town probably believes the captain and I to be engaged.”

“Is that such a terrible idea?” The vicar gave her a clear-eyed stare.

Charité opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “I do not know what to say to that.”

“Do you have any tender feelings for my son, Miss du Pessac?”

Charité appreciated Mr. Owen’s directness.

“Captain Owen has my gratitude, respect, and...and I suppose, affection,” she confessed.

“Affection and respect are excellent bases for building a marriage.” Something warm entered that stare.

Charité swallowed. “I would never wed anyone who did not have such regard for me. And I do not know how Captain

Owen thinks of me. He is ever courteous, and never goes beyond the line of what is proper.”

Mr. Owen shifted his gaze to the fire.

“Sometimes my son can be a fool,” he mumbled.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

*Had he really called Thom a fool?*

“I think you and my son need to spend more time together. I’ve invited him to dine with us tonight and will encourage him to do so every night.”

Charité’s face heated. “You need not interfere, sir. I am certain Captain Owen is quite capable of seeking his own opportunities to see me should he wish to do so.”

“You are correct.” The vicar nodded.

His words reassured, but the expression on his face did not.

*He’s plotting something. Please heaven he does not attempt to play at matchmaker.*

“I have kept you from young Samuel long enough, Miss du Pessac. Thank you for speaking with me, and thank you very much for your help with mistresses Buckley and Pownall.” Mr. Owen smiled.

“You are very welcome, Vicar. I have enjoyed our conversation.”

They stood together.

“However, before I leave. Have you thought of holding another meeting with all the people interested in Samuel’s future?”

Vicar Owen grinned. “I will consider the idea. With many people present, Mistresses Buckley and Pownall would not dare let themselves be seen at less than their most courteous. Although private meetings may be best. In private, people will feel more comfortable and thus reveal more of their true selves.”



“I know you will decide what is best, sir. Good afternoon.”

Charité departed, somewhat reassured that Mr. Owen regarded her with kindness. But she worried that he might interfere between her and Thom. She would admit to no feelings for the captain deeper than gratitude and friendship. Not even to herself. The last thing either of them needed was to be pushed into a closer relationship before they truly understood their own sentiments.

## CHAPTER 5



*September 2, 1815, The Vicarage*

Thom wiped his mouth, put down his napkin, and surveyed his empty dish. Not a crumb of bread pudding remained. Soldiers never knew when the next meal would come, so they always ate rapidly and consumed everything available. Someday, he hoped he would drop the habit.

He raised his head to see his fellow diners still partaking of the sweet.

“My complements to Mrs. Appleberry. That was an excellent pudding.”

His father looked at the empty dish. “I’m delighted you enjoyed it. Would you like more?”

Thom eyed the remaining pudding in the serving bowl on the buffet next to the wall. Yes, he wanted more, but he was no longer as active as when he was in the army. Besides, there looked to be just enough for Mrs. Appleberry, Fields, and the tweeny to share. “Thank you, Father, but no. I would like instead, while you all finish your deserts, to tell you how I spent my day.”

“By all means, son. I think we would all enjoy learning of your activities.”

Charité and Lady Faith both nodded.

“I started with a visit to Earl Barlow—my good friend Ford—and spoke with him about establishing a day school for

the town children. He had a number of good ideas about how to fund the school and gain more support.”

“A school is a very good idea, Thom. With whom else did you speak?”

He listed most of the influential families in the area. “I received approval and promises of support from nearly all. With Buckley it helped a great deal that I already had the support of Pownall. When I dropped that into the conversation, Buckley was determined to help with both materials and funds. He even suggested he hire the crew to construct or refurbish any buildings.”

His father placed his serviette on the table. “Have you considered where you might put this school?”

“I’m considering a number of sites. However, I think the mill would be best. Is it still without an owner?”

“It is, and a great inconvenience that causes for all residents. Pownall and Buckley are constantly complaining about the price of having flour and other milled supplies brought in from Chester.”

“Would you charge a fee for attending students?” Charité asked.

Thom beamed. Charité’s interest meant a great deal to him. He wanted very much to impress her. “I would prefer not to. Some of the children who need the school most come from families who are quite poor. However, I would like to earn some salary, and I don’t know another way to finance that.”

“Let me write to the Bishop,” his father said. “He may be able to help find money to subsidize the attendance of the poorer students, which would make charging a fee more equitable. Or perhaps the money could be used to pay you and any other teachers, negating the necessity for any fee.”

“I appreciate that help, Father.”

“I recommend that you encourage students to spend time and effort in maintaining the school building and grounds,” Charité contributed. “It has been my experience as a governess, that children who are invested in their physical

surroundings, are more eager to learn the skills necessary for improving their lives.”

Thom looked at the woman he admired so much. They shared an interest in teaching and helping children as well as those horrifying days in Bajadoz. Would she consider marriage with a schoolmaster? More likely than with a penniless former soldier. *But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm not a schoolmaster yet.*

His father rang the bell for Fields who appeared promptly to clear the table. “Shall I bring brandy for you and Captain Owen, sir?”

“We will have tea with the ladies in the music room.”

“If you don't mind Father, I would like to escort Miss du Pessac on a walk in the vicarage gardens. She might enjoy seeing the last of the roses mother planted and the chrysanthemums are blooming as well. The night is fine, and we may not have many more when weather permits us to entertain ourselves out of doors.” He shifted his gaze to Charité. “Would you care to join me, Miss du Pessac? The vicarage gardens are quite splendid.”

“Indeed, yes. Many a local couple have chosen to say their wedding vows in the garden's folly,” his father remarked. “Perhaps you'll join Lady Afton and myself when you come in.”

The vision of Charité dressed in a fine gown, flowers in her hair, smiling up at him as he placed his ring on her finger, struck Thom like a physical blow. His heart clutched, and his breath stopped, for a single moment. But it was long enough to give him pause. *What could possibly have caused such a reaction to a simple imagining?*

Color rode high on Miss du Pessac's cheeks. “I would enjoy that very much. I've not had the opportunity to walk in the gardens, yet. Thank you for the offer, Captain Owen.”

“Here, child,” Aunt Faith said. “Take my shawl. It's more convenient than running up to the nursery to retrieve one of yours and will be just as warm.”

“Thank you, Aunt.”

Moments later Thom, with Charité’s arm on his, stepped from the double glass doors on one side of the dining room and led her down the bricked pathways of the vicarage walled garden.



An hour later, he paused on the small landing before the dining salon doors.

Charité dropped her hand from his arm.

“Thank you, for showing me the garden. It’s lovely.”

“My mother loved plants, especially roses, and father indulged her whenever possible purchasing items she expressed an interest in throughout the year.” Thom gazed down at her.

“She had a good eye for color and arrangement. I can tell by the types of plantings that this garden has color all year long.” She smiled.

“Yes, even in the coldest winters we have holly berries, rose of winter and winter aconite to bring us cheer. And speaking of bringing cheer, I wonder, now that you know a bit more about the town, if you think you and your aunt might remain and make your home here?” His future hung on her decision.

She sighed. “Taking care of Sam is a pleasure I would never give up, if I did not have to. However, the time for him to leave me will eventually come, and I am uncertain how I would feel seeing him, if I lived here.”

“Perhaps you might have children of your own.”

Her eyes gleamed in the face she turned up to his. “Of all things, I want a family. My early childhood was very happy, and I would love to give that happiness to my own children and a spouse.”

*A man like me?*

Hope welled. Then he recalled she was a working Miss only because of the war. In reality she was the daughter of a French Comte and deserved to have that life again. Most likely with a wealthy man. Thom could never give her that kind of life. His heart raced as it had before battle. An all too familiar fear knotted his stomach.

“What sort of man do you think of when you imagine your future husband?”

She turned slightly away from him, and he felt bereft. He wanted those shining, joyful eyes on his face, looking at him.

“I...I don't know really. Some one kind, and strong in spirit. A thoughtful man who is careful of those he loves. A man much like you... in many ways.” She looked at him then. Her beautiful brown gaze locking with his.

Her words made him brave. He ignored fear and worry, seeking her fingers. “Could you imagine me in that place, not just someone like me?”

“Oh, Thom.” She placed her free hand against his cheek, rose on her toes, and pressed her lips to his for entirely too brief a moment. “I like you very much, and respect, even admire you. I consider you one of my best friends, but I don't know if I love you.”

“I am fairly certain I love you, Charité du Pessac. But I will never pressure you. If I can only ever be your good friend, then I am content to be so.” He smiled, though his heart fair broke as he said the words.

“Thank you both for your declaration and your understanding. I've known so few men in my life. I didn't have the kind of life that a Comte's daughter might normally expect.” Her gaze lost focus.

*Does she regret losing the life of a wealthy noble?*

He wished he could take away all the tragedies of the past. The most he could do would be to make the future, her future, as bright and happy as possible. Whether that future was at his side or not.

“I recall you mentioned that while we traveled. Your life may have followed an unexpected path. However, you are very intelligent. Your delicacy of manner and your ability to always say just exactly the right thing are typical of every noble I’ve ever met.”

Some of those had been very good men. Hell, Barlow, his friend was stellar example. Others, however. Others used their manners and their nobility to mask ugly, thoughtless souls. Charité, his Charité, was of the first sort he was certain. Did her noble heritage place her out of his reach? Could she ever truly be *his* Charité?

She lowered her lashes. “You are kind to say so, but I have deliberately left that life behind. I scarce recall it. There is a reason I go by Miss du Pessac and do not use Lady as my aunt does.”

“Don’t you want revenge for the death of your parents, or at least the return of your ancestral property? You would never want for anything if that wealth was restored to you.”

Her lips thinned. “Is that what you think? That I am so petty a person that I would spend a decade and more steeped in the hate that generates revenge and mired in the greed that would seek restoration of property and title I can scarce recall.”

“No, no. Of course, I don’t think that.”

“Good.” Arms akimbo, she stamped her foot. “If you did think that of me, I would know you for a narrow-minded idiot who labels people, himself included, and only understands behaviors that his tiny mind conceives of as appropriate to those labels.”

She grasped the door handle and walked away, throwing, “Good night to you, Captain,” over her shoulder.

The open door swung in the rising breeze until a gust slammed it shut for her, leaving him cold and alone.

He went into the house, found his cloak and hat then made his way back to his friend Barlow’s home. *Charité is right. I am an idiot.* Whether her family came from a long line of

noble Comtes or an even longer line of beggars had no bearing on who she was—the most wonderful, enchanting, clever, enthralling, thoughtful, brave, astonishing woman he'd ever met. *There are not enough words in any language to describe her or how I feel about her. I must find a way to win her heart, or at the very least her high regard.* Although he knew he'd never be satisfied with simply being in her good graces. He wanted her in his life as close as a woman could be to a man. As his wife. But how to make that happen?



## CHAPTER 6



*September 5, 1815, The Vicarage*

Three days passed before Charité encountered Thom again. Over those days only Sam had been able to distract her. Whenever the child was napping or thoroughly occupied in play, her thoughts drifted to that evening.

*How could I have been so angry with Thom? How could he have even asked if I might want revenge or rank and wealth?*

He'd been on the verge of a marriage proposal, she suspected, and she'd not been ready for it. Then she'd said the one thing, apparently, that could convince him they would never make a good match. How idiotic. And how equally idiotic to get angry over it. She should simply have repeated that she had left the past in the past and emphasized her use of Miss instead of Lady as proof that titles, nobility, property, wealth were all unimportant to her.

What was important was making a good enough living to survive. Just as important was doing work that rewarded one with the knowledge that others were better off than they had been. Equally essential, she believed, was the love and comfort of a good man and a family should God so bless them.

*Could I have that with Thom?*

Look at the plans he was making for the school. When he'd first spoken of the idea, she had been thrilled. *I would like to share in that adventure.* He thinks about improving the lives of others, of providing a living for himself and the family she believed he wanted. She could not be certain of his reasons for

wanting a family, but she suspected that like herself he sought love and comfort in a wife and children. *I need to know for certain. And I need to apologize for storming off as I did on the night of our garden walk.*

Miss Pakenham agreed to watch Sam while Charité went to have breakfast. When she entered the dining salon, she found Mr. Owen placing food from the buffet onto two plates. He then served one to Lady Afton before setting his own on the table and taking his seat.

“Good morning, niece,” her aunt spoke cheerfully. “How are you today? I confess you’ve seemed a trifle peaked to me recently. And you’ve been retiring early. I do wish you would join Mr. Owen and myself in the music room this evening. He sings beautifully, and I am able to play the pianoforte. We have quite the jolly time of it.”

Charité plastered on her cheeriest smile. “I would be happy to join you tonight, Aunt, Mr. Owen. I’m certain Sam will be asleep by then, and Miss Pakenham enjoys caring for him almost as much as I.”

“Then I am doubly glad I hired her,” Mr. Owen remarked.

Charité selected a coddled egg and a muffin to have with her coffee and seated herself. “Tell me, Aunt, what plans have you for today?”

“I thought I might go into the town and wander the shops. My London solicitor has finally managed to send my jointure to a local bank, and I thought I’d celebrate by purchasing some ribbons or a new bonnet, if I can find one that is not too dear.”

Aunt Faith blushed. Charité looked to see what might possibly cause her aunt’s unease and discovered Mr. Owen beaming at the older woman.

“Ahem.”

The vicar addressed his eggs, and her aunt’s face cleared.

“That sounds like a lovely outing. I would like to accompany you, and bring Sam if you don’t mind.”

“I would be happy to have you join us. Perhaps we should ask Miss Pakenham to come as well, to help with Sam,” Aunt Faith replied.

“An excellent idea Aunt. I’ll inform her as soon as we finish breakfast. Vicar you gave an excellent sermon yesterday.” Charité changed the subject.

“Indeed, Corinthians 13:4 is one of my favorite verses,” Aunt Faith contributed. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

“I was happy to see both Mistresses Pownall and Buckley present to hear your message. I hope it sinks in. Perhaps their feuding will stop.”

“I pray for that daily, Miss du Pessac,” Mr. Owen said.

“Have you plans for the day, sir?”

“Yes, in fact, thank you for reminding me. I’ve decided to have private meetings with the heads of each family wanting to raise Sam. I have one today with Mr. Pownall. Tomorrow with Mr. Buckley. I will also arrange to see other families who might be related to the child.”

“Would you like me to be present for any of these meetings?” Charité asked. She wanted Sam to stay with her, but knew that could not be. “Sam may be more comfortable, if I am present.”

“I am meeting with Pownall and Buckley at their respective inns and will not bring Sam with me, but I will let you know of any other meetings as they are arranged.”

“I will make myself available when you wish, sir. Perhaps we could discuss your meeting with Pownall at tea today?”

“I would like that,” Vicar Owen smiled.

“We can finish our business in the town and return in time for tea, can we not, Charité?” Aunt Faith queried.

“Most certainly.” She set down the coffee she’d been sipping. “Sam will want his nap by then. We will join you for tea, Mr. Owen. I am very fond of Sam and wish to see him

with a loving and thoughtful family, since I cannot raise him myself.”

She rose to leave.

“Miss du Pessac,” Mr. Owen’s voice stopped her. “There was an amulet that was brought with Sam as one of his possessions. However, I seem to have mislaid it. Could you please look in the nursery to see if it somehow found its way there?”

“Certainly, sir.”

She did find the amulet and dropped it with her host as she, her aunt, Miss Pakenham, and Sam set off for the town.

An hour later they arrived at the shops bordering the town square. They left Miss Pakenham to entertain Sam with a ball on the green and spent a pleasant hour comparing ribbons and examining the hats in one of two millinery shops.

“You looked quite fetching in that silk turban, Aunt.” They strolled along the walk bordering the street.

Faith sighed. “Yes. The price was fair but too dear for me. I must save my pennies for when we leave the vicarage.”

Charité tugged on her aunt’s arm, guiding both of them to the side of the walk closest to the buildings. “Perhaps you need not leave the vicarage, Aunt.”

Faith blinked and pressed her lips together.

“Don’t you play innocent with me, Lady Faith Angelica Afton. I’ve seen how Vicar Owen watches you. How careful he is to see to your comfort. How much you both enjoy your musical evenings. And most important, I’ve seen how you watch him. You are as careful of him as he of you, even if you are a bit bossy about it.”

“Warning the man that too much wine of an evening will cause him a headache in the morning is not bossy.”

Charité rolled her eyes. “If you say so, but thank you for the reminder, I need to visit Beeson Bros. Apothecary & Alchemist across the way. I’m out of headache powder.”

“Your sudden need for headache curatives has nothing to do with the fact that Captain Owen just entered that establishment?”

“Of course not.”

“I have missed seeing him at dinner the past few nights. I should go with you, just to say hello.”

Charité’s stomach clenched at the idea of Aunt Faith hearing her apology to Thom. A vastly uncomfortable inquisition was sure to follow the moment they were out of earshot. “Actually, I had hoped you might assist Miss Pakenham in taking Sam to the tea shop. If he eats before we return home, he is sure to nap more soundly.”

“Hmm. Yes, it will be easier to manage Master Sam at the tea shop with two adults present. Although we may stop in the mercantile long enough to purchase some peppermint fondants. You mentioned the other day that young Sam is partial to them, and they are good for digestion.”

“Then it is settled. Please order tea and a biscuit for me. I’ll join you as soon as I finish at the apothecary.”

They crossed to the green together.

Charité marched straight to the shop selling medicines and curatives. Aunt Faith, Miss Pakenham and their charge ambled toward the mercantile.

On opening the apothecary shop door, an overhead bell rang cheerfully.

The proprietor was busy speaking with Captain Owen and another man. “I’ll be with you soon, Miss. I must fill this order first, so it will be a few moments.”

Charité nodded and perused the shelves.

“Perhaps I can help you, Miss...” It was the man with Captain Owen. The captain remained at the counter waiting for the Apothecary.

“Du Pessac, Miss Charité du Pessac.”

“You are?”

“Doctor Paul Wagner. Should you have need, I pray you will send for me.” He produced his card which she took.

“I can vouch for Mr. Wagner’s skill. He saved many a soldier’s life in France.”

Thom had approached as they spoke.

“Thank you. I will remember your recommendation.” She looked at him, then at the doctor.

“Now what is it you need?” Wagner asked.

“I need a stock of headache powders. I normally use a chamomile and lavender tisane. However, I cannot seem to find any here.”

“I know precisely what you speak of, and it is an excellent remedy. Few local people think to combine the relaxing aroma of lavender with the more neutral chamomile, so demand in Reabridge is not high. I suspect you will not find any on the shelves. However, we can ask the apothecary to make some up and have it delivered.”

The three walked to the counter area at the back of the shop. The package-laden apothecary emerged from a door leading, presumably to a storage or work area.

“Your supplies are all here, Doctor.”

“Excellent.” He paid for the merchandise. “Miss du Pessac, this is Phillip Beeson, a most superior apothecary. He and his brother Clayborn own the shop. Beeson, Miss du Pessac is in need of chamomile and lavender tisane, for headache relief.”

“Ah, I regret that I have none on the shelves, Miss du Pessac. However, I can make some for you and have it delivered shortly after tea time. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Quite satisfactory. What is the price?”

The apothecary named a standard fee.

Charité fished in her reticule for coins then paid for the tisane.

“Please deliver it to the vicarage. My aunt and I are staying with Mr. Owen.”

Doctor Wagner looked at her with some interest. “You are the young lady helping the vicar to care for the orphan, Sam?”

“She is.” Thom replied for her.

Charité frowned at him.

“Mr. Owen speaks highly of your care of the boy.”

“The vicar is more than kind.” She gave the doctor a smile. “Captain, will you be joining us for supper tonight?”

“I thought I might.”

She brightened her smile.

“You must come with him, doctor. Please. I would very much like to get to know you better.”

The small glower that settled on Thom’s face delighted her.

“I...uhm...I suppose I could come.” His gaze had gone from Charité to Thom and back. “Your father won’t mind, will he, Thom?”

A smile cleared the captain’s expression. “Of course not. He’ll be happy to see you.”

Wagner collected his packages and said his farewells.

“Miss du Pessac, may I escort you to your next destination?” Thom offered his arm.

“Thank you. I am joining my aunt, Miss Pakenham and Sam for tea.”

“At Miss Cosy’s Teashop?”

“Yes.” They stepped from the shop to the walk, heading for the green and the tea shop at the south end.

“I’ve missed seeing you, Captain,” Charité began.

“I’ve missed you as well.”

Halfway across the green, she stopped, looking up at him. He released her.

She gathered her courage. “I want to apologize for losing my temper the other night. I should never have said those things.”

“I apologize, too, Charité. I did not think when I asked those questions, and never meant to suggest you might actually wish for revenge or wealth. Every word you speak, every gesture you make speaks of a true nobility of spirit, and that is what is important.”

She smiled. “Thank you for saying so. I regard you in much the same way.”

“Does this mean I may speak with your aunt about paying my addresses?”

She could not mistake his meaning and heat rose to her cheeks. “I...I suppose so.” *He intends to propose. What will I say?* Butterflies set her stomach aflutter. She couldn’t pretend she was not happy at the prospect.

“Thank you.” He offered his arm once more.



## CHAPTER 7



Arriving at the tea shop they found Lady Faith and Miss Pakenham in a dither. Lady Afton frowned at the younger woman.

“I tell you the boy was just here.” Miss Pakenham protested. “I only turned away for a moment to ask that young woman for more lemon.”

Thom seated Charité at the table. “I’ll look in the kitchen and store rooms, he can’t have gone far.”

“Please.” She raised a stricken gaze to his face.

As he left, a serving girl carrying sliced lemon returned to the table.

“Have you seen the small boy who was here earlier?”

Charité’s worried tones carried on the air.

“No, miss.”

In the kitchen Thom found the chef arguing with the owner, the rest of the staff in a circle around the two.

“Attention!”

Everyone looked at him.

The order worked to get troops organized. It was the fastest way to stop whatever dispute was happening.

“Have any of you seen a small boy? Blond, blue eyes, about eighteen months.”

Most of those looking at him shook their heads no.

“I believe there was such a child in the tea room. He was sitting with two ladies. One of them, Miss Pakenham, is related to my wife,” the owner said.

“Yes, they had him, but he seems to have wandered off. He is not in the tea room now.”

“Well, he’s not in my kitchen.” The cook stated as he pointed at his staff. “All of you get back to your stations, and search when you get there.”

Seconds later it was clear that the child was not in the kitchens, but the back door had been found standing open.

Thom sprinted from the kitchen, slowing long enough to suggest that the ladies go home. He would organize a search. He ran for the alarm bell that stood on the near side of the green. Pulling the bell rope with all his might he set up the alarm.

In moments, ten or twelve men surrounded him, with others approaching at a run. He explained that Sam was missing then found Mayor Pimblott, Lord Barlow and two other prominent men and put them in charge of search parties.

“Mayor Pimblott, please lead your group to search the rest of the island. Lord Barlow, be so kind as to organize the search of Upper Reabridge. Buckley, you and your group search Lower Reabridge.”

To lend urgency for a thorough search, he let them all see how worried he was.

“Ask anyone you meet if they’ve seen the child. Send reports back every half hour to the vicarage. I’ve asked Lady Afton, Miss du Pessac, and Miss Pakenham to wait there with my father. If you find the boy, take him to the vicarage as quickly as possible and have someone ring the alarm bell to call off the search.”

Thom called to the man he knew was courting Gwen Hughes. “Jack, please remain here to act as a command center, and coordinate information with the various searchers as it comes in. Call for Doctor Wagner in the case of any injury.”

Next, he turned to the two innkeepers. “Pownall, Buckley, set some of your lads who can swim to watching the bridges and the river. I don’t think the child will go to the water, but better safe than sorry.”

“Aye we’ll do that right away.” For once the two men spoke in accord.

“All of you, keep your searches to the outside. I doubt Sam could manage a door on his own. If he isn’t found by twilight, we’ll meet here and organize the night search. Good luck. Let’s begin.”

Thom joined the mayor’s group. “The lad is only a year and a half old or so. He cannot have gone far.”

“Aye.” Mayor Pimblott eyed his men, now grown to number about twenty. “We’ll divide the island into sections, north to south. Each group of four men will search moving west to east. Stay within sight of each other and call out if you see any sign, any indication of where the boy might be.

Heart in his throat, Thom joined three other men searching the southern tip of the island.

*Charité must be frantic.*

When he had advised her and the other ladies to go home, he could see she wished to protest. But she was smart enough to know she would be more help staying in one place and preparing for Sam’s homecoming.

He wished he could be with her, hold her, soothe her. But wishing held no purpose. He must focus on finding Sam.

*If I were a small child in a strange place, where would I go?*

Twilight approached as Thom joined the rest of the searchers on the green.

“What now, Thom?” Lord Barlow asked.

He shared a look with his friend. They weren’t in battle but all the skills learned at war to search out the enemy or look for missing friends came to the fore.

Roughly one hundred men and older boys turned in Thom's direction.

"We must consider that Sam entered a building somehow. I've sent for lanterns. We'll work in pairs searching the buildings on the island. The Duke of San Sebastian has sent his dogs with their handlers. They'll be given some of Sam's clothing and will search the outside once more. As before, send reports to the vicarage and sound the alarm if he's found. I will start with the church."

He admitted to himself that starting with the church would give him a chance to see Charité and try to reassure her.

Barlow joined Thom. "The church doors are heavier than most."

"True, but I grew up playing in the churchyard and know a few ways a child could enter without much effort."

"Well enough. Then while you look in the church proper, I'll search the burying grounds."

Thom clasped his friend's shoulder. "Thank you. That is not a task I want to perform."

"I know it was searched earlier today, but there are a few mausoleums as well as some large monuments where he might have sought shelter and not be seen earlier."

Thom made his way to the far end of the church where he knew there was a small door leading into the building's tiny office. The door was nearly always unlocked and the latch was low enough to the ground that a child Sam's size might have been able to reach it. The boy's weight would open the door if the latch were released. From the office Thom searched the other back rooms and the organ chamber. He made his way to the choir loft and the bell tower.

As he descended to the nave he despaired. Full dark had fallen, and he began to fear that Sam might never be found. The room was cold and dark. Not a place he would wish to hide or rest if he were a child. Still, he wove his way between the pews searching carefully under and around each as he approached the space in front of the sanctuary. That cleared

area revealed nothing unusual as he raised his lantern. However, a glance at the sanctuary itself showed that the tall candles normally on the flat surface of the communion table were missing along with the altar cloth.

He hurried to search behind the large wooden piece and found Sam. The candles and their holders lay scattered across the floor. Thom released a pent up breath and thanked heaven. The boy was asleep, curled within the shelter of the gold and red altar cloth. Thom set his lantern aside then knelt beside the boy.

“Sam.” He touched his shoulder softly.

Sam blinked sleep from his eyes. “Tum?”

He gathered the boy into his arms.

“Yes, Sam, it’s Thom.”

The child clung to him. “*Veux Aimée.*”

“*Elle n’est pas là.* What say we go see Charité.”

“*Oui Charité.*” Sam laid his head on Thom’s shoulder.

Thom managed to hold the boy and retrieve the lantern.

“Barlow?” he called softly as he pushed through the main doors.

“Here, Thom.” Lord Barlow emerged from behind a large mausoleum. “Ah I see you found him.”

Thom nodded, his cheek rubbing against the boy’s soft curls. “He’s tired, scared, and asking for his French nurse. I told him I’d take him to Charité.”

Barlow clasped Thom’s shoulder. “Good idea. You do that. I’ll get to the green and sound the alarm. Then let everyone know Sam’s been found.”

“Tell all who searched to come to the vicarage. If I know my father, he and the women kept themselves busy preparing a hot meal and drinks for all.”

Lord Barlow grinned. “A good captain always thinks to feed his troops. However, the vicarage isn’t that large. Can you

handle so many?"

"I doubt all of them will come. Some will want to go home to their families. But however many, we will find space. I'm certain Father will welcome all."



Charité helped in the kitchen, until Mrs. Appleberry arrived and shooed all the ladies out.

"I appreciate your assistance, Lady Afton, Miss du Pessac, Miss Pakenham, but you've chopped enough vegetables for an army. I need to put them and the beef into the stewpot on the hob and prepare all else for hungry men."

"I insist on helping," Miss Pakenham said. "I'll not be able to think until Master Sam returns, and helping you will pass the time."

"Very well, but I only need one helper."

Now Charité paced the parlor floor, pausing every few minutes to gaze out the window. Night fell, and no word came.

At long last Mr. Owen entered.

"Is there word?" Charité.

"Sam's not been found, but the search continues. The Duke of San Sebastian has sent his dogs with handlers, and the town men are searching every building."

She resumed pacing.

"Charité dear, you are exhausting me with your worry. Come sit and listen to Mr. Owen tell us about his visit with Mr. Pownall.

Charité wasn't certain she wanted to hear about anyone who might take Sam from her. Yes, he would eventually go to a good family, but not now. Not until she had him safe in her arms and knew he suffered no harm. Nonetheless, she sat beside her aunt.

“Pownall began by apologizing for his grandmother’s behavior. He evidently heard of the, um, encounter between her and Mrs. Buckley and was mortified. We settled that, then discussed Sam and how he might be related to Pownall.”

“How might that be?” Charité asked.

“One of Pownall’s daughters eloped with David Buckley. Sadly, David returned from the war without his bride. When his wife’s sister suggested that Sam might be David’s child, he proved that to be impossible by returning his wife’s amulet.”

“That is tragic.”

“The entire episode must have increased ill feeling between the two families,” Aunt Faith remarked.

“It did. Although as I spoke with Pownall, he admitted that had the child been his daughter’s he might have tried to make some effort to compromise with Buckley concerning Sam’s care.”

“That’s unexpected and a relief.” Charité subsided into a chair.

Aunt Faith continued the conversation with Mr. Owen, but it did little to distract. Standing once more Charité resumed her pacing.

“Niece, come play cards with me and Mr. Owen.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt. I couldn’t concentrate.”

“Very well, but ...”

The opening parlor door interrupted her.

Thom, holding Sam tight to his shoulder, stepped through.

“Sam!” Charité rushed to Thom and took the boy in her arms. “I was very worried about you. Let’s take you upstairs. Thom, ask Mrs. Appleberry to send up some bread and sops for Sam’s dinner.” She wanted to hug Thom and kiss him, tell him how wonderful he was for finding Sam. But Sam came first.

“Oh,” she said as she walked out the door. “Please tell Mr. Wagner when you see him that I apologize for having to

cancel tonight's dinner."

"Of course. Father, I hope you are prepared for a crowd of guests. I promised every searcher a meal from your table."

That was the last she heard as she climbed to the nursery. She listened to Sam babble about his adventures. His former nurse's name came up repeatedly, and she eventually understood that Sam had seen someone who looked to him like *Aimeé* and he'd very much wanted to play with her. But she'd run away, and he looked all over. He'd gone into the church because *Aimeé* often went there to talk with God. Sam said, in his childish way, that God could help find *Aimeé*.

"*Aimeé ne m'aime.*" Sam sniffed, as Charité began to clean him up.

"That is not true, Sam. She loves you."

"*Non, ne joue.*"

Charité sighed. How to explain to the boy that the nurse he so loved had gone to a home far away? She hugged the child. "I do not know, Sam. But I'm here. I will play with you tomorrow, after you sleep."

He frowned up at her.

Fortunately, Miss Pakenham arrived at that moment with Sam's dinner tray and distracted him.

Charité helped to get him settled.

"You're fair exhausted, Miss du Pessac. Why don't you go down to your own supper? I can put young Sam to bed."

Charité looked at the boy. She did not want to leave. Neither did she wish to smother the child. He was smiling at Miss Pakenham and enjoying his food.

"Very well. Thank you. No need to attend me tonight. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight Miss."

"Goodnight to you." Charité kissed the top of Sam's head then left.





At the end of the meal and after all had been fed, Charité had retired. An evening of music with his father and Lady Afton helped Thom relax.

“Father, do you recall that song by Moore, that mother used to sing to me when I was small?” Arriving in the room before his father and Lady Afton, Thom had carefully hidden the sheet music for Thomas Moore’s melody about the Vale of Avoca near Wicklow in the cabinet on the far side of the music room. He wanted to distract his father long enough to have a private word with Lady Afton.

“Yes, son, I recall the tune. It’s lovely. Lady Afton, are you familiar with it?”

Thom stared hard at her.

The lady opened her mouth, glanced Thom’s way for one brief moment. “No, I’m familiar with Moore, but that is not a song I learned.”

“Perhaps you could find it, Father. If Lady Afton learns it, she might teach it to her niece. I think she would enjoy singing it to Sam.”

His father nodded, “Ah, I see you believe that Miss du Pessac may need soothing distraction in the coming weeks.”

“Uhm, yes, that’s it precisely. Do you know where the sheet music is?”

“No, I’ve not seen it recently. I’ll check in the storage cabinet. Excuse me, please, Lady Afton, I’ll only be a moment.”

When his father was on the far side of the room, Thom moved to sit beside Lady Afton on the piano bench. “I’ve been trying to have a private word with you, but we have all been quite busy tonight.”

“Visit tomorrow morning when your father is working on his sermon in the study.”

“Ten o’clock. I’ll be here.”

“Charité will be occupied with Sam at that time, and we may have a comfortable cose.” She lifted her head. “Oh, excellent, Vicar, you found it. I love learning new pieces, and Moore is one of my favorite composers.”

Thom remained for a few more moments then said his goodnights. As he walked to Barlow’s home, he considered the affection he’d seen between his father and Lady Afton. Father had been in very good spirits lately. Thom had thought it was Sam who had caused the lift in his father’s emotions. The lad brightened every room he entered.

*Perhaps the cause of my father’s restored happiness, isn’t Sam but Lady Afton.*

Shortly after ten the following morning, Thom accepted a cup of tea from Lady Afton.

“Now young man, what is it you wish to say to me?”

“I wish to ask your permission to pay my addresses to your niece.”

Lady Afton paused in raising her cup to her lips. “Do you believe she wishes to marry you?”

She continued to sip her tea.

Thom rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I’m not certain. We’ve not spoken of marriage.”

The lady’s brows rose. “That is what you want, yes?”

“Most ardently.”

“Have you discussed your futures?”

“Only in the most general terms.”

“Such as?”

“Would you like to marry? Have children? What sort of man or woman do you wish to wed? Where would you like to live. Those sorts of questions.” He felt no need to confess that he had asked Charité if he could pose the current question to her aunt. That was between himself and Charité.

“Hmmm. I gather the responses were satisfactory on both sides.”

He nodded.

“Do you love Charité?”

“With all my heart. She is all that is good and brave and generous. She is beautiful, kind, thoughtful. She works much harder than she needs to and is always happy in the joy of others.”

“Cease.” Lady Afton raised her free hand palm out and with the other put her tea on a nearby table. “You need not sing Charité’s praises to me.”

He smiled. “Once I start it is difficult to stop.”

Lady Afton returned the smile. “You know, young man, that you did not have to ask my permission. Hence, I thank you for the courtesy you do me by asking.”

“You are most welcome.” The back of his neck heated.

“Have you spoken with your father?” She studied Thom.

*Why haven’t I spoken with him?* “Er, no. I suppose I should.”

“Indeed, he worries sometimes that the disagreement you had before you went to war still lingers and prevents you from sharing your life with him as you once did.” Her expression was clear, her tone serious.

“He confided that in you?”

She smiled again. “We’ve spent a great deal of time together.”

“Hmm.”

“When might you propose to my niece?” She resumed sipping her tea.

“Not until she recovers from nearly losing Sam. But before the end of the Harvest Moon Festival. I would very much like to make the announcement on the night of the ball. If she accepts me, that is.”

Lady Afton stood, so Thom rose as well.

“Stay here. I’ll get your father, so you will have all done today and can feel free to proceed without worry.”

He hadn’t thought to tell his father. What would he say? What does any young man say when he tells his father he intends to marry. Thom sat with a thump, and reached for his tea, drinking without even tasting.

“You look to be a million miles away, Thom.”

He blinked to see his father seated in the chair where a short while ago sat Lady Afton.

“Lady Afton said you wished to speak with me.”

“Ah yes, I apologize for interrupting you during your sermon writing time.”

Father waved a hand. “Nonsense, I would hope my son can speak with me whenever he needs to do so.”

“I used to, didn’t I. Before we disagreed,”

*We might as well address the largest problem first.*

His father nodded. “We started to think and behave differently after your mother passed. I...I was less attentive than a father should be, especially for a son who’d lost his mother.”

“I understand.” Thom leaned close to his father. “You were grieving. We both felt her loss deeply.”

“But you were too young to understand at the time. Please forgive me.” Father placed a hand on Thom’s knee.

The gesture was one often used when as a boy, he’d sought the counsel of his father. “If you feel you need my forgiveness, you have it. I hope you will do the same for me.”

“And what should I forgive you for?” One of the older man’s brows rose.

“For believing that you would hold resentment and not welcome me home.” Now that he voiced his fear, Thom realized how small and petty a thing that fear was.

“Forgiven. Is that what you wish to discuss?”

“No.” Thom swallowed, his throat surprisingly dry since his teacup was empty. “I want to tell you that I plan to propose marriage to Miss du Pessac.”

His father sighed and threw his head back. When he once more looked at Thom he grinned.

“I wondered when you would realize she was perfect for you.”

“I think I’ve known for some time. It simply surprised me so much that I did not recognize what I truly felt.” So much confusion and doubt held for so many years, and all faded before his love for Charité du Pessac.

“I recall something similar when I first met your mother. Have you decided when you plan to propose? How you will set the scene? His father asked.

“Ah, no, I did not realize I should set the scene as you say. As for when, I hope to find the right moment before the night of the Harvest Moon ball. Do you approve of my marriage with her?” He found himself worried and hopeful as well as almost surprised that his father’s opinions mattered so much.

“Most certainly I approve. But I advise you to control the moment you choose. Do all possible to create an environment that encourages Miss du Pessac to say yes.”

“And how would I do that?” Thom wrinkled his brow.

His father leaned forward. “Here is what you do.”

## CHAPTER 8



*September 16, 1815, The Vicarage*

Perhaps it was the stress of Sam's disappearance and fortunately quick recovery, but Charité could scarce let the boy out of her sight in the following days. Thom spent nearly as much time with the boy as she, and what he observed made him love her all the more. But his worry increased over how she would take the inevitable separation from Sam.

More and more frequently, local families came to visit Sam and discuss with the vicar how the boy might fit into each family. After attending one or two such meetings, Charité declined to attend more. She confessed to Thom that she found the prospect of handing Sam over to someone else most depressing. "I know I'm being unreasonable, wanting to keep Sam. But I almost lost him once."

She did her best to distract herself, with preparations for the approaching festival and spending less time with Sam each day. Along with several other couples she and Thom decorated the church and helped to adorn every lamppost and shop front along the town square. They spend hours selecting just the right ribbons and other materials for the children's corn doll making competition.

He invited her to accompany him as he met with supporters of the school and included her in those planning discussions. The invitation pleased her greatly. If she couldn't be a mother figure to Sam, perhaps she could take solace in teaching some of the younger children. She must find the perfect moment to discuss the possibility with Thom.

The school plans were progressing nicely. The Duke of San Sebastian had purchased the mill property and donated it to the town. Barlow had agreed to fund the mill management. Buckley would pay for refurbishment of the buildings and grounds. Pownall provided desks, chalkboards, and other supplies. Thom was officially hired as headmaster and teacher, increasing his expected salary. The Reabridge Mill-School Committee, as they had named themselves, sent out notices of three open teaching positions as well as hiring support staff. An opening date one week before next year's Harvest Festival was set.

The day before the dinner at Lord Barlow's home, to which Thom, the vicar, and his guests had been invited, Thom arrived at the vicarage with a borrowed curricule, complete with tiger stationed at the back.

"The day is warm and lovely. Please say you will drive out with me. Mrs. Appleberry has provided a picnic," he begged of Charité.

"I would enjoy that very much, thank you. Let me get my hat, arrange for Miss Pakenham to look after Sam, and tell Aunt that I will be gone for lunch."

Soon they were tooling along the river. They crossed over to Lower Reabridge and passed through the town, still driving along the south bank.

"Are we going to the mill?"

"For a bit. But I have something else I'd like to show you."

They drove on, leaving the noise and activity of Lower Reabridge behind.

They passed stubbly fields where hay had been mown and harvested and a few rolling green pastures where milk cows grazed in the shade of surrounding trees—white barked silver birch splotted with dark stripes, glowing golden sweet chestnut, fiery orange wild cherry, and of course good English oak, with their great trunks and brittle brownish foliage.

The road bent south, away from the riverbank then around again until they topped a small ridge that arced to the south. Its

far end—most likely where the land and river met—was hidden in trees, and a panorama spread out below them. Several stone buildings dotted the grassy, tree-lined green that sloped gently down to the mill—constructed of the same marled sandstone—with its aged oak waterwheel showing spots of faded red paint.

They spent a few moments admiring the prospect and discussing the use of the various buildings.

“Thom, is that smoke and a chimney?” Charité gestured toward the far side of the ridge.

He smiled at her. “Let’s go find out.”

He guided the carriage onto a cleared track that split halfway down the hill. One branch went off toward the mill and storage structure. Thom took the other, which climbed back up the hill, past the sheds to a spot on the ridge some distance from where they first stopped.

She gasped as the prospect was revealed.

“It’s lovely, Thom.”

He kept driving. “It’s called Briar Rose cottage, and was home to the miller.”

The stone house stood on a small level area about twenty feet below the top of the ridge. The entire near end of the building was covered in climbing wild roses. The blooms were faded and the leaves fallen or withered. But Charité could imagine the beauty to be seen come spring and summer. What a blessing to reside where such loveliness could be seen every day.

“You will live here?”

“I hope to. I have permission from the committee to do so. Let’s go take a closer look. I have a key with me.”

He helped her down and instructed the tiger to take the coach and horses to the barn and see to their care, then to return with the picnic basket.

She studied the house with its two windows flanking the front door and the single chimney. “It’s rather small.”



“Three rooms only.”

“What about...?” She was glad the tiger had disappeared into the barn.

“Yes?”

To her ears the tone was all teasing and false innocence.

“Your family. You do want a family, children and a wife, do you not?”

“I’ll have many children at the school.”

“Yes, yes, but they won’t be yours and your wife’s. You are an only child like me. Weren’t you lonely, especially after you lost your mother.”

“I was. How large a family do you think I should have?” He took her hand.

“Are you seriously asking me how many children you should have with some unknown woman?”

He shrugged.

“You must have at least twenty or so,” she said, gratified to see him go pale in truth.

She kissed his cheek. “I apologize for teasing you. How many children you have is up to you, your wife, and God.”

“Indeed.” He gave a single nod.

Her brow lowered. “I still don’t see how you can raise a large family in such a small home.”

“Look over there.”

From behind, he gently turned her shoulders until she faced at a right angle to the house. At the top of the far end of the slope stood a tall, solitary, wild cherry tree.

“That tree marks the edge of a green that ends in a bluff above the river. There is enough space to build a house of sufficient size to house twenty children or more.”

“And this green is part of the mill property?” Charité asked.

“Yes, and no.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“It is now part of the mill property. However, I am discussing with the committee the possibility of splitting that parcel off to permit me to purchase it and build a home there.” He urged her around to face him.

“At what cost? And if you can afford it, how long before you could put up a house big enough for the family you hope to have?” she asked. He must be sensible.

“The price is reasonable, and something that could be managed within a few years. Part of the sale agreement would be to improve the property by building on it. So, I would have to carry the cost of construction as well as the payments for the land. I can manage it. If...”

“If?” She tilted her head.

“Ah, let’s leave that for later. Here comes our lunch.”

The tiger approached with the picnic basket.

Thom took it and rummaged on one side. “Here you go.” He handed several wrapped parcels and a netted sack of fruit to the Tiger. “Enjoy your lunch out here or in the barn, meet us at the house with the carriage ready in three hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Three hours?” Charité queried.

“Well. We must eat.” Thom took her hand.

“Yes, but three hours?” She frowned.

He lifted her hand to his lips. “You might like to explore the house with me.”

“It has three rooms.” She began to suspect an ulterior motive.

“I forgot to mention there is an attic.” Innocence personified, He blinked at her.

“Oh well, by all means, four rooms will take several hours to explore.” *Why has he brought me here to see his future*

*home? A hollowness bloomed in the pit of her stomach.*

The tiger disappeared into the barn.

“Indulge me, Charité. Please.”

“Oh, very well.” She followed him to the door, tapping her foot as she waited for him to manage the key and lock.

He opened the door then stood back to usher her in. The large room had a fireplace in a far corner where the inner wall met the outer wall. To the right of that was a kitchen area, with a good-sized countertop, sink and a water pump, beyond the sink stood a large wooden pantry. The only furnishing other than the empty pantry was a large worn rug that covered nearly the entire plank floor. Save for those items the room was empty.

On the wall opposite the pantry was a door. She opened it and stopped.

A large bed occupied the center of the room not far from a fireplace that must share a flue with the hearth in the kitchen. The bed was completely at odds with the rest of the cottage. Made of smooth, polished, wild cherry, it had four elegant posts. Deep blue velvet curtains were tied back against each scrolled post. A lacy canopy topped the posts. A dozen fluffy pillows were decorated in the same material as the creamy counterpane embroidered in blue.

“Oh my.” It was a bed made for marriage, for loving. Were it hers, she’d never leave such luxury. At the moment, all she felt was dismay. Days ago, Thom had asked Charité’s permission to approach Aunt Faith about paying his addresses to her niece. Then Sam had gone missing, and nothing more had been said. He must have changed his mind. *I would, too, if a man I contemplated marriage with lost a child in his care. However, why show me all of this, if Thom wants to share it with some other woman?*

He moved to the bed and reclined, careful to keep his shoes off the counterpane. “Come test the mattress. Please. Lie down beside me. I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“I shouldn’t.” She wrinkled her brow.

“We’re alone. Who will know?” He patted the counterpane.

She wanted to touch that lovely bed, lie beside him. If only once and only at a distance. “Since you invite me.”

She smiled and advanced to the unoccupied side of the bed. There she swept her hand over the counterpane. *Silk?* She tested the material again. *Silk!* She smoothed her palm across the nearest pillow case. The texture was the same, but beneath the cloth, was a small lump.

Since the lump did not move, she burrowed her hand between the cloth and the pillow. Finding the object, she withdrew it, discovering she held a ring of braided gold. She put it into her open palm then looked at the man she loved too much for words.

He reached into the pocket of his trousers. “I have a companion piece here.” He held out a similar band with a smallish diamond attached by four prongs. The band had the same braided pattern.

She took the ring from his hand, studying the pair as she held them together before her. “They are lovely.” She returned the rings to him.

He looked down at the gold.

“They were my mother’s.”

Butterflies swarmed her stomach, and her breath caught in her chest. “Thom?”

He grinned at her, then removed his shoes tucking the rings into one before he set it on the floor. Then he turned and crept across the bed to kneel before her on the silk covering.

“Charité Estelle Benéntia Marmont du Pessac will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She kissed him.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she fell with him onto the bed. He stroked her hair, as he returned her kiss with matching fervor.

She held his face, unable to get enough of him, peppering kisses from forehead to chin and back to his lovely, very skilled mouth.

His lips moved beneath hers, and she thrilled to his hand on her breast. Pleasure hurtled through her like one of the Congreve rockets she'd heard of, exploding when it reached her center, putting every sense on alert and every nerve begging for more.

She found the ends of his neckcloth and managed to untie it without breaking the luscious kiss. She began to open his shirt.

He left off his caress to stop her and broke the kiss.

Looking up at him, she lowered her brow in question.

“You’ve not responded to my proposal.”

She relaxed her forehead. “I would think our current activity is answer enough.”

“I need the words, Charité. I give you my heart, my entire being with my proposal. Is it too much to ask for one simple word?”

She stared into his earnest face, and decided not to tease him more. “Yes, Thom Owen, I accept your proposal. I want to marry you, grow old with you, bear your children. I give you my love and will hold yours close for as long as I may live.”

Placing his lips next to hers he whispered, “Thank you.”



A long while later, after helping each other dress, they sat on the large rug in the front room consuming the picnic of cold chicken, cheese, bread and apples. They sipped champagne from the flutes Mrs. Appleberry had packed. In between bites, Charité admired the betrothal ring on her left hand.

“You said there were three rooms. I’ve seen two. Nor have I seen the attic.” She wiped her mouth and fingers on one of

the linen serviettes included in the basket.

With a glance at his pocket watch, Thom followed suit. “We have a few moments, before the tiger comes with the carriage. Let’s pack up the basket, and I will show you the third room and attic.

The third room was through a door on the bedroom’s hearth wall.

“How did I not notice this before?”

Thom grinned. “I like to think it is because you were, ahem, otherwise occupied.”

She grinned back. “You kept my attention on you quite thoroughly.”

The room on the other side of the door was small, but too large to be a closet or dressing room. It was as empty as the rest of the house save for the set of thin stairs on the far end of the room, which rose to an opening in the ceiling.

“A study perhaps?” Her brows met.

“To start with,” Thom agreed. “Perhaps later we could convert it to a nursery.”

She stared, turning as she examined the room. “Yes, I can see that. It’s close enough to the hearth that a young child would not get cold. Those stairs lead to the attic?”

“Indeed. Would you like to see it? The stairs are a bit treacherous, but with me to steady you the climb should be safe enough.

She poked her head above the attic floor and found a pleasantly large space—tall enough for a man like Thom to stand in, if he did not go too close to the slanting ceiling. At the far end sat a small window, just large enough to let in a breeze during spring and summer along with the scent of the roses covering that end of the house.

“Have you seen this?” She looked down at Thom.

“I have, and need not see it again.”

“Then help me down the stairs. I can imagine a number of uses for the attic space. But we need not make up our minds now.”

“No.” He kissed her once again when her feet were planted on the lower floor.

“Mr. Owen?” The tiger’s voice floated through the doors left open to the other rooms.

“Take the basket to the carriage,” Thom called. “We’ll join you there in a few moments.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“We’ll not be able to afford servants for the first few years of our marriage. Will you mind very much?” Thom took her arm.

“No, a governess may not be a house servant, but she often has to do for herself, especially when the staff is small and have all they can do to serve their employers. However, I would like us to save enough to have a nurse for the children and perhaps a cook, once we move from Briar Rose cottage.”

“We should be able to do that.” They emerged to see the tiger walking the horses, nearby. He brought them to a halt.

Thom locked up then helped her into the vehicle before taking the seat beside her. The tiger handed up the reins, and Thom gave the horses the office to walk.

She felt the back of the carriage dip as the tiger leapt up. “This has been a splendid afternoon, Thom. Thank you for taking such care with your proposal.”

“I almost didn’t. I spoke with my father to tell him my intentions, and he advised me to, set the scene, so to speak. I had to scurry to arrange all in time for our outing today.” He guided the horses, carefully retracing their original route.

“Your army experience in organizing men and actions has served you well.” Charité clasped his near upper arm, unwilling to deny herself the pleasure of touching him.

“I hope it will continue to serve me when I have a small army of boys to organize,” Thom said.

“I am sure you will be an excellent headmaster and teacher.” She bit back the envy that threatened. She would be a wife and eventually a mother. Much as she wanted those two positions, she would miss teaching young girls and ladies.

The sun was lowering toward twilight. They would be home soon and questions would start along with all the arrangements for their wedding.

“Thom.”

“Yes, my love.”

She let his words sink in and join her growing happiness. Yet there was much left unsaid, and she wanted the worst of it over before they reached the vicarage.

“Earlier, before luncheon, do you recall we were discussing the cost of the property you want to purchase and the house you want to build?” she asked.

“Do you not want those as well?” he queried.

“I do. However, those things are expensive. You mentioned that they might be affordable if... I need to know what *if* might be.”

He was silent for so long.

*Is he going to reply?*

“Thom?”

“Generous as my salary for being headmaster and teacher may be, it would not cover the cost,” he confessed.

“Then how?”

“We can afford the property and house, if we have two salaries coming in instead of one.” The coach slowed but did not stop.

She frowned. “How...?” Then she knew. “You want me to work at the school as well?”

“I hoped you might be willing. At least for a few years, until our family demands too much of your time.” Doubt filled



his voice. "I do not wish to force you to work. Only do so if you wish it."

Happiness lifted her heart. All the worries she'd had for their future seemed to have solutions. There might be difficulties along the way, but she now knew she shared the same vision of their life together as Thom. They would grow old together, God willing, and grow in love as their family grew.

## CHAPTER 9



*September 16, 1815, The Vicarage*

Charité went upstairs to change, while Thom drove the borrowed rig back to his friend's stable. He had just enough time to wash up and walk over to the vicarage before supper. He entered the house just as his father was leading Lady Afton into the dining room. Thom offered his arm to Charité, who smiled.

“Did your aunt notice my gift to you?” He leaned close, whispering in her ear.

“She has not said anything.”

Entering the dining room, Thom stopped. Charité halted as well.

Candlelight sparkled from a dozen different pairs of silver holders. The entire chandelier was lit. His father usually only used the lowest tier. “Waste of money,” he would say.

The table was covered with a fine linen cloth. Thom lifted one of the corners and found it embroidered with an elaborate script, *JIO*. He finally moved around the table and seated Charité before sitting beside her. He looked at the gold bordered chargers and the intricate pattern edging the plates of each setting. He'd forgotten what his family's fine china looked like. Everywhere he looked were vases of chrysanthemums in all colors.

“The dining room is lovely tonight, Mr. Owen,” Charité commented. “Is there a special occasion?”

“Most certainly.” His father, who remained standing in back of his chair, looked at each person in turn, making certain of their attention. When his gaze settled on Lady Afton he spoke. “I have the very great honor of telling you Miss du Pessac and Thom that Lady Afton has consented to accept my proposal of marriage.”

Charité leapt up and hurried around the table to stand between Lady Afton and his father. She hugged them both in succession.

“This is wonderful, Aunt Faith. Mr. Owen, may I now call you ‘uncle’?”

“Certainly, my child. May I call you ‘niece’?”

“As you please,” she said. “Unless you would like to call me ‘daughter’.”

In an instant, Lady Faith hugged Charité once more. The older woman looked at Thom. “You should have told me you intended to propose to my niece today.”

“I disagree, Aunt—if I may call you that? My proposal was her news to share.”

Lady Afton made a single nod. “Quite wise.”

Then she turned a gimlet gaze on her betrothed. “Joshua, you knew, did you not, that Thom would propose today?”

“I did. Though I wouldn’t have if he had not asked me for his mother’s rings.”

“Charité, let me see,” Lady Afton pleaded. She made the appropriate oo’s and ah’s, then gave her hand over to her niece.

After admiring her aunt’s ring, Charité issued Thom’s father a sly glance. “You chose to propose today because you knew Thom and I would be out most of the day.”

His father nodded. “That and the fact that the day was fine and an excellent opportunity to show my beloved over the vicarage and property. I wanted her to know what she was getting.”

“Did you know niece, that the vicarage has a small apple orchard outside the walled garden?” Aunt Faith asked.

“I did not, Aunt. Thom you must take me and Sam to see it,” Charité insisted gently.

“As soon as possible, my love.” He could not restrain his smile.

“Harrumph.” His father’s man of all work stood at the dining room door.

“Yes, Fields?” Father lifted a brow.

“Mrs. Appleberry suggested that I warn you how easy it is to overcook a goose.”

His father smiled. “Please thank her for the reminder, Fields. You may serve as soon as we all resume our seats.”

Delicious as the picnic had been, Thom was famished and hurried to help Charité sit. She was in an equal hurry.

*She’s as hungry as I after our exertions this afternoon.*

They shared a glance, and from his peripheral vision saw his father kiss Lady Afton’s hand.

They talked of their futures, the school, hopes, dreams, and of wedding plans. The bishop would, of course, perform the ceremony for Thom’s father.

The men carried their brandy to the music room where the conversation continued amongst much song and hilarity.

“Will you please officiate at our wedding, Uncle?” Charité asked.

“Yes, please, Father.” Thom echoed her request.

“Since you both wish it, I will be honored to do so. Will you stand up with me, Thom?” Father had his own requests.

“Nothing would please me more, Father. Thank you for asking.” Thom wanted to crow. All the worries he’d had about his father’s acceptance after their disagreement faded.

“We can stand up for each other, Aunt. Does that meet with your approval?” Charité suggested.

“Yes, Charité. But I’ve no notion who should escort either of us down the aisle.” Aunt Faith frowned over her dinner.

“You could be very modern and progress unescorted,” Thom offered. “You are both very capable women and need not be given away.”

Father’s brow wrinkled. “Would that please you, Lady Faith?”

“I appreciate the suggestion, Thom, but moving from daughter to wife, even symbolically is an important part of a woman’s wedding.” Aunt Faith stated.

“I agree, Aunt. Thom, perhaps one of your friends would perform that office for both Aunt Faith and I?” Charité’s longing to share and solve problems together showed in her open gaze.

“I’ll ask Lord Barlow. If he has no other obligations, I’m certain he will accept the honor.”

“That brings us to setting a date. Lady Faith, I’m afraid you and I will have to wait until the bishop has an opening in his calendar,” Father stated.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Lady Faith’s shoulders dropped.

*Is that a blush coloring Father’s face?*

“He’ll want to bless our marriage before November, when he begins to get very busy preparing for the celebration of the nativity.” The color in Father’s neck began to recede.

“That gives us plenty of time for the banns to be read,” Lady Faith remarked.

“Would you like to wait and marry at the same time as Father and Aunt Faith?” Thom asked.

Charité shook her head. “I’d like to celebrate our nuptials as soon as possible, if you don’t mind.”

“You can get an ordinary license from the bishop in Chester, Thom,” Father informed him. “That will permit you to wave the banns and be married within a week of the license being issued.”

“I’m willing to travel to get the license, but I don’t know how soon I could do it.”

“An opportunity will arise, Thom.” Charité squeezed his hand. “How do you feel about announcing our betrothal at the Harvest Moon Dance in two days?”

“It is what I hoped for.” His gaze met hers.

“I intend to ask Lord Barlow, if I may take a moment during his dinner tomorrow to make known my intent to marry Lady Afton,” Father announced.

The mantel clock chimed midnight.

“Oh heavens.” Charité stood. “I’ve much to do over the next few days. Not the least of which is helping with the last preparations for the Harvest Moon events on the eighteenth.”

Her aunt followed suit.

“And I have church services to see to, as well as officiating at some of the festival competitions.” Father stood too.

“I, too, have a very busy day ahead of me.” Aunt Faith echoed her betrothed’s sentiments.

“That makes all of us then,” Thom said, leaving his chair to stand beside Charité “Father, we will speak later in the week about living arrangements and such. Until the wedding, I will continue at Barlow’s.”

The two couples bid each other good night. “Tell Sam I will see him tomorrow morning, please,” Thom asked of Charité as he took her in his arms.

“Certainly. I suspect he missed both of us today. I feel a trifle guilty about that.” She leaned against him.

“Without necessity. However, I know you love the boy and want all that’s best for him.” Thom stroked her hair.

“I wonder sometimes if it would be best for Sam to stay with us.” Her voice trembled.

Thom lifted her chin to make certain she understood. “Father has said he’ll make a decision soon.”

She nodded. “And what he decides will be best. I am certain.”

“Even if Sam goes to another family?” Thom asked.

“Even if.” She nodded again. On tiptoe she reached up to kiss him. “Good night, my love.”

“Happy dreams, my dearest Charité.” He sent the wish as she climbed the stairs to the nursery.

Thom turned his steps toward his friend’s home. Only a few more days, two weeks at most.

## CHAPTER 10



*September 18, 1815, Harvest Moon Dance,*

Thom waltzed with Charité around the floor, his heart full to overflowing. Within the week they would be man and wife. They already planned to spend the days before their wedding in furnishing their small house. His father had said there was enough in the vicarage attic to furnish ten rooms.

Earlier in the day, Charité, came to him teary-eyed. “Sam will be leaving us the day before we move to Briar Rose Cottage.

“I am sorry you will have to give him up. Tell me what transpired.”

“This morning, two women came to visit him.”

“The ladies at dinner last night, who mentioned they might visit?” Thom asked.

“I’m not certain. I was distracted and did not catch their names. Regardless, Sam took to them right away,” Charité smiled then continued.

“I was very proud of how well behaved he was. When one of the ladies recognized the amulet that came with Sam, it was clear that he did belong with their families. Before they came, your father assured me both women were honest and affectionate. Since Sam is theirs, I am confident he will have a good home and loving family.”

“That will be very good for the boy,” he remarked.



“Yes,” she agreed. “However, I am saddened that he will be moving away.”

“Hmmm.” Thom did not reply, though he suspected a good friend of his had a tendre for one of the women. Sam might very well reside in Reabridge.

“Are you very sad?” Thom asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “I know this is best for Sam. Once I get used to him not being close by, I’m sure I will be quite happy for him and his new family. Also, you and I shall be quite busy. I doubt I’ll have much time to miss him.”

“You are an amazing woman, Charité du Pessac, soon to be Owen.”

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips.

“The day cannot come soon enough, my love.”

As the waltz came to an end a great pounding was heard. The crowded dance floor cleared to reveal the jester of the Harvest Court, pounding a staff twice his height on the parquet.

“Hear ye, hear ye,” the man called out. “His Majesty, Bevan Haskell the first, requires the attention of all here present.”

Haskell made a great show of entering the ballroom. He wore an embroidered robe, a straw crown, and carried an apple for an orb and a scythe as his staff.

“Citizens of Reabridge, one of my subjects has beseeched me to plead on his behalf for your good blessings. I told him he must do so himself.”

“Is it time?” Charité asked Thom.

He nodded then led her to the center of the dance floor to stand before the Harvest King. “Friends, neighbors, most welcome visitors. I plead for your blessings and good wishes on my approaching marriage to Miss Charité du Pessac.”

A rousing chorus of huzzahs rose from a corner of the room where many of his fellow veterans had gathered. The

civilians of the crowd applauded.

King Haskell pointed to the orchestra. “Another waltz, good fellows. I command you.”

Thom took Charité in his arms and together they began the steps of the waltz. The floor was soon as crowded as it had been earlier. He did not want the dance to end, though he knew it must. The blessing was that Charité would always be in his arms.

THE END

# ABOUT RUE ALLYN



Award winning author, Rue Allyn learned story telling at her grandfather's knee and has been weaving her own tales ever since. She and her husband of more than four decades (try living with the same person for more than forty years—that's a true adventure) have retired and moved south. When not writing, enjoying the nearby beach or working jigsaw puzzles, Rue travels the world and surfs the internet in search of background material and inspiration for her next heart melting romance. She loves to hear from readers, and you may contact her at [Rue@RueAllyn.com](mailto:Rue@RueAllyn.com). She can't wait to hear from you.

Learn more about Rue at:

**Website:** <https://RueAllyn.com>



# COMING HOME



MARY LANCASTER

# COMING HOME

MARY LANCASTER

**Old memories, new love**

Captain David Buckley comes home from Waterloo at something of a crossroads in his life. Restless yet weary of war, he contemplates settling down near his home town of Reabridge – only it's full of painful memories of his late wife and the eternal enmity of her family which goes back hundreds of years.

He is not looking for the added complication of love when the mysterious Lady Lorna falls literally into his arms, though he is happy to retrieve her stolen property and scare off rejected suitors. Only with the harvest moon festival does he begin to understand the true meaning of love and home.

## CHAPTER 1



Captain David Buckley woke in his old bed in his old bedchamber. Almost to his surprise, he did not hate it at all. The familiarity of the house's morning smells and sounds, even the voices of his brother's children clattering downstairs, sparked memories that were not painful but comforting. Against all the odds, it was good to be home.

He had been startled by the welcome he had received last night, intense and joyous and touching. And, of course, guilt-inducing, for he should not have waited this long. Now, at last, he had done the right thing. But he had one more painful duty to perform before he could truly relax.

He rose, washed, shaved and dressed with military speed. Then, extracting the small carpet bag from his open, half-unpacked trunk, he went down to join his family for breakfast.

"What have you got there, Davie?" his brother Jeremy asked, laying down his newspaper. "Doesn't look very soldierly to me."

"It's Mary's," he said simply, setting it on a vacant chair.

His sister-in-law, Arabella, nudged her husband in exasperation. His father scowled. His brother grunted. His oldest niece said, "Who is Mary?"

"She was my wife," David said, unreasonably irritated that no one had told the children about her. "She died a couple of years ago. I have some of her things to take to her family at the Book and Bell."

Arabella paled. "You aren't going *there*, are you?"



“Why not?” he asked. “Have the Pownalls moved?”

“Of course not,” his father said irritably. “But if you will take my advice, send the bag by messenger. With a polite note, if you must.”

“If I must?” David stared at him. “Do you expect me to insult them over their daughter’s last possessions?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” his father snapped. “You are not exactly popular with the Pownalls since you ran away with Mary!”

“Apparently, I’m not exactly popular with the Buckleys either,” he retorted. “For the same reason.”

His father glared at him. “What did you expect?”

David met the fierce gaze steadily. “We both expected to be forbidden and reviled. Why do you think I took her away?”

“You mean you *ran* away,” his father exploded, “like a child stealing an apple!”

David pushed to his feet, his plate untouched. “If we are hurling accusations of childishness, how mature is it for grown men and women to maintain the same feud over nothing for more than two hundred years and umpteen generations?”

“It isn’t mature at all,” Arabella said hastily before anyone else could respond. “But you should know the Pownalls have not forgiven you. David, they hold you responsible for Mary’s death.”

David stared at her. “I *am* responsible,” he said bleakly. “Excuse me.” He snatched up the carpet bag and went out, only just remembering to grab his hat on the way past.

He could have saddled his horse and ridden over. It would have saved time, got the duty over with and maybe built some small bridge with Mary’s family all the quicker. But his need for exercise was too immediate. He strode part way down the drive and across the fields toward the town of Reabridge.

This, the guilt, was why he had put off coming home. Everyone knew that, if he hadn’t taken Mary with him, she would still be alive. No one knew it better than David himself.

Lashing himself with the fact could not bring her back, and so he had learned not to, not all the time, at least. He had lost himself in his military duties, in caring for his men, fighting, volunteering, more duty, even beyond the peace of 1814, the Waterloo campaign and its aftermath. Because he had known that at home, the lashes would come again from all sides, and none sharper than his own.

Almost in spite of himself, the familiar scenery soothed his spirit. On this bright, early autumn day, most of the harvests were in and the fields bare. Though here and there cattle and sheep grazed on greenery, and the different shades of trees scattered into the distant woods. The river glistened, majestic in the morning sunlight. He could have crossed at the ford to enter Upper Reabridge from the correct side, but it was better, somehow, to follow along the familiar track, to see the town as he always had, and let the childhood memories bombard him.

The river flowed right through the town, forking around the island that was the heart of Reabridge, where the church and the market square and most of the shops were located. From a distance, it still looked the same. He passed the Crown and Castle Inn, which had belonged to his family for hundreds of years, even before they had become landowners. Someone was sweeping the yard as he passed and acknowledged him with a nod. The lad did not recognize David, didn't even blink at the uniform, but then David knew there were several military men in the village just now, home from the wars in time for the Harvest Festival.

Enjoying his anonymity, with a vague sense of unreality, he walked across the bridge, past the church and the vicarage. In the square, a familiar, shaggy dog trotted over to him.

“Mack?” he said, holding out his hand.

The dog wagged its tail, sniffed his hand and permitted an ear scratch before going about his business. David smiled as he walked on. No, Reabridge never changed.

Crossing the bridge to the other side, he immediately saw the Book and Bell inn, and his stomach tightened.

He sighed, wondering why it was so much harder to face a few Pownalls than a French cavalry charge. He had known them all his life, played with them as children. Only in adulthood, apparently, were you meant to remember the old enmity.

He carried on to the inn and entered by the front door. It was quiet, as though breakfast had passed and the midday drinkers had not yet arrived.

In the open coffee room, a young woman was energetically cleaning tables. The floor was spotless, the polished wood of the banister gleaming its way up the staircase to the upper floor where the guest bedchambers were located. An equally well-polished balustrade ran along the beginning of the passage above.

“Can I help you, sir?” the young woman said pleasantly. “Breakfast, or just coffee?”

“Neither, thank you.” He had recognized her voice first, but as she moved toward him out of the shadows, he knew her face well too. Mary’s younger sister. He took off his hat. “Good morning, Hannah.”

She halted, her face frozen for an instant. He gave her a rueful smile but it was not returned. She curled her lips into a sneer. “La-di-da, Captain Hero. What are you doing here among the lesser mortals?”

Her tongue could be as nasty as Mary’s. Both had been spirited and beautiful girls. Unlike the boy he had been, he would not argue with her. Instead, he put the bag on the nearest table.

“I brought you this.”

“Well take it off there,” she snapped. “I have just cleaned that table.”

He left it where it was. “It’s Mary’s.”

Involuntarily, it seemed, her eyes focused on the bag. She swallowed, probably to deal with unexpected and unwanted tears. “What did you bring it here for?” she asked furiously.

“To carry away the rest of her things? Leave, David Buckley, before I get the men to throw you out.”

He was almost tempted to obey. But it had never been in his nature to do only the bare minimum of his duty. He needed to make peace with Mary’s family. So, giving himself time — he hoped—he opened the bag and took out the bundled contents. A warm, woolen gown, two lighter ones. Two shawls, one that she had taken with her when she had left Reabridge with him, one that he had bought for her on their last happy day together in Spain. On top of them, he laid her hairbrushes and two Spanish combs, and the carved amulet all the Reabridge girls were given.

Hannah moved forward as if she could not stop herself. Slowly, she reached out and touched the amulet. She gave a gasp that was almost a sob and rounded on him. “What did you bury her in? Her chemise? Or don’t you know?”

“I know.” He had dressed her in the silk evening dress she had loved, the one she had worn when she had last danced with him. But he would not grieve here, not within sight of her contempt. “I have kept her wedding ring,” he said steadily, “but it will pass to you on my death.”

“So you *did* marry her? Or was that pretense, too?”

“Of course I married her!” he said, roused at last to anger. “What do you take me for? What do you take *Mary* for?”

“Dead!” Hannah burst out. “I take her to be dead, which she would not be if you had not seduced her from her family and her home. Why did you even come back here? For the baby? Well, you can’t have him! He will be brought up a Pownall!”

Now, he was confused. “What baby?”

“The orphan that the vicar has taken in! He has an amulet just like...” She broke off, staring at Mary’s as though, briefly, as confused as he.

David stared at her. “And you thought he was Mary’s? Hannah, Mary died of fever. Not in childbed.”

“So *you* say. I don’t believe any of your lies. You weren’t even there, were you?”

The guilt was crushing, as if the years since her death had never been.

Hannah laughed, a bitter, anguished sound. “So, someone took the child and you didn’t even know. Or pretend you—”

“Hannah, there was no child,” he broke in. “Even if there had been, *there* is Mary’s amulet!”

“So you—” Something distracted her, made her jerk around to face the staircase. Following her gaze, David saw a young woman at the top of the stairs. Her hair glowed like sunshine, and her face...was pale, her eyes unfocused. He knew the instant before she began to fall and bolted to the steps, leaping up them just in time to catch her tumbling person against his chest.



Lorna woke to lots of tangled voices. She lay on her back on something hard, although there seemed to be a cushion beneath her head. She opened her eyes, blinking to clear the blurriness from her vision and focused on the nearest face, sun-bronzed and male, the same army officer she had heard—and seen—arguing with the innkeeper’s daughter. He might not have been classically handsome, but he had one of those arresting faces, so full of life and thought that he was bound to attract and keep one’s attention. Or at least Lorna’s attention.

She realized she was staring and quickly shifted her gaze to discover the innkeeper’s daughter, Hannah Pownall, and Kerry, Lorna’s maid who was looking unusually grim.

“There, she’s come around,” the innkeeper’s daughter said with some relief.

“She should not even be out of bed,” Kerry said, anger clearly masking her anxiety.

“What was she thinking of?”

“Boredom,” Lorna said succinctly. It had made her rise and dress unaided while Kerry was elsewhere. She had longed for fresh air and the sight of anything other than the four walls of her chamber. The argument between Miss Pownall and the officer had aroused her curiosity, but she would hardly have eavesdropped if she had not needed to pause, her hand gripping the balustrade, to restore her strength. Willpower had got her to the head of the staircase, and she had foolishly imagined if she gripped the banister tightly enough, she would manage.

At least she could not have fallen down the stairs, for she could feel no bruises, and she was lying on the hard, wooden settle in the inn’s reception area. She must have collapsed—gracefully, she hoped—on the landing, only how had she got down here? She tried to remember walking down and couldn’t.

Kerry tutted. Miss Pownall looked anxious. The officer’s eyes glinted with sympathy, as though he understood boredom only too well.

“Well, boredom nearly broke your neck,” Kerry scolded. “If it had not been for this gentleman, we’d have been picking you up in bits! Now, back to bed with you! Miss Pownall, if you could summon Dr. Wagner—”

Lorna grasped the back of the wooden settle she was lying on and hauled herself into a sitting position before anyone could help her. “I will *not* go back to bed!”

They all blinked at her with varying degrees of astonishment and consternation. Though the officer’s eyes began to smile in a way that made her feel giddy again.

“My lady, you are far too weak to be up!” Kerry exclaimed. “Fainting and falling downstairs only proves it.”

“I did not fall downstairs,” Lorna said with certainty.

“Only because I managed to catch you before you pitched too far forward,” the officer said, driving the heat of embarrassment into her face and neck.

Then he had not only caught her and saved her, he had carried her down here, too. *Oh the devil!* And he had taken Kerry's side with reason. The misery of the bedchamber called.

"On the other hand," he said thoughtfully, "you are already downstairs. What did you plan to do?"

She sighed. "Just walk around the garden a little. I can see it from my window. Perhaps I was a little too optimistic."

"Perhaps," he agreed, "though I doubt there's any reason why you should not *sit* in the garden for a little." He glanced at the innkeeper's daughter, his eyebrows raised.

A brief struggle waged clearly across Miss Pownall's face, as though she resented his interference so much she would have liked to oppose him on principle, but could find no reason to do so.

"There is a bench there," she said at last, directing her gaze at Lorna. "I'll bring some cushions so that you're more comfortable. Perhaps some tea?"

Lorna beamed at her. "That would be wonderful. Thank you, though I'm so sorry to put you to all this trouble."

"It's no trouble. Will you be able to walk?"

"Perhaps the gentleman could carry her," Kerry struck in.

"No, no!" Lorna said hastily, "I can walk perfectly well."

The officer, who had remained crouching by the bench all this time, rose to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. "Take my arm as a compromise."

Neither of them wore gloves. His hand was large enough to lose her own in, and his fingers closing around hers were rough and calloused to the touch, yet gentle in their hold. He placed her hand respectfully on his arm and ambled across the room as though he knew the way.

She stepped out of a side door and smiled to feel the breeze against her skin, the sun on her face as she raised it to the warmth. The cushions were already arranged on the bench and he handed her into it with the perfect courtesy she was

used to. And yet something about him was nothing like the usual kind of man she met. He bowed, as though he was about to leave her and she panicked, throwing out her hand.

“I believe we don’t know each other,” she said in a rush. “I’m Lorna Gaveston.”

“David Buckley, at your service.” He took her hand and bowed over it with a grace that seemed more natural than military.

“*Captain* Buckley?”

“For the moment at least.”

There was no other seat but the bench, so she gestured to the space beside her. “Will you keep me company for a little?”

He seemed to hesitate and she blushed to think he was put off by her boldness. Though perhaps he was merely worried about Miss Pownall’s objections. At least he sat.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said with difficulty. “I realize I could have hurt myself very badly through my own stupidity.”

“Not stupid. I was bed-ridden with an injury once and almost *burst* with the need to get out.”

“That’s exactly how I felt,” she said, pleased, “although, of course, a lady does not burst in polite society. I assure you I am not injured, however, nor even ill any longer, but it seems I over-estimated my strength somewhat. I should have waited for Kerry, but I was sure she would find a way to stop me. I think I used up all my reserves in dressing.”

She should not have mentioned dressing either, as the catch in his breath reminded her. She had been too fascinated by the play of expressions across his face. A blaze of humor, a hint of concern and understanding, and then something else she could not read.

He said, “I hope you were not very ill?”

She touched her neck, and his gaze followed the gesture. “Some infection of the throat which led to fever. It has left me weak as a kitten, but Dr. Wagner assures me I shall recover



fully.” She smiled ruefully, “Providing I can avoid falling downstairs.”

The pot boy had appeared, carrying a small table which he set in front of them. Behind him came Miss Pownall, carrying a tray with the teapot and a cream jug, and one cup and saucer.

“Shall I pour for you, ma’am?” she asked, pointedly ignoring Captain Buckley.

“No, thank you. If I drop the teapot, I shall rely on Captain Buckley to catch it! Thank you.”

The innkeeper’s daughter glared at the captain. “I’ll send your maid to you,” she said shortly and stalked back inside.

“You are not friends,” Lorna remarked.

“We were once,” he said. There was distant sadness in his eyes. She realized it had always been there, behind every smile and expression. But then, the conversation she had overheard had been about him marrying Miss Pownall’s sister, who was clearly dead.

“There are always bridges to be built,” Lorna said.

He inclined his head, and without being asked, poured a little milk into the waiting cup before adding tea from the pot.

“Thank you,” she said. “That saves us both from the danger of scalding.” She sipped her tea, regarding him thoughtfully. “I suppose you will be one the heroes of the late battle at Waterloo?”

His smile was twisted. “Let us say I survived it.”

“You sound disillusioned.”

He thought about that. “No. But I lost too many friends that day.”

“Was it your first battle?” she asked, although somewhere she knew it could not be.

“Far from it. I have been with Wellington’s army since 1809.”

“And now you are considering a different life?”

He hesitated. "I am considering. Mostly, I am home to see my family and enjoy the harvest festival."

"Then your family also lives in Reabridge?"

"Yes." His gaze flickered as Kerry appeared with a sun hat and another shawl which she made a fuss of draping around Lorna's shoulders. "At Buckley Manor on the other side of the river."

Kerry stood back and waited pointedly.

"I don't need you, Kerry, you may go," Lorna said. Kerry looked mutinous, but in the end obeyed, dragging her heels.

"She is concerned for you," Captain Buckley said. "And I doubt she has heard anything good about me or my family from the staff here. In Reabridge, we know how to bear grudges that literally last centuries. What brought *you* here?"

"Badness," Lorna replied with a quick smile. "You are a man and have lived an adventurous life, so you probably don't understand how maddening are the restrictions placed on young, unmarried ladies. We are meant to be content with needlework, watercolors and dancing, perhaps the odd, sedate walk or drive in the park until we are married. And then we are further restricted to bringing up babies!"

"Then you do not wish to be married?" he asked curiously.

Clearly, even he thought her odd. She shrugged. "I've never met anyone I could bear to be married to. What I do want is to see the world, learn about other places and other people. If I paint, I would like to paint Paris or Venice! If I walk, I would like it to be under sunnier skies, over foreign mountains. I would like to sail across oceans and explore other continents—Africa, India, the Americas..."

With an effort, she stopped her runaway tongue and sipped her tea. "As it is, I have not even been to Scotland. I tried to persuade my father that he would be very useful at the Congress of Vienna, but he refused to go at all, never mind to take me with him."

"Vienna is a lovely, friendly city," he allowed, "but probably more appealing when not packed to the gunnels with

foreign princelings, politicians and bureaucrats. So you are right to wait.”

“You have been there?”

“I guarded and then carried diplomatic dispatches for a little. Between the peace and Bonaparte’s escape.”

“I would love to hear about your adventures some time,” she said wistfully. Then, realizing how overly inviting it must sound, she blushed. “I’m sorry. I am keeping you from family and friends. But I do thank you for rescuing me from the consequences of my own folly.”

He smiled. He had a lazy, yet very engaging smile. It lit up his whole face and crinkled the skin at the corners of his eyes, where there were strong laughter lines probably emphasized by peering into the sun. Lorna defied anyone not to return such a smile.

“It was my pleasure,” he said, and something in his voice made her shiver in a way that it was not remotely unpleasant. More of a thrill. But he stood, accepting his dismissal – or perhaps grabbing the opportunity she had provided. “I wish you a speedy recovery, Miss Gaveston. And here is Dr. Wagner, so I’ll bid you goodbye.”

The doctor, somewhat tousled and grim, was walking toward them when his face suddenly lightened and he thrust out his hand. “Good God! David Buckley!”

Captain Buckley shook his hand with some enthusiasm. “Glad to see you back, sir. I lost track of you after Waterloo.”

The doctor muttered something unintelligible and turned to Lorna. “Good morning, ma’am. Miss Kerry tells me you were taken poorly again and fainted.” He peered at her. “You look much better to me.”

Lorna wished he would get out of the way because he was blocking her view of the departing Captain Buckley.



The center of the town was busier on David's return journey, and he ran into several old friends, some of whom were fellow soldiers and had also fought at Waterloo. He ended up in the Crown and Castle, enjoying a pie and a pint of ale and catching up with local gossip.

Hannah Pownall's claims of a baby worried him.

"Some traveling English couple brought the child from France," Josh Tyler the innkeeper told him, "because they recognized the Reabridge amulet which was about all he had. They brought him here, hoping to find his family and the vicar took him in. Lots of people are squabbling over who his parents are." Josh eyed him over his ale. "There are some think he's yours and Mary Pownall's."

"Mary Buckley," David snapped. "And we were not blessed with children. How old is this baby?"

"About a year and a half."

And Mary had been dead by Christmas 1813. "I wrote to my family and the Pownalls," he said. "How can anyone believe he is ours?"

Josh shrugged. "I suppose the Pownalls wish to have something—or someone—of Mary's. And Mr. Buckley declared if the child was yours, *you* would bring him up. Turned into another quarrel, of course, with old Mrs. Buckley fanning the flames."

David sighed. "I'll speak to my father. And my mischievous old grandmother." Maybe it wasn't their fault. Maybe David's letters had been vague about dates. But there was no excuse to believe that he would abandon his own wife and child!

"Get a flea in your ear from the Pownalls?" Josh asked sympathetically. "Expect you were lucky to get out alive."

"Oh for the love of—" David broke off and took a deep breath and remembered Miss Gaveston's useful phrase. "My bridges are still being built. We were distracted by a convalescing lady who appears to be staying at the Book and Bell. A Miss Gaveston."

Josh nodded. Upper and Lower Reabridge were happy to drink in each other's inns and he knew all the gossip. "Another mysterious lady. Some are connecting *her* to little Sam—the orphan baby—only she's never asked about him. Mind you, she was at death's door for a bit her fever were so high."

"Why is she mysterious?" David asked, amused. "She has a name."

"Calls herself Miss Gaveston, but that stuck-up maid of hers, Miss Kerry, she calls her *my lady* more often than not."

"Does she indeed?"

"Betty Harris thinks she's hiding from her husband," Josh confided, just as his wife, Nancy, came barging through from the back of the house.

"Betty Harris has more hair than wit," Nancy pronounced. "And Miss Kerry isn't stuck-up, she's just very respectable, which means her mistress is *not* a runaway wife whatever her title. Now are you going to serve customers, Josh Tyler, or do I hire another tapster?"



"If you want to bring up another child," David said to his father over dinner, "don't let me stop you. Only don't pretend it's mine when you know damned—I beg your pardon, Arabella—*dashed* well it isn't."

There was no point in apologizing to his grandmother, who claimed to be deaf as a post, although David had always found her hearing more selective than vanished.

His father cast him a sheepish half-smile. "Of course I know. I was just winding the Pownalls up because they dared to imagine you would abandon your own child, to say nothing of your wife."

"Don't you think they're distressed enough over Mary's loss?" David said quietly.

Color surged into his father's face. But before he could speak, Grandmama's head snapped up and she glared at David. "Don't you dare lecture us on right and wrong, boy! *You're* the one who eloped with Mary Pownall in the first place."

To which, of course, he had no defense.

Over the next few days, as he settled back into life at Buckley Manor and Reabridge, he often felt like a complete stranger. At other times, it was all so familiar he might never have been away. He tramped the countryside, looking at land, and thinking, imagining.

Lorna Gaveston popped into his mind quite often. She had felt so fragile and light in his arms, when he had caught her on the stairs, and yet when he had talked to her, her face bore such vitality, such character that he had almost forgotten she was ill. Her longing for adventure, for a life that was different, made him think of himself as a young man with his first commission, desperate to see the world and find honor and glory.

Well, military life might have supplied the foreign lands and the adventure, in between bouts of boredom, but the honor and glory had proved harder to pin down. He was not even sure he understood the concepts anymore. Still, the regiment, the army, had been his life and he had thrived on it. He had never even thought of selling out, not even when Mary had been alive. Until Waterloo, when grief at so much loss had combined with a sense of staleness and he had begun to wonder about other directions for his life.

In the meantime, mulling things over, he renewed old friendships, visited his sister, played with all his nieces and nephews. And on market day, he wandered into town, wondering if he should make another sortie to the Book and Bell. Or should he wait until the harvest festival when, traditionally, disagreements were laid aside?

He refused to be influenced by the possibility of seeing Miss Gaveston again. Nevertheless, he had already decided to go to the inn again today, when he saw Miss Gaveston clearly on the other side of the square. With the stern figure of her

maid behind her, she was examining some ribbons at one of the stalls.

He moved nearer, changing direction until he could see her delicate profile. More even than her beauty, he was fascinated by the intense curiosity she brought to everything, even cheap ribbons at a provincial market stall.

The maid saw him coming before her mistress. She glared at him in a repelling kind of way. He ignored her and was about to address Miss Gaveston when the lady turned, a question on her lips for the maid. Seeing him, she broke into a natural smile of pleasure, and David had the sense he could not breathe.

“Captain Buckley, what a pleasant surprise. How do you do?”

“How do *you* do, ma’am?” he responded. “I would guess you are feeling better?”

“Indeed, except that I cannot make up my mind between the lavender and the jonquil. What do you think?”

“Jonquil,” he said without looking. “Lavender is too dull for you.”

To his delight, she blushed, bringing some much needed color into her pale face. “Oh, they are not for me but my eldest sister.”

“Then if she resembles you, I stand by jonquil.”

“I’ll take both, if you please,” she told the merchant, who was delighted and began to cut and wrap her purchases. “What brings you to the market, Captain?”

“Idleness,” he said deprecatingly. “What of you? Do you have the doctor’s permission for so strenuous an outing?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Hardly strenuous. We came in the innkeeper’s gig, when what I really want is to walk.”

“You’re not up to it,” Kerry said grimly. “Don’t want you fainting again.”

Miss Gaveston paid for her ribbons and accepted the little parcel with a smile and a word of thanks. Kerry took it and put it in her basket.

“I shan’t faint,” Miss Gaveston insisted. “I have grown much stronger in the last few days.”

David found himself saying, “I would be happy to escort you around the market. And perhaps a short walk to Lower Reabridge for luncheon? Miss Kerry could bring the gig, in case you find it too much.”

It turned out to be the ideal if slightly ridiculous solution, preserving the lady’s reputation by the nearby presence of her maid, and yet allowing David the opportunity of private conversation with Miss Gaveston. Kerry driving the rattling gig along just behind them seemed to amuse Miss Gaveston as much as it did him.

“It will be all over town before tea time that we are trying to poach customers from the Book and Bell,” he said as they turned in to the Crown and Castle Inn yard.

“And are you?” she asked.

There was teasing laughter in her eyes, but he chose to answer seriously. “Actually, I wanted to see if you would come, or if you had been told too many terrible stories about me and my family.”

“I make up my own mind about people, Captain Buckley.”

David signaled the ostler to deal with the pony and gig, and helped Kerry to alight.

She all but pushed him away as soon as her feet were on the ground. “My lady, you cannot be seen at a public inn with a man!”

“On the contrary,” David said mildly. “Your reputation will be well-preserved by the presence of several other ladies, who frequently take lunch or tea here on market days.” Or at least they had used to. He couldn’t imagine things changing to that degree.



In fact, there was the usual market day hubbub, with folk from town and the surrounding countryside and different classes chatting pleasantly together, if not at the same tables. Most spared a glance for David and Miss Gaveston and called greetings in the midst of their own conversations.

David found a pleasant table in the corner by the window, and had the impression his companion was glad to sit down. Kerry sat pointedly at the next table. It was not a place to come for privacy. Several townspeople stopped for a quick word, as did Arabella and his sister. Miss Gaveston took it all in her stride, and seemed glad to meet everyone. She ate with enthusiasm, although her appetite was not great, and conversed with intelligence and humor on everything from politics to fashion.

The time flew by, for she was entertaining company, naturally warm, curious and often novel in her observations. He liked her, liked the way she made him think. But more than that, he liked her musical voice and he liked to watch the play of expressions in her face.

She had a gift, he thought, of appearing at home in any company, any situation. And he was in danger of liking her too much. For that reason, he was almost glad when she declared it time to depart. At the next table, Kerry all but bounced to her feet.

David escorted both women out into the yard, and Tom the stable boy brought round the gig and pony that belonged to the rival inn. Tom seemed quite gleeful about that.

Toward the main gates, a huddle of men who had probably just emerged from the taproom, were parting. Without warning, Miss Gaveston dropped David's arm and whipped herself around to his other side.

He glanced at her in some amusement. "What...?"

"Someone I do *not* want to see," she said with unexpected grimness. "More to the point I don't want him to see me. We cannot drive past him! Is there a side-entrance I can use and I shall walk back to the Book and Bell. The gig—"

“You can’t walk all that way,” Kerry all but wailed.

“Hush!” Miss Gaveston glared at her, the first sign of annoyance he had seen her use.

“There’s a tradesman’s gate wide enough for the gig,” David interrupted. “It will take us over rougher paths before we get to the road again, though.”

“You must drive,” Miss Gaveston said firmly, though Kerry looked outraged since there was not room for three of them in the gig. “We don’t know the paths.”

“Turn it all around,” David said to the wide eyed Tom. “Then find a vehicle to take Miss Kerry back to the Book and Bell. And keep a still tongue in your head,” he added, flipping him a coin.

The gig was now between Miss Gaveston and the men by the gate. Kerry, tight-lipped, was obliging enough to stand in the way, while David handed Miss Gaveston in and climbed in to take the reins. As he moved, he took time to examine the group by the gate. Most of them were local, but one gentleman stood out in his perfectly cut blue morning coat and buff pantaloons. Fair curls escaped from his exquisitely tall, beaver hat. He carried a cane for swaggering purposes, not need, and he smiled while he talked.

David set the pony into motion, and it trotted swiftly out of the narrower gateway to the path beyond. Beside him, Miss Gaveston fidgeted, rubbing her fingers together in her lap. She did not appear frightened, but she was definitely not at peace.

He let the worst of the bumps in the path go by before he spoke. “Who is that man, and how has he upset you?”

She glanced at him a little ruefully. “You will think me a complete goose.”

“No.”

She drew an audible breath. “His name is Edgar Winthorpe. He is a gazetted fortune hunter.”

David felt the draining of hopes he had not known he harbored. “Is it your fortune he is hunting?” he asked evenly.

“He was, and probably still is since he is here. He must have followed me, asking lots of questions, which is even more disturbing.”

“Your family does not know you are here.” It was not really a question, and she did not answer it directly.

“I was on my way to my eldest sister’s house in Wales. Most of my luggage was sent ahead, so I wrote to my sister that I would stay with friends on the journey and she should not look for me before the last week in September.”

“Giving you freedom to explore.”

She smiled at him, and he found it difficult to breathe. Deliberately, he looked at the pony’s ears instead.

“Exactly,” she said warmly. “The country is so pretty here, and one gets tired of posting inns and the main roads. We found some lovely little villages in the hills, and then we came upon Reabridge. I meant to stay only one night, but by the morning my throat was on fire and I felt awful. I was afraid I would spread the illness, but I don’t seem to have. Even Kerry didn’t catch it and she nursed me through the fever most devotedly, bless her. Dr. Wagner called it tonsilitis, an inflammation but not infectious.”

She broke off, perhaps afraid she was saying too much. “That isn’t what you wish to know, is it?”

He glanced at her. “I wish to know if that man—Winthorpe?—is any threat to you, and if so, what I can do to protect you.”

Color seeped into her pale face. Her quick smile might have been one of gratitude. “He is a threat to my peace, no more. And I suppose he could spread rumors that I am traveling alone, although Kerry is always with me. I do not wish to disgrace my family, Captain, only...escape them sometimes.” Her lips quirked. “And escape their expectations.”

His eyebrows flew up. “They expect you to marry the gazetted fortune hunter?”

“I am four-and twenty, Captain, almost on the shelf. A fortune-hunter of birth and possible expectation is the best I can be reasonably expected to accomplish.”

He stared at her. “Any man would be overjoyed to marry you.”

“I thank you for your flattery, but it is true I have turned down several more eligible suitors and my father is tired of it. Mr. Winthorpe is my last chance.”

“Or what?” David demanded. “He throws you into the street?”

She laughed, a delightful sound that seemed to sing through his blood. “Hardly. He will want me to go to the aunts in Bath and grow old quietly. I have hopes of persuading him that my own establishment with a respectable companion would be preferable.”

“And then you can explore the world with this respectable—and presumably adventurous—companion?” he guessed.

“Precisely.”

“So, all you have to do is hold out against Winthorpe?”

“Who is, sadly, reluctant to take no for an answer. I do come with a reasonable dowry.”

David suspected her definition of reasonable and his would differ. “My lady,” he said thoughtfully.

She sighed. “Kerry cannot get out of the habit of using my title. I have made a botch of being incognita, haven’t I?”

“Not entirely. I still don’t know who you really are.”

“Lady Lorna Gaveston,” she replied, “so not so very different. Though my father is the Earl of Kingswood.”

An earl’s daughter. Why did he always set his heart on the unattainable?

*Don’t be stupid, your heart is not involved. You barely know her. She is nothing like Mary and the situation is entirely different.*

“You are silent,” she said. “Does my dishonesty give you a disgust of me?”

He met her gaze once more and was surprised to see that she actually cared for his answer. He smiled because he couldn’t help it. “Of course not. I have sympathy for anyone trying to veer off the expected path.”

“Because you did when you married your wife?”

He looked away in order to guide the pony down the fork that led back to the road.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “That is none of my business.”

“I was right to veer,” he replied. “The feud is ridiculous and pointless and we had every right to ignore it to seek our own happiness.”

“I sense a *but*,” she said, her gaze steady on his face.

His smile was twisted. “I was in too much of a hurry. I had come home to recover from a shrapnel injury. Just a few weeks. But we had known each other all our lives. In another year or two, when peace came, the love would still have been there. And so would she. But it seemed to me then that I could not return to Spain without her, and we knew our families would make delays. So, we eloped. I expect you know the tale from Hannah’s side.”

“Hannah is not an unreasonable woman,” Lady Lorna said as they bumped onto the road again. “I think your sudden appearance just took her by surprise and it’s as if she is grieving all over again.”

They crossed the bridge to the island, skirting the market and heading directly for the other bridge to the upper town.

“I am sorry you lost your wife,” Lady Lorna said.

“She did not like army life,” he blurted. “She thought she would, but she hated it. When I could, I left her in decent accommodation in safe towns, with a woman who was both maid and guard. It made both our lives difficult. But I never regretted marrying her, until she died and I could see all my

mistakes as plain as day. I had not behaved like a responsible adult. Since then, I seem to have aged a decade.”

“Youth and love are not a crime, Captain,” she said gently, yet with an urgency that made him look at her in surprise. She smiled a little self-consciously, which brought him back with a bump to her immediate problem.

“The name Gaveston will lead Winthorpe to you here,” he warned.

“I won’t see him without protection,” she assured him. “And it is probably time I refused him in a manner that leaves him no hope whatsoever. With luck, he will run onward to my sister’s party and find another fortune to marry.”

“Then you will see him there, too?” David asked, frowning.

“Oh yes. One sees him everywhere.”

He drove the pony into the yard of the Book and Bell, and nodded to the ostler who came to take her. As he escorted Lady Lorna inside, he said urgently, “You will send to me if you need any help at all? Anyone here will know where to find me.”

“Thank you,” she said warmly, and for a wild instant, he almost thought she would reach up and kiss his cheek. She didn’t. She merely smiled, thanked him and flitted away toward the stairs.

David had to force himself to walk away.



Word, it seemed, was out. When Kerry brought Lorna her morning coffee, it came with a hand-delivered note directed to Lady Lorna Gaveston.

She regarded it on her tray with dislike. “I suppose it was inevitable now that Winthorpe is here.” Oh dear, could it be from Winthorpe himself?

Without touching the note, she picked up her coffee cup and sipped.

She had also told Captain Buckley who she was and how she had come to be here. Could the note possibly be from him? The notion certainly made her heart beat more pleasurably, though she doubted in the circumstances he would commit such a breach of etiquette as to write to an unmarried lady.

She eyed the note with misgivings. The paper was of reasonable quality, the writing well-formed, but perhaps a little feminine?

“Just read it,” Kerry said sardonically.

Lorna snatched it up and set down her coffee cup to break to the seal and unfold the note. She dipped at once to the signature at the bottom. *Arabella Buckley.*

*Dear Lady Lorna,*

*Please excuse my writing to you when we have never met! I was so sorry to learn of your recent illness and how circumstances have trapped you in Reabridge without family or friends. If your health permits, I would be honored if you could dine with us at Buckley Manor this evening. We so look forward to meeting you.*

A surge of excitement took her by surprise. Arabella Buckley was Captain Buckley’s sister-in-law. She could only imagine he had prompted the invitation. That pleased her. She liked him. She had enjoyed talking and laughing with him yesterday. And his quick, unquestioning action in taking her out of Winthorpe’s way was admirable. And if there was something about his smile, and his nearness and his occasional, casual touch that made her heart flutter, well, she had always enjoyed novelty.

She glanced at Kerry. “I do have an evening gown here, don’t I? I did not send them all to Galton Park?”

“Why, where are you going?” Kerry demanded.

“Buckley Manor, for dinner this evening.”

“You can’t!” Kerry wailed. “They’ll be after you for that captain, and God knows how he’ll try to compromise you into marriage! What he did to his first wife doesn’t bear thinking about!”

“Oh, stop being ridiculous,” Lorna commanded. “You may safely discount most Buckley tales you learn in this inn. It takes two to elope and I never heard that he dragged her off kicking and screaming. The lady’s death is a tragedy, not fuel for a foolish feud that seems to have been going on since the Flood.” She threw off the covers. “I shall breakfast downstairs.”

This, however, turned out to be a mistake. The coffee room was quiet, the meal delicious, and Lorna was pleased by the improvement in her appetite. But as she stood to go for her morning walk, a slight, elegant gentleman was descending the stairs in a leisurely, dignified manner. Her heart sank as she recognized Edgar Winthorpe.

She had known that he would find her here. But she had hoped he would have the decency to stay at the Crown and Castle. Frankly, it made her flesh crawl to think they had been sleeping under the same roof. Although it was likely the same would be true at her sister Augusta’s.

He made no effort to pretend surprise, although he smiled with obvious pleasure to see her. On reaching the foot of the stairs, he bowed elaborately. “My lady!”

“Mr. Winthorpe. How unexpected.” She dipped a curtsy, but neither approached nor offered her hand.

“Likewise, dear lady. My sympathy on your recent illness. I do trust you are quite recovered? Perhaps you will allow me to send to London for my own physician, who is most skilled.”

“Thank you, that won’t be necessary,” she replied distantly. “I am convalescing well, according to the local doctor.”

He curled his lip. “What, the drunken fool in the village?”



“I cannot think so,” Lorna said, though it was true she had smelled spirit on Dr. Wagner’s breath on several occasions. She dared say the same was true of most gentlemen, including Winthorpe. Besides, she liked Dr. Wagner. There may have been some deep trouble in his life, but he had a sense of humor, and when consulting, he concentrated absolutely on his patient.

Winthorpe had lost interest in the subject. “Might I invite you to take a stroll, my lady? If you are up to the exertion?”

She knew at once what he was about. A private tete a tete during which he would point out the difficulty of her being alone here without her family, and add this to his pressure when he proposed. She even opened her mouth to send him about his business, before she realized that this was also her perfect opportunity to get the whole matter over with and refuse him.

It might cause awkwardness at Augusta’s, but it would certainly be more comfortable than waiting for him to jump out from behind pillars and door posts to accost her while she was there.

“I shall be happy to take a short walk with you in five minutes, if that suits,” she said, sailing past him to climb the stairs. “And you will come with me,” she murmured to Kerry as she came alongside the maid on the stairs.

Winthorpe did not look best pleased when Kerry descended behind her, also in bonnet and shawl. “We are in the country,” he observed with distaste. “And old friends. Might we not dispense with the pointless propriety of the following servant?”

“On the contrary,” she said, determined to take the wind out of his sails. “In my current circumstances, I need to be twice as careful of my reputation. I go nowhere without my maid.”

“Oh, very well,” he said ungraciously.

Hannah Pownall appeared as they moved toward the front door.

“I am taking a short walk,” Lorna told her. “But I shan’t be more than twenty minutes.”

“That is hardly a walk at all,” Winthorpe pointed out, holding the door for her.

“It is as much as I can manage,” she said, not quite truthfully, “in my convalescence.”

“I shall look after you,” he promised, offering his arm.

It would have been impolite to refuse, so she laid her hand on his sleeve and wished he were David Buckley instead. She liked walking close to *him*...

Winthorpe turned left at the inn gate, walking away from the center of town and toward the pleasant countryside along the river bank. “I am surprised and a little worried not to find his lordship and at least one of your sisters here with you. How awful to have been ill with no family around you, only strangers.”

“Oh, Kerry looked after me splendidly, and to be frank I was in no condition to care who was around me. The inn staff have been wonderful.”

“How like you to say so. But I have the feeling his lordship does not even know you are here. He told me you were staying with friends in Cheshire.”

“I was on my way to do so when I fell ill,” Lorna lied with aplomb. “And no, I did not worry my family by telling them so. I shall, of course, explain to Papa when I see him.”

“Oh, of course,” Winthorpe said in tones of rather blatant disbelief. “You have an independent spirit, which I admire profoundly. However, I hope you do not mean to play off such tricks on a husband, once you are married.”

So, straight to battle, then... “At the moment, I expect I would,” she said candidly. “Which is why I have no immediate intention of marriage.”

His hand closed over hers on his arm, and she stiffened instinctively, forcing herself not to throw him off. “What, not even to one who admires you as you are, who can give you the

freedom you crave, and who has the benefit of his lordship's blessing as your suitor?"

"No," she said, not quite able to force her teeth apart. She did make herself meet his gaze however, and saw a spurt of irritation in his eyes, followed by uncertainty.

He leaned closer. "You do understand that I am making you an offer of marriage, Lorna? I shall be the most devoted and yet the most liberal of husbands. I shall solve all your problems and provide you with all the fashionable cachet you need."

She blinked. "I do not need or even want fashionable cachet, whatever that is. For the rest, you do me great honor, Mr. Winthorpe, but we should not suit, and I must respectfully decline your offer. I think we should return to the inn now."

"But Lorna, you cannot have thought this through," he protested. "You need a husband, not just to extract you from your immediate embarrassments, but, to be frank, to keep you off the shelf. Do you really want to be shuffled around all your married relations for the rest of your life, made use of as unpaid spinster companion and derided as the useless drain on family resources? I am your way out."

She tried to withdraw her hand and found it clamped to his arm. "I do not need a way out," she snapped. "I am content as I am, and my future is not your concern." She came to a sudden halt, hauled hard on her hand, taking him by such surprise that she was able to free herself, and spun on her heel to face her astonished maid. "Your arm, Kerry. I find I am fatigued. Good morning, Mr. Winthorpe. Enjoy the rest of your walk."



An unpleasant thought struck her just as she prepared for Mrs. Buckley's dinner party that evening. What if Winthorpe had been invited, too?

She stared in dismay at her reflection in the slightly spotty glass. Captain Buckley would not have asked the man, but if

his sister-in-law imagined Lorna would like some ton-ish company, or even if he had charmed and wriggled his way into Mrs. Buckley's good graces...

"The rubies are too much for an informal dinner party," she said to Kerry, sacrificing her favorite jewelry set reluctantly. "I'll wear the pearls instead. Less ostentatious."

Kerry sniffed, as though she thought the country gentry hereabouts *should* be overawed by Lorna's wealth and consequence, if only to keep them in their place. Reluctantly, she unfastened the necklace and placed it back in its case while Lorna removed the dangling earrings.

Kerry put the case in the bottom drawer of the large chest and took out the pearl case instead. The creamy strand looked good, if not dazzling, with her evening gown in shades of pink silk. And the button earrings were much more the thing. She was not attending a ball.

And why did she care so much what impression she made?

Because Captain Buckley would be there, of course. Whether Winthorpe was present or not, she must not look as if she were pursuing anyone.

*Am I?* she asked her reflection in sudden awe.

*No*, she told herself firmly. *I like the captain, but I merely wish to know him better.*

She rose and picked up her reticule and shawl. Kerry carried her cloak downstairs to where Peter, her father's under-coachman, awaited her, sniffing his disapproval as he had every time she had met him since she had obliged him to veer off the main road and stay at substandard country inns. For his own sake, she had tried to send him on to her sister's but he had refused to go.

There was no sign of Winthorpe in the coffee room or in the inn yard. She hoped he had left already for Galton Park. Or better still, his own estates. Or London.

It was a pleasant drive through the town and along the banks of the river. Buckley Manor proved to be an old courtyard building, much smaller than the country residences

she was used to, and yet under the pink and gold sunset, she found it charming.

As was the sight of Captain Buckley playing with three children and a dog in the courtyard. The children were laughing excitedly and stopped to gaze with awe at the horses and the carriage. A small girl clung to the captain's hand until he extricated himself and came to open the door, let down the steps, and hand her out.

He was smiling as he murmured words of welcome, but she could not quite read his expression. It came to her that he was not behind his sister-in-law's invitation after all, and was not at all sure he wanted her here. Which should not have hurt as much as it did. But then she was swarmed by grinning children and a puppy, all of whom seemed eager to be introduced.

Captain Buckley scooped up the pup and commanded, "Atten-shun!" At once, the boys stopped pelting her with questions and sprang upright, although they still grinned. The little girl giggled.

"Allow me to present my niece, Jane, and nephews Robert and Andrew." He scratched the pup's ears. "And Duke, although any creature less ducal I have yet to meet. Troops, make your bow to Lady Lorna Gaveston and then take Duke to the stables."

After the bows—Jane bowed too, in imitation of her brothers—Lorna shook hands with each of them, which seemed to awe them into obedience and they ran off to the stables with Duke.

By then, Captain Buckley's brother and sister-in-law had also come outside to welcome her and the captain led her to meet them by the front door.

"Lady Lorna, how lovely to meet you," Mrs. Buckley said, smiling although with a hint of anxiety, perhaps regretting her hospitable impulse to an earl's daughter used to every luxury. Lorna was glad she had not worn the rubies. Mrs. Buckley's jewelry consisted of a simple locket.

“It’s so kind of you to invite me,” Lorna said warmly. “For one thing, I didn’t realize until I met your children, how much I miss my own nieces and nephews.”

It seemed to be just the right note, for both proud parents smiled and she was swept inside to meet the head of the family, Mr. Hyde Buckley. He was discovered scowling over a newspaper in a pleasant drawing room, though he rose at once to greet her with perfect courtesy.

Only then did she catch sight of the old lady in the corner, making a great production out of rising to her feet. Immediately, Laura went to her, saying, “Oh, please don’t get up on my account, ma’am.”

The old lady smiled, a little charmingly, a little slyly.

“My grandmother, Mrs. Lydia Buckley,” David said with an air of resignation. “Grandmama, Lady Lorna Gaveston.”

Lorna was already offering her hand, which the old lady took in both of hers, beaming. She might have been merely the gentle, sweet old lady she was portraying, but the gleam in her eye belied it. On the other hand, she was clearly delighted to meet Lorna.

It was the children who broke a moment’s awkwardness, bounding inside, though without the pup. Once the Buckleys realized Lorna was not one of those who frowned upon children mixing with adults, they seemed to relax, and so did Lorna. Although she could not help noticing that Captain Buckley remained very quiet.

When the children were sent off to bed, Lorna happily agreed to go up and read them a story, and after a moment’s hesitation which was not lost on her, Captain Buckley accompanied her. Amongst much laughter, a story was told rather than read and the children committed to the care of their nursemaid.

“You really don’t mind being here, do you?” Captain Buckley said as they walked along the passage to the stairs.

“*Mind?*” she repeated, startled. “Why would I mind?”

Even in the dimming light, she could see the faint stain of color along the line of his cheekbone. “Arabella wrote to you without my knowledge.”

Hurt clawed at her stomach. “You would have forbidden her?”

His flush deepened. “Hardly. For one thing, it is not my place. I just... I don’t want you to feel *obliged*. I know it is obligation, in part, that you are trying to escape.”

She pretended not to see his proffered arm and sailed downstairs in front of him. “Friendship is not obligation to me.”

He caught up with her before she reached the foot of the stairs. “Nor to me. Are we friends?”

“Apparently that is for you to decide.”

“Lorna!” He caught her arm, then dropped it. “I beg your pardon. My lady. If I am ass, tell me so.”

She took his arm. “Captain Buckley, you are an ass,” she said cordially, and he laughed.



Hyde Buckley was no caricature of a country squire. Although down to earth, he not only had his finger on the pulse of local happenings but was well-informed about national events, too. The whole family had opinions on every subject, from politics and foreign affairs to literature and music and the extraction of antiquities from other countries. They argued without quarreling and Lorna found it particularly interesting that the ladies’ opinions were treated with as much respect—and opposition—as that of the males present.

Without being elaborate, the food was excellent and plentiful and Lorna ate more than she had since her illness. The ladies kept the custom of withdrawing and leaving the men to their wine.

“How long do you mean to stay in Reabridge, Lady Lorna?” asked the captain’s sister, Mrs. Gordon, who had arrived with her husband while Lorna and David had been in the nursery.

“Sadly, I have little excuse to remain,” Lorna said ruefully. “If my family hears of my illness, they will worry and probably send the equivalent of a cavalry regiment to collect me. I should probably go at the end of the week.”

“Oh, you can’t leave before the harvest festival on Monday,” Arabella exclaimed. “The whole community comes out for dancing and sports and children’s amusements. We make a huge fuss of it in Reabridge.”

“Quaint but colorful,” Mrs. Gordon added with a hint of deprecation, perhaps afraid of Lorna finding them country bumpkinish.

“My favorite things,” she assured them. “Perhaps I shall stay and merely write to my sister.”

“Where is your sister?”

“Oh, in Wales, Galton Park. I was on my way there by—um... easy stages, when I fell ill. But I am very glad to have discovered your town. It is quite charming.”

“It can be,” Mrs. Gordon allowed, with a quick glance at Arabella. “Apart from ancient feuds. I expect you know of David’s heinous crime in marrying the daughter of our enemy!”

“A little.”

“I hope you won’t believe all you’ve been told at the Book and Bell.”

Arabella frowned at her sister-in-law. “Sarah, if Lady Lorna believed such nonsense, she would not have come near us.”

“Indeed, I prefer to make my own judgments,” Lorna said mildly. “My feeling is that the Pownalls are more grieving than angry, and that all could be resolved very quickly. I know Captain Buckley is keen to end the ill-feeling.” As she spoke,



her gaze fell on a very fine pianoforte, and she sprang to her feet. "Goodness, what a beautiful instrument."

"I'm sure it's wildly out of tune," Arabella said, "but please try it out if you wish."

It was indeed badly out of tune, so Lorna merely amused the other ladies with a comic performance that produced gales of laughter, even from the old lady while she clapped her hands over her ears. Only when the gentlemen joined them, did Lorna jump to her feet and move away.

As the evening progressed, she realized that not only was she enjoying herself but that she was being herself and that she was accepted as such, not with any foolish awe for her rank, but with liking. More than once, she felt the captain's steady gaze on her, and surprised a smile playing around his lips. The smiles caused butterflies to dance in her stomach, and she was very aware of him sitting beside her, large and masculine and *real*.

He made no effort to be alone with her until after her carriage was summoned. She thanked her kind hosts, and said goodnight, but it was Captain Buckley alone who conducted her out to the courtyard, rather too quickly for the carriage to be waiting.

"I wanted to ask you about Winthorpe," he murmured.

"Oh, it was just as I expected. I refused him and I think he might have left Reabridge."

"Then he won't bother you further?"

"Well, he might go to my sister's, but I shall deal with that when I have to. I like your family. They are kind and fun."

"So are you."

She flushed, risking a fleeting glance up at him, and her heart thudded. Beneath the stars, in the flare of the lights from the house, he looked both handsome and shadowed, like some temptation girls were warned against. And she melted with longing.

He leaned closer, as though he couldn't help it, as though he felt the same, insistent tug. Her stomach dived with the knowledge that he would kiss her.

And then hooves clattered on the cobbles and he straightened. "May I take you for a drive tomorrow?" he said, with odd huskiness. "Show you some of our countryside?"

She swallowed. "Thank you. That would be most pleasant."

His teeth gleamed as he moved toward the waiting carriage and opened the door for her. "Until tomorrow, then. Good night, my lady."

"Good night, Captain," she managed, and took his hand to climb into the carriage. Even through her gloves, his strong, steady fingers seemed to burn her skin. But she was smiling as the carriage took her back to the Book and Bell.



Lorna woke to daylight, a sweet inner happiness, and an insistent rummaging close to her bed. Sitting up, she pulled back the bed curtain and beheld Kerry pulling everything out of the chest of drawers and piling it precariously on top of the chest or on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Lorna asked, mystified.

"The rubies," Kerry said in a choked voice. "I can't find the rubies."

"What is that beside you?" Lorna demanded, seeing a jeweler's case on the floor.

"The pearls," Kerry said, pausing only long enough to show her and snap the case shut again. "I'd just put them in the case and opened the drawer when I realized the other case wasn't there, and I'm sure I put it in the bottom drawer. Your ladyship didn't move them?"

"No. And I saw you put the rubies back in the bottom drawer before I left yesterday evening."

“Well, they’re not there now!” Kerry raked her hand through her hair, sending pins flying in all directions.

Lorna sighed and slid out of bed. “Let’s put everything back one item at a time,” she suggested. “You took everything out in a panic, I expect, and caught the other jewel case up without noticing.”

Her calm had its effect on the maid, and together, they shook out every item before replacing it carefully in the chest. Kerry even rummaged behind and beneath the drawers, under the chest. Then they sat back and looked at each other.

“Someone’s taken them,” Kerry said.

“I can’t imagine any of the staff here doing so,” Lorna said firmly. “So let us not hurl accusations. I shall go and speak to Miss Pownall.” She frowned. “But no one would have any reason to come in here yesterday evening or first thing this morning. And I locked the door when you left me last night.”

“The rubies are still gone.”

“But how? You waited up for me to come home – did you wait in here?”

“I tidied up in here when you’d left, took some things down to the laundry and had something to eat with the staff. I spent most of the evening in the kitchen.” She cast Lorna a frightened glance. “I don’t think I locked your bedchamber door.”

“We never have, except at night,” Lorna pointed out. “And that is only because I don’t want some jug-bitten guest getting muddled as to his own room.”

“They could have, though, while you were out. No one in the main room at that time of night. The tap room’s busy but no one keeps much track of who goes up and down the stairs.”

Lorna got to her feet. “Help me dress and I shall go and find Hannah.”

Half an hour later, Hannah Pownall stared at her across the table in the coffee room. Her expression was one of horror. “None of my people would do such a thing! I’ve known them

all my life! Besides, they know the inn and their jobs depend on our reputation for honesty. This is terrible! For all of us as well as for you. Who could have done such a thing?"

"That is what we have been wracking our brains over," Lorna said. "What about your other guests?" she asked bluntly. "Staying guests, or strangers in the taproom?"

Hannah rubbed at her forehead, as though trying to wake herself from a nightmare. Lorna had the guilty feeling she was adding a final straw to the poor young woman's burden. "There are some soldiers around, she admitted. "Not all known to me. Some have come with comrades and friends, for the harvest festival..." She looked up. "There was that gentleman who stayed last night. Mr. Winthorpe."

"We could ask him if he had seen anyone—" Lorna broke off at Hannah's expression.

"You don't understand," Hannah said. "He's gone. Didn't even pay his shot, but his room is cleared out. His servant's gone, too."

Lorna's mouth dropped open in shock. "He did not pay? Nor leave word where to send your invoice?"

Hannah shook her head.

In the world of a gentleman, there was a big difference between ignoring tradesmen's bills and stealing, although they were basically the same crime. Could he really have stolen from her? For spite? Revenge? Some foolish attempt to compromise her into marriage?

Ridiculous. And yet...

A blast of cool air wafted in as someone opened the front door and walked across the floor.

Hannah grimaced with sudden anger. "Or perhaps the culprit is closer to home. You could do worse than look at *him*."

Lorna turned and felt the familiar lurch of her heart to see Captain Buckley almost upon them. "Oh, no," she said to

Hannah. “That is quite wrong. Captain Buckley would not steal from me or anyone!”

Hannah curled her lip. “Not to hurt you, perhaps. But he certainly wouldn’t mind ruining the Pownalls. None of the Bucleys would mind that.”

“You’re quite wrong, Hannah,” the captain said mildly, bowing slightly and taking the third seat at the table uninvited. “What is it I am supposed to have done now?”

Hannah met his challenging gaze with one of her own. “Probably, you stole her ladyship’s jewels.”

“Most certainly I did not,” he said, looking more amused than anything. “What even brings the idea to your mind?”

“The fact that they’re gone,” Hannah said with relish, before Lorna could squeeze in a word.

His eyebrows flew up as he glanced at Lorna for confirmation.

“They have vanished from my chamber,” Lorna admitted. “But I know Miss Pownall is surely joking in her accusation. If a so-called gentleman stole my rubies, I know precisely which one.”

Captain Buckley locked his gaze with Hannah’s. “Why, did he also seduce a Pownall, and abandon her with her child in a foreign land? If he didn’t, I’m afraid I am the only possible culprit for theft or any other crime in the vicinity.”

Hannah flushed but didn’t drop her gaze. “If you are innocent, prove it.”

“I have no need to,” he said quietly. “And if you throw such accusations at me, you know perfectly well they will come flying back to you. The inn is yours.”

“Trying to force us out of business?” Hannah retorted.

Captain Buckley’s eyes were steady, not angry. “I think you know that’s not true. Let us not have yet another quarrel over a lie.”

To Lorna's surprise, unshed tears shone in Hannah's eyes before she sprang to her feet, muttered an apology to Lorna and stalked away.

Lorna hurried into speech, mainly to wipe the sudden bleakness from Captain Buckley's face. "I think it might have been Winthorpe. He alone knows for certain who I am, and the door was not locked yesterday evening when I was at Buckley Manor. *And* he bolted early this morning without paying his shot."

The captain blinked. "And your family wants to marry you to this man?"

"To be fair to them, if he is the thief, he has sunk to new depths no one has guessed at. We knew he was living largely on his expectations, but perhaps things are more desperate with him than anyone suspected."

He searched her face. "You don't seem as upset as Hannah is."

Lorna shrugged. "She has more to lose. I like the rubies. They were a gift from my parents when I turned one-and-twenty. But losing them won't change my life, beyond another lecture from my father." She frowned. "On the other hand, if it was Winthorpe, I am loath to let the worm away with it."

"We can find him and haul him back," Captain Buckley said casually, in the same tone he might have offered to fetch her shawl from the next room. "Only why would he steal from you, of all people?"

"Perhaps because he knew I was bound to have something worth stealing. Or..." Heat seeped into her face. "Because I refused him, he may be hatching some trick to compromise me, at least in my parents' eyes if not society's, so that I am forced to marry him." She curled her lip. "For my fortune, you understand."

A moment longer he met her gaze, his own unreadable. "We need to speak to him at the very least. Do we know which way he went?"

“If he means mischief, probably west to my sister’s at Galton Park, though the staff here did not see him leave. But there is no...” She tailed off as a dazzling smile broke out on his face, depriving her of breath.

“I may offer you a faster drive than I had anticipated,” he said. But first, I should set some friends on the other roads. Will you come?”

Conscious of a sudden, foolish yen to go anywhere and everywhere with him, she squashed the idiocy and merely nodded.

He stood. “Then we’ll go to the Crown and Castle and recruit some help to scour the other roads. While we pursue our man westward.”

She jumped to her feet with rising excitement. “Then I’ll fetch my bonnet and a warm cloak and come at once!”

Less than five minutes later, she sat beside him in a slightly battered curricle. “It was Jeremy’s,” he told her with a quick grin. “From his youth when he wanted to cut a dash. But the horses are decent.”

He drove them smartly through the town toward the other inn, owned by his family. The center of the town was a positive hive of activity, full of horses and carts and tradesmen. Decorations were being put around the village green, and booths and stalls being built.

“For the Harvest Moon festival on Monday,” Captain Buckley told her, weaving his horses between a cart and two men carrying long pieces of wood and a ladder.

As soon as the captain brought the horses to a stand in the inn yard, calling to the ostler to hold them for five minutes, Lorna jumped down unaided and accompanied Captain Buckley into the inn.

In the main room, several men were enjoying breakfast and the delicious smell of coffee mingled with fried bacon and smoked fish. At the largest table, in solitary splendor, sat Edgar Winthorpe.



The man was either innocent or totally blatant. Beside David, Lady Lorna halted in sheer astonishment. Then Winthorpe caught sight of them and smiled, rising at once to his feet while he chewed and swallowed his current mouthful.

He bowed. "Lady Lorna, good morning."

She moved forward with obvious reluctance. David kept pace with her while his gaze remained steadily on Winthorpe.

"Mr. Winthorpe," she acknowledged with a civil inclination of her head.

Winthorpe beamed at her. "A pleasure as always." His gaze flickered to David. "Though you could, perhaps, choose your company more carefully."

"That is probably true," David said ambiguously.

"Captain Buckley is helping me to find my lost jewels," Lorna said. "You wouldn't happen to have seen them? Or anyone suspicious near my chamber at the Book and Bell yesterday evening?"

"I didn't see anyone at all yesterday evening apart from my wretched valet. I might have seen the woman who is your maid when I retired. I retired early."

"Did you?" Lorna said without interest. She inclined her head once more and David, taking the hint, moved past the table toward Josh Tyler at the kitchen door.

"What the devil is *he* doing here?" David asked the innkeeper quietly.

Tyler shrugged. "Arrived this morning with his bags and his manservant." He grinned. "Said the service at the Book and Bell wasn't what he was used to."

"Yes, well, he scarpered without paying his shot. Didn't leave his direction either, so watch him."

Tyler's eyes narrowed. "I will."



David glanced around him and lowered his voice. “Also, a necklace is missing... Where’s his manservant?”

“In the taproom,” Josh replied.

“Any chance you can keep him there for the next quarter hour? And the delectable gentleman here?”

Lorna’s eyes gleamed with understanding and approval.

David murmured, “Perhaps you could walk in the garden for—”

“Not a chance,” she interrupted. “Lead the way.”

“Best chamber at the back,” Josh said, already walking away. He had left his large set of keys on the counter. David picked them up as he turned around.

They might have looked as if they were leaving the inn when they walked out of the room. Instead, David turned left and ran lightly up the stairs to the bedchambers. When Lorna ran after him, it gave his body all sorts of improper notions that he strove to quell before having to face her. He tried to concentrate on finding the right key to open Winthorpe’s door, which was locked. But by the time they went inside and closed the door, all he could think of was that he was alone in a bedchamber with *her*.

She, clearly had much more sense, for she immediately started opening drawers and raking through the contents. So much for his cool, military head in a crisis, he thought ruefully, and forced himself to move to the bed, where he looked under pillows and felt beneath the mattress.

He then looked under the bed, where he found two large bags and a fortunately empty chamber pot. The bags were empty, too. He moved to the little desk, while Lady Lorna raked through the coats hanging in the wardrobe with a frown of annoyance.

“They’re not here,” she said flatly. “I’ve been maligning him.”

“Not necessarily,” David said. “They could be on his person, but short of turning him upside down and shaking him,

we cannot be sure.”

A breath of laughter crossed her lips. “I would like to see that,” she said regretfully. “But I don’t really think you can without proof.”

“Come, let’s get away from here. Go out to the front and I’ll join you in a moment. We don’t want to be seen descending the stairs together.”

She blushed, which made her look even more adorable, but when he opened the door a crack and checked the passage was clear, she slipped out without a word. He waited until he heard the inn’s front door close behind her, before he left the room, locked the door again and followed her downstairs. He left the keys with one of the maids, asking her to return them to Tyler, then went outside to rejoin Lorna.

She was making friends with his brother’s horses, who were nudging her for treats and scratches. But at least her smile seemed to be for him as he came up to her.

“What now, do you think?” she asked

“Tyler will watch him. We should plan our campaign while we take the pleasant drive I promised you.”

Her eyes sparkled, though she merely nodded and let him hand her in to the curricule.

“Do you still think it could be Winthorpe?” she asked as they road grew quieter along the river bank.

“Yes, I do, though I admit I am prejudiced against him.”

“But why would he linger in Reabridge if he had taken it?”

David said, “He walked from the Book and Bell to the Crown.”

“Is that important?” she asked.

“I think it is. What if he had no money to hire a vehicle, or pay his shot? I don’t know how he arrived in the town, but it wasn’t in his own carriage, or on horseback. I can’t imagine anything less than desperation would drive him to risk stealing from you. And he’ll still have no money unless he sells your

jewels. He couldn't do that in Reabridge—by now everyone in town will know your rubies have been stolen. He would have to go to Manchester or Liverpool. Or Chester, perhaps.”

She stared at him. “Only he has no money to do so... Unless he steals someone's purse!”

“Or begs or borrows a carriage.”

“Or,” she said, thoughtfully, “writes to bring someone here to buy it? Surely, he could not have arranged such a thing already, because he cannot have known I was here. Or anyone else with anything of value that was easily stealable.” She frowned. “I wish we had not made it so easy for him!”

“How could you have known?”

She sighed. “He might write to my father to come and collect me,” she said miserably.

His idiot heart was beating with hope. “Would that be so bad?”

“I want to be here for your harvest festival, at least.”

He smiled, because the event seemed so much more exciting with her presence. “Well, that is the day after tomorrow, so I think you are safe.”

“It is pretty countryside,” she said, gazing out over the river to the sloping fields and woods and the hills beyond. “You must be glad to be home.”

“More than I thought to be. It crossed my mind I might sell out, use my prize money to buy some land and settle down as a gentleman farmer, somewhere near here.”

She turned her head and regarded him. “And will you?”

“I don't know. I am tired of war. But I'm not sure I am quite ready to be that settled.”

“Perhaps it is best to have somewhere to come to, from whatever adventures you choose next. Do you have that choice?”

“I can stay with the army on active service. Or accept a detached duty looking after diplomats abroad.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“It is. I did something similar in Vienna and Paris. But it would mean I could not devote the time I would need to be a farmer.”

“Gentleman farmer,” she corrected. “Don’t they normally have stewards to run their property?”

“I’m not that much of a gentleman,” he said ruefully. “I doubt I could pay a steward. But it’s something to look into.”

“You are lucky to have choices. Women don’t. Or at least, not women of my rank.”

A crazy idea entered his head. He thrust it aside immediately. She was not for him, under any circumstances.

She said, “I expect you miss your wife especially when making such decisions. She should have been here with you.”

“She should.” He swallowed back the next words, and then, suddenly, he was tired of keeping them secret. He wanted someone to know. He wanted *her* to know. “I am afraid sometimes that I was completely wrong. That our affection would not have lasted into peacetime and normal life. By taking her with me and marrying her, did I make it more than it was, than it should have been? If I had gone back to the war alone and come home now, would she still have loved me? Would we not just have been the childhood friends we had always been, grown apart from different experience?”

She frowned, looking concerned, but not appalled. “But you and she did share experience, didn’t you?”

He sighed. “Not as much as you might think. She was eager for the adventure, loved the idea of following the drum and facing danger with me. But the reality of army life took her by surprise. She hated the discomfort of camps, the lack of privacy, my absences, the bouts of boredom. If we were to be in an area for some time, I found her lodgings in town and went back to my men. That is where she was when she took ill. I didn’t know at first, though I got to her before she died. That is why Hannah is angry with me. And she is right. We

took a chance, Mary and me, and I am afraid it...it might have been the wrong one.”

His hands were on the reins, but her fingers slid over his in quick comfort.

“You are lashing yourself with guilt,” she said softly. “Nothing more.”

“We were children. I feel I have aged a decade in the three years since we left Reabridge.”

She squeezed his fingers gently, and he hated when she took her hand away.

“What of you?” he asked. “How is it no one has ever caught your interest? Or is there some unrequited and unsuitable love in your history?”

She shook her head, smiling a little. “No. Not after the stable boy when I was twelve. And we never did more than smile at each other. He must have been all of fifteen and probably thought I was a funny child. I was certainly a fickle one because I can’t actually remember his name now. I wonder whatever happened to him?”

David let the horses find their own way along the path while he searched her face. “If the world was perfect for you and you could do whatever you wished, what would that be?”

“I would travel and write clever, entertaining books about the things I saw and the people I met.”

“Would you travel alone?”

She considered. “If I had to. It would be more fun with a companion who understands my sense of humor and is as curious and appreciative as I.”

“Do you know of such a companion?”

She looked at him again, almost as though she didn’t want to. A tinge of color seeped along her delicate cheekbones, and a strange expression lit her eyes—defiant, almost frightened, and yet soft and so very warm that he felt he was basking in her sunlight.

“Recently,” she said, “I have wondered if I might.”

His breath caught. Could she really be saying what he imagined? Could she possibly feel it, too, this tug of attraction and understanding that was almost knowledge, or at least recognition? For *him*?

She was an earl’s daughter, beautiful, rich, and courted. That he could come higher than Winthorpe in her regard was hardly an accolade. But he, David, was an utter coxcomb to think she could ever believe in him as her companion.

And yet was that not to think less of *her*, too?

“Could we walk by the river for a little?” she suggested. “And let the horses rest before they take us back to town.”

David guided the curricle off the track and jumped down to tie the reins around a convenient tree. He was glad to see Lady Lorna, still seated in the curricle, gazing out across the river. It gave him an excuse to touch her, to help her down. The urge to take her by the waist and hold her in his arms was strong, but around her, even the resistance was sweet.

She took his arm before he offered, which pleased him hugely. They talked about fishing and childhood pursuits, unimportant things that still warmed him because it felt like closeness and trust, and in any case, whatever she said, he would love the sound of her voice. But he was conscious of over-taxing her strength, and guided them back to the curricle before too long.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“I am,” she said, in some surprise. “Though it seems a shame to go back to town just yet.”

He reached under the seat and produced the blanket-covered basket of food he had scrounged from the kitchen at home.

She gave a crow of appreciation. “You think of everything!”

“Military training,” he said lightly. “Never be caught without rations.”

Leaving the horses cropping grass and bits of tree, they crossed to the sloping river bank. The river was not high and there was a pleasant place to sit beneath an old willow, which would shelter them from the track above. Here, David got his wish. After depositing the basket, he reached up and lifted Lorna down to join him.

His heart thudded, for she was soft and fragile in his arms, and yet he had the impression of strength behind the delicacy. She smelled of lemon and flowers, and something else that was purely her. He would have liked to inhale the skin of her throat, bury his face in her hair. Instead, he released her to spread out the blanket and she flopped on to it unaided, like a child. There was something very natural and down-to-earth about this earl's daughter.

She began to rummage immediately in the basket and found the cold pie, which she tore into pieces with her fingers and set between them. Beside it, she laid the cucumbers, and bread and cheese, and left the fruit in the basket for later. He poured small beer into the cups, and clinked his against hers.

“And here is Mack,” he said, as a shaggy dog appeared from nowhere, wagging its tail. “Wherever there is food, there he is.”

“Is he your dog?” she asked, as the animal sat and gazed at her hopefully.

“No, he's no one's really. And everyone's. I'd call him a stray except he's never short of a meal or a place to eat. He just has a free spirit, don't you, Mack?”

Mack wagged his tail and shuffled forward. David tossed him a tiny piece of meat from the pie.

Lady Lorna ate and drank with evident enjoyment and he tried not to watch the movements of her lips or the delicacy of her fingers. They laughed at the antics of a crow, who clearly wanted the courage to come and eat the pastry crumbs but, after a bit of flapping, only ran at them and then flew up in the air when Mack lunged at him.

“This is a good place to come home to,” she said, as she helped herself to an apple. “Good people, family, unique scenery. This *is* home for you.”

He turned his head to watch her. “Where is home for you, my lady?”

She met his gaze for an instant. He might have imagined the vulnerability in her eyes, for it was gone in an instant, melting into a quick, deprecating smile.

“I have not found it yet.” She bit into the apple, and he finished his beer.

A few minutes later, as she began to tidy things away in the basket, and Mack loped off again, he found he did not want to go. Reluctantly, he helped Lorna, shaking out the cups and placing them in the basket along with the bottle.

His fingers brushed against hers. She was not wearing gloves and the warm softness of her skin was irresistible. Before he could think, he took her hand in his.

“You have beautiful hands,” he said truthfully. “Small and slender, and yet there is strength in your fingers.”

“Thank the pianoforte lessons. And years of sewing indifferent samplers.” She did not pull away, and he lifted his gaze to hers. He thought she was not breathing until his thumb involuntarily stroked her wrist and then she inhaled sharply. Yet still, she did not take back her hand.

“Would I spoil the day,” he asked softly, “if I kissed you?”

Her eyes widened, but not with shock, though there was certainly surprise, and a hint of fear. And, surely, longing. She shook her head. Still, her hand lay trustingly in his. In fact, her fingers clasped his, almost convulsively. He raised their joined hand to his lips and gently kissed her knuckles. Then he leaned closer, his attention shifting from her eyes to her trembling, slightly parted lips.

This was insanity. But only she could prevent it now. And she didn't. Slowly, he covered her mouth with his, and savored. Her taste, her sweetness. Temptation and innocence. Dread and longing. And passion. He was sure he tasted that,



too. He drew back and found her staring at him. Then she touched his cheek and tilted her head and he took her in his arms properly, kissing her as he longed to, deeply, passionately. And she opened to him with wonder and trust and something dangerously like joy.

Dear God, he had never imagined a mere kiss could be so arousing. He could spread her beneath him on the blanket and take her now and nothing in the world would be so... But, of course, he could not. Her trust battered his lust back into submission. Her kiss, her pliant body against his, her fingers threaded through his hair in awakening passion—those were worth savoring alone, and he did. God, he did.

Only the awareness of movement close beside them, made her slide her lips from his. The crow was happily pecking their crumbs from their blanket. She let out a shaky laugh and the bird flapped off with its beak stuffed.

Lorna turned her face into his neck. She seemed to inhale him so he let his nose and lips wander across her hair, and smiled.

“So that is a kiss,” she murmured, almost inaudibly. Her lips stretched against his skin. “Your kiss.”

“My kiss,” he said softly against her ear. “And yours. Will you give me another? Not now,” he added hastily. “I only have so much self-control. At the festival. Dance with me.”



Lorna would have danced with him there and then. She was beginning to realize she would do anything for him, for his astounding kiss that pleased and excited. To her, it felt like exchanging souls, though she knew that for a foolish fantasy.

“Of course,” she managed. “Once we have caught Winthorpe in his villainy.”

“Now there is an incentive,” he said lightly and she was afraid he was drawing back, regretting the kiss, afraid,

perhaps, that she would read too much into it. Like a proposal of marriage.

From a man still grieving, still guilt-ridden over the death of his first wife? The last thing he would want was another wife to pin him down with responsibilities... Worse, did he see as her fragile and needy in the manner of the most tedious aristocratic ladies?

*Why would he kiss a tedious lady?*

*To stop her talking.* A sound that could have been a sob or a breath of laughter escaped her lips and she drew back from him. "The horses will have run out of grass," she managed, standing and smoothing her skirts.

David picked up the blanket and shook it out before folding it, swiping up the basket and climbing up the bank with one long-legged stride. He bent, stretching down his free hand and pulled her up close to him.

There was an instant when they stood too close and butterflies danced in her stomach, for his eyes were warm on hers. They dipped to her mouth and then, determinedly, back to her eyes. She smiled, with relief as much as mischief, and took his arm for the short walk back to the curricule.



The next day was Sunday, so Lorna, accompanied by Kerry, walked to church for the harvest thanksgiving service. It was the custom to bring something harvested, which would be given to the poor of the parish. As a stranger, Lorna picked some wildflowers, and mixed them with some Hannah gave her from the inn garden, to make a very pretty bouquet. She set it on the corner of the table at the front of the church, which was already piled with fruit and vegetables, wheat sheafs, small sacks of flour, bottles of cordial and beer.

The chief landowning families had their own covered pews at the front of the church. But the Buckleys sat in the front row of the ordinary pews. The Pownalls sat in the one across the aisle from them. Lorna smiled at both families, and could not

help the tumult in her heart when David smiled back at her. Was she imagining the special warmth in his eyes?

Not wishing to step on anyone's toes, she sat well back in the church, beside Kerry. The vicar, Mr. Owen, conducted one of the happiest services Lorna had ever attended, preaching gratitude for God's gifts of the land, and generosity in his sermon. The hymn-singing was rousing and Lorna was very glad to join in the cheerful blend of voices.

Afterward, in the yard, she seemed to be greeted by everyone. Even people she did not know made a point of speaking to her. To her surprise, she saw Winthorpe emerge from the church and speak to the vicar. Hastily, Lorna moved and attached herself to Arabella Buckley.

"Lady Lorna," Arabella greeted her warmly. "Perhaps you would join us for luncheon?"

"Thank you, I would love to."

David, she saw, was exchanging civil if slightly stilted remarks with the Pownalls, under the watchful gaze of several. Since the theft of Lorna's jewels, accusations had been flung freely between Buckley and Pownall supporters, so she supposed he was showing he didn't believe it.

"My lady," said an only too familiar voice behind her, obliging her to turn to face Mr. Winthorpe. He was smiling in the kind of way that made her itch to kick his shins. "Charmed as always to see you here. What a delightfully *rustic* service, don't you think?"

"Delightful, certainly."

"I am surprised not to see his lordship your father with you," Winthorpe said, looking about him as though expecting the earl to drop from the sky.

"I cannot imagine why."

Of course, it was just what he had meant her to say. The broadening of his smug smile told her that. "Because I wrote to him of my delight in finding you at Reabridge and, of course, my anxiety concerning your recent illness."

Damn him! “I don’t believe I told you of any illness,” she said coldly.

“No, but everyone else did. There are no secrets in a village.”

“How true,” Lorna said. “Did you also tell him of the theft of my rubies?”

His smile did not falter. She wondered if he knew they had searched his room for them. “Why, no. I imagined you would tell him before any letter of mine could reach him.”

“I thank you for your consideration.”

David loomed suddenly beside her, and Winthorpe looked irritated for the first time. He did not speak directly to David, but said obliquely to Lorna. “You are not without friends, my lady. Encroachers may still be punished.”

“Indeed, they will be,” David said. He did not smile and he looked directly at Winthorpe, holding his gaze when the older man tried to stare him down with withering contempt.

Instead, it was Winthorpe who stepped back with a curl to his upper lip. “I look forward to seeing his lordship again.” It was his parting shot as he strolled down the path to the church yard gate.

“He’s written to my father, the wretch,” Lorna murmured. “It must have been when he first arrived, for he expected him to be here today.”

“He also posted a letter yesterday to someone in Manchester. Tyler knew the name as a pawnbroker of dubious reputation.”

“Then he does have my rubies and means to sell them!”

“Almost certainly.”

“I wish we could catch him with my father present to see what kind of a man he wishes me to accept!”

Something flared in David’s eyes. He opened his mouth as though he would say something, something important, and

then his lips closed again as the rest of his family began to move, and he offered her his arm.

“Tomorrow’s festival,” he said thoughtfully, “is when there are often strangers in town. We should keep watch on Winthorpe, and any strangers he speaks to. Tyler will help.”

“So will the Pownalls,” she said. “Speak to Hannah.”



Edgar Winthorpe rose from bed in his small, plain room and allowed his valet to shave and dress him. His mood was buoyant because today was their bumpkin festival, and the day he would finally be in funds again. Which would enable him to greet Lord Kingswood with plump pockets at least and disdainfully throw coin at the innkeepers and everyone else he owed.

He had been annoyed not to see Kingswood yesterday, but maybe it was as well the earl didn’t show up until the deal was done. If all went well, Winthorpe would end up with the money, the bride, and Lord Kingswood’s eternal gratitude.

Of course, the wretched girl was suspicious. He knew perfectly well someone had searched his room. He suspected the officer who hung about her and seemed to have some hold on the staff here. Naturally they hadn’t found anything, because he had burned the case and kept the jewels on his person at all times.

After breakfast, he took a stroll about the town. There was air of bucolic excitement that amused him. He wandered across the green watching the little people set up their ridiculous little stalls of fruit and flowers, perfume and carved ornaments in brass. Someone was hanging a ringed target on a tree, presumably for shooting or archery. He expected they’d shoot each other by mistake—or deliberately, if a Pownall or a Buckley was involved.

He smiled to himself, for the silly feud was working in his favor, each family blaming the other for the theft. Really, it

was too easy. He wished he had thought of this method of replenishing his funds before. It was so simple.

Something prickled on the back of his neck, as though he were being watched. He turned abruptly, and a soldier walked past him. Further back, was an inn servant who looked vaguely familiar, but he seemed more interested in the girl arranging the flowers.

Winthorpe smiled at his own nervousness, because he knew in his heart that nothing could go wrong.



Lorna greeted the day with a happy sense of anticipation. Because she would see David again today. Because she would dance with him. Because he had asked for—or promised—another kiss. The very thought made her insides melt.

He had not taken advantage of her visit to Buckley Manor yesterday. There had been no secret kisses or embraces. Only once, he had touched her hand, just for an instant, but his eyes held such intense passion that she had felt singed. And was delighted to be so. It gave her hope.

Like everyone else in the town, she walked to the fair that afternoon, keeping alert for any sighting of Winthorpe. Although frequently distracted by the children's games, and greetings from people she had begun to know, she did see him at last, strolling around much like her, as though he had not a care in the world. The only people she saw him speak to were local to Reabridge. He did not even approach Lorna, merely doffed his hat to her from the other side of the green.

"He is the perfect guest in town, is he not?" David murmured beside her and her body heated at once with gladness and sheer awareness.

"He is up to something," she replied with certainty.

"Indubitably."

"What if he has already made the exchange?"

“He has not. I have recruited a few friends to take turns keeping an eye on him. He has spoken to no strangers, and no one has seen the pawnbroker in town yet.”

“Maybe we are wrong,” she mused. She didn’t seem to care as much as she should.

“No, he’ll do it under cover of darkness,” David said with contempt. “When he imagines most of the town will be too drunk to notice or care.”

“Will it?” she asked.

“Some. We inn proprietors do a roaring trade each harvest festival. You will dance with me, won’t you?”

“Providing you’re not too drunk to notice,” she said sweetly, and strolled away to help Arabella with the youngest children’s games and prizes.

Both David and Winthorpe had vanished by the time she had a moment to notice again. But taking Kerry’s advice for once, she went back to the inn to rest before the evening. She sat and drank tea, but she did not even try to sleep. Her mind was too full of rubies, Winthorpe, and the mysterious pawnbroker. And David.

Returning as the sun was setting, she found the atmosphere subtly changed. The stalls were empty and the children fewer. Musicians were playing some tune she guessed hadn’t changed in hundreds of years, while Morris dancers performed. Lorna had always found Morris dancing bizarrely humorous, so she was pleased to see even the dancers weren’t taking it too seriously. Their emphasis was on the fun of the thing, and that she could applaud with enthusiasm.

She looked around for David and couldn’t see him, although Arabella waved. Still with Kerry, Lorna moved around the edges of the green, watching the gold and pink fade from the darkening sky. Scattered among the crowd were several military uniforms, but none of them were David’s. She noticed Hannah Pownall with a young officer and smiled to herself. She liked Hannah.

And then she saw Winthorpe, once more strolling about as though amused by the peasants' entertainment. Someone walked into him and he halted. Instead of haranguing the man for clumsiness, Winthorpe appeared to exchange civil words with him, and Lorna's pulse sped up with excitement. She moved closer, sure, suddenly, that this was the pawnbroker. A tall, thin, almost spider-like individual, his hair sticking out from under his tall hat. He wore black except for a startlingly colored waistcoat.

Lorna looked around desperately for David, at the same time trying to watch Winthorpe's hands. Then Winthorpe simply strolled on.

"Don't stare," David murmured behind her. "You'll scare them off."

"But nothing happened! I'm sure nothing changed hands."

"It wouldn't in the light with hundreds of witnesses," David said reasonably. "But you're right—that's the pawnbroker. Tyler recognized him. Would you care for some ale? Or wine if the gentry haven't scoffed it all."

Kerry, still disapproving, trailed after them. Lorna didn't mind. She was in David Buckley's company and all was right with the world. As darkness fell, Winthorpe sat casually on a bench with his cup and flirted with the young girl already sitting there. When the girl's brothers appeared, Winthorpe merely laughed, bowed and strolled off.

In fact, he appeared to be leaving.

Lorna's breath caught. "David..."

"I see him." David set their cups on the nearest bench and offered her his arm. They strolled together, parallel to Winthorpe's course, until he vanished from view behind a row of booths that had not yet been dismantled. Lorna increased her pace, all but dragging him with her between stalls to get to Winthorpe. She thought she felt his breath of laughter but couldn't be sure.

In any case, she was distracted by the moving shadows between the stalls and beneath them, and feared suddenly that



the pawnbroker had brought his own guards and things might get a lot nastier than she had imagined. She tugged David's arm, afraid to speak, but he only took her hand and moved steadily forward. She could hear low voices now.

Winthorpe asked a question ending in "...money?"

"Course. Need to see the stones, first."

"In the dark?" Winthorpe said sarcastically. "I don't want lanterns shining on this particular business."

"Don't imagine you do," replied the spidery pawnbroker. Flattened against the side of the stall, she could just make him out. He pointed up at the sky and the large, harvest moon. "It's good enough for me." He grinned, his teeth showing like a snarl. "And if I find you've diddled me, I'll know where to find you, won't I? Now, let's see these so-called rubies."

Beside her, she felt David tense. They stood perfectly still. The other shadows had ceased to move, too.

Winthorpe shifted into her line of vision. He held something in his fist, waiting for the pawnbroker to hold out his hand, palm upward. Then he trickled something into it. Something that glinted red in the moonlight. The pawnbroker stepped back and stuck a glass against his eye before holding up Lorna's necklace to the moonlight.

David's hand tightened warningly on hers.

The pawnbroker shook the stones, tapped them with his finger nail. He even bit one. "Not bad," he said at last. "I'll give you the agreed price. For the set."

"Show me your money then," Winthorpe commanded.

The pawnbroker took two heavy purses, one from each pocket, and threw them to Winthorpe, who smiled greedily and tossed the earrings to the pawnbroker, too.

"Got him," David said lightly and walked into the moonlight with Lorna on his arm. The pawnbroker made a lunge to his left and found his way blocked by several soldiers and the vicar.

*The vicar?*

Winthorpe only goggled in silence for a moment. Then he smiled at Lorna, a somewhat ghastly attempt. "I've found your necklace! Look! That's the man that stole it!"

"Why you lying..." the pawnbroker began in fury and then dropped the stones as though they burned him. Lorna caught them deftly in one hand.

"You're a true gentleman, Winthorpe," David said sarcastically. "Was that the plan all along? Send Lord Kingswood along to the pawnbroker's to find the necklace, while you kept the money and won all that praise for the discovery?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Winthorpe said grandly.

"Your pocket are bulging with gold," Lorna pointed out. "You may return it to this gentleman since he is not receiving the rubies you promised him. And don't trouble to lie, sir, your transaction was witnessed by all these people."

"Peasants! Nobodies!" Winthorpe insisted, his voice high with fear now.

"Officers and gentlemen," David said mildly. "And even the vicar." He stared mercilessly into Winthorpe's eyes, while he deliberately extracted both purses from his pockets and held them out in the pawnbroker's direction. The pawnbroker snatched them and bolted. "Gentlemen, perhaps you'd be so good as to escort the gentleman out."

"Out of the green?" the vicar asked.

"Out of town. There's bound to be someone heading to Chester this evening. If Lord Kingswood chooses to press charges, I'm sure he'll know where to find you." He turned his back on the slack-jawed Winthorpe, while the other officers closed in.

"Lorna!" he squeaked. "My lady, you cannot..."

"Goodbye, Mr. Winthorpe," she said.

"Excellent," David said, as she slid the rubies into her reticule. "Shall we dance?"

She smiled, and was about to accept when she caught sight of Hannah slowly approaching. “Later,” she said. “Come and find me.”



As Winthorpe was marched away and Lorna walked back toward the music, accompanied by the vicar, David gazed steadily at Hannah Pownall.

“Thank you for helping,” he said. “I thought you’d want to be a witness, though I don’t fancy your chances of his ever paying your bill.”

“Or yours.”

“True.”

“I never thought you took the jewels, David. I knew you hadn’t.”

“I know.”

She sat like an urchin on the step of the nearest booth. And like the boy he’d once been, he sat beside her and the silence stretched, not tense or hateful, just sad.

He said, “She didn’t die alone, Hannah. I was with her.”

“I know,” Hannah whispered. She dashed the back of her hand against her eyes. “And I know you didn’t seduce her. Wild horses couldn’t stop Mary doing what she’d set her heart on. I always knew that. I just forgot it for a bit.”

“Grief,” he said. “It clouds thoughts and makes for odd behavior. I speak from experience.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. Tears glinted on her cheek. This time, she didn’t bother to wipe them. “Sorry you lost her. Sorry I did.”

He put his arm around her shoulder in a quick, hard hug. “So am I, Hannah.”

For a moment she leaned against him, accepting and giving comfort. And the weight on his heart that been there for

so long began to ease.

“I loved her,” he said honestly.

“She loved you.”

He nodded.

Hannah raised her head and looked at him. “*She* loves you, too, you know.”

He blinked. “Who?”

Hannah nudged him. “Lady Lorna, you idiot. And I’ve seen the way you look at her. Don’t hold back for Mary. She would want you to be happy again.”

He swallowed. “It isn’t for Mary,” he admitted, flooded with the knowledge of his love and the new happiness he could never have. “She is an earl’s daughter with a dowry to match. I’m...well you know who and what I am.”

“I know what you *were*. Never afraid to go after what you wanted, or to do what you knew was right.” She held his gaze. “Isn’t Lorna right for you.”

His breath caught. “Oh, God, yes. So right...”

“Then why are you sitting here with me, slow-top?”

He laughed, just a little shakily, hugged her again and sprang up to find his love.



Lorna had danced one of the country dances she knew—a more energetic version of those she had danced in many London ballrooms. It had just ended when she saw David leaning against the oak tree, watching her. Hastily, she smiled her thanks to her partner and hurried toward him.

“Well, are you and Hannah friends again?”

“Better friends, at least. I believe we understand each other, now.”

“Good.”

A smile lurked on his lips. “You are quite meddlesome in your own way, are you not?”

“Meddlesome!” she exclaimed.

He laughed and eased his shoulder off the tree to snatch up her hand. “Come and dance with me.”

This was not a dance she had ever come across before, but it was probably as old as the medieval town. Men and women danced in a circle, moving outward and inward to the quickening rhythm of the music, which was exhilarating and increasingly fun as it grew faster. And then, as if at some signal a mere outsider could not comprehend, the men seized the woman beside them and they spun together until dizzy.

Laughing, Lorna hung onto David until the music stopped and her stomach dived. She felt the oak tree at her back, and David’s steadying hands on her waist. Around her, but comfortingly distant was chatter and laughter and above her was the bright, round harvest moon. And David, gazing down at her.

It was no longer the dance that made her dizzy. She reached up with both hands to his shadowed face, touching the roughness of his cheeks, his parted lips which took hers with abrupt passion. It was long, invasive, shocking, and it left her trembling with a hunger she had no name for.

“Lorna, sweet, wonderful Lorna, could you ever love me, even a little?” he groaned into her mouth.

“Why should I tell you that?” she asked shakily.

He lifted his head a little and slowly, a smile began to form in his eyes. “Because I love you so much already that it hurts. And it keeps getting worse. Or better. Certainly more. Please answer, if only to stop me talking.”

She gasped out a laugh. “Oh you idiot, do you not know I loved you from the moment I opened my eyes in the Book and Bell and you were there? My savior, my comfort, my friend, my—”

“Lover,” he said, and took back her lips in another astounding kiss, which led to another and another, and his hard

body against hers, pressing her so excitingly to the tree.

“Lorna!”

Only her father could make her soft name sound like a gunshot. Yet held in David’s arms, she did not jump as she always had in childhood guilt.

She disentangled her lips, and said breathlessly, “Good evening, Papa.”

At least it reduced him to stunned silence. David stood back slowly. She doubted it was the way he had hoped to first meet her father. But Lorna had known his lordship all her life, and with the knowledge that she was loved and loving, seemed to come the understanding of how to deal with him.

“Papa, I would like to introduce you to Captain Buckley, who wishes to marry me. I have said yes.” Of course, no actual offer had been made or accepted, not in words. But she knew it all the same, with bright, dazzling gladness. “I realize you wanted me to marry Winthorpe, even though he is a fortune hunter, but he is also a thief and a liar, and stole my rubies, which Captain Buckley was kind enough to retrieve for me. Captain Buckley may not be rich, but at least he loves me. I hope we have your blessing.”

Both men stared at her in astonishment. A faint smile curved David’s lips. Her father’s mouth opened and closed several times before any sound came out.

“I can see I will have to know you better, Captain,” he snapped at last. “You may present yourself at the Book and Bell tomorrow morning at ten of the clock. I am taking my daughter back there now.”

David bowed. “Of course. Oh. Lorna?”

“Yes?”

“If I take the detached duty with the diplomats, will you help me find us a place here to come home to?”

She smiled as though she would never stop. “Yes, of course I will.”

Beneath the harvest moon, all of life and love was suddenly open to her, and she would seize every moment with both hands. With him.

THE END

# ABOUT MARY LANCASTER



Mary Lancaster lives in Scotland with her husband, three mostly grown-up kids and a small, crazy dog. Her first literary love was historical fiction, a genre which she relishes mixing up with romance and adventure in her own writing. Several of her novels feature actual historical characters as diverse as Hungarian revolutionaries, medieval English outlaws, and a family of eternally rebellious royal Scots. To say nothing of Vlad the Impaler.

Her most recent books are light fun Regency romances.

Learn more about Mary at

**Website:** <http://www.MaryLancaster.com>





UNDER THE CHAMPAGNE  
MOON



ALINA K. FIELD

UNDER THE CHAMPAGNE  
MOON

ALINA K. FIELD

Orphaned by the French Revolution and rescued by a British family, Fleur Hardouin was a solemn and often sullen child. She didn't—or wouldn't—speak, until the jolly young Gareth Ardleigh crossed her path one summer and saved her from bullies.

Fifteen years later, Fleur's life takes another twist when she and the beloved lady she serves lose their home and return to the town of Reabridge. Determined to rescue them both through an advantageous marriage, Fleur tries to brush off the attention she receives from Captain Gareth Ardleigh, who's home from the wars and as handsome as ever. Her heart longs for him, but her head knows he can't provide the security she needs.

Gareth's excuse for visiting Reabridge is to deliver the personal effects of his best friend who perished at Quatre Bras. But his real purpose is finding the little French girl he met years ago, for marriage—not to him, but to the Frenchman who helped save his life. Little does Fleur know that she's heir to a wealthy French vintner who's demanded Gareth's help finding Fleur as repayment of his rescue from Napoleon's army.

Astonished to find that Fleur has grown into a beautiful—and still intriguing—young woman, it soon becomes clear he must choose between honoring a promise or trying to win the hand of the woman he loves.

## CHAPTER 1



*Summer, 1800*

*Cheshire, England*

**O**n this glorious summer's day, Gareth Ardleigh reveled in the riches of Sherington Manor. Fish begging to be caught, small game fattened by summer's bounty, and trees promising climbers wide vistas. He and his school friends, Thaddeus and Laurence Sherington, skirted the edge of the park, guns and rabbits in hand when they came upon an altercation. Two boys and a girl loomed over a thin little waif with hair so pale it was almost white.

“Say summat in French,” the bullying girl lisped. Limp hair straggled over dirty cheeks to a lank, dingy pinafore, drawing the eye down to bare brown feet.

In fact, only the biggest bully wore footwear—scuffed, holey boots at least one size two big.

“She can't,” the shorter boy sneered, leaning in on his quarry. “As dumb as that tree over there, she is.”

Inside the circle of dirty, ill-dressed tormentors, the specter bristled, her brows drawn together in a defiant glare that was bigger than her small self.

“That's Flora,” Thaddeus said. “She lives at Bicton Grange.”

“She doesn't speak,” Laurence said. “That other lot are the Haskells, up from Lower Reabridge to help with the haying.”

“Croak for us, Froggie.” The big Haskell stepped closer and the other two sniggered.

The one thing Gareth couldn’t abide was bullies. He handed Laurence his gun, dropped his game, and winked at Thaddeus.

He and Thad had battled their way through Rugby School together, and neither would back away from a fight.

“Leave off.” Gareth snatched the ringleader’s shirt and yanked him back. Cloth ripped, and three shocked faces turned his way.

Their shock turned to anger, followed by a fist. Gareth ducked, and Thaddeus flew into the fray, taking on the shorter boy.

“Stop it,” their sister squawked, and then shrieked. When Gareth spared a glance, the dirty chit had curled up on the ground, spluttering curses, while her would-be victim kicked at her.

He laughed and tossed the ringleader down. “Get you gone, all three of you. If I see you bullying again, I’ll do more than bloody your noses.”

“She’s a bluidy French—”

“Watch your mouth.” Thad slapped the younger lad.

“Take the king’s shilling and join up if you want to fight,” Gareth said. It was what he and Thad were doing at summer’s end. “But don’t pick on babies.”

The baby in question glared at him, and while he swallowed a chuckle, all three Haskells tucked tail and ran.

Thaddeus clapped Gareth on the back, laughing. “Bang up to the mark, Gare,” he said. “You planted a solid facer. Looks like he clipped you one though.” He tapped Gareth’s chin and held up a bloody finger.

Gareth touched the wound. “So he did.” Laughing, he dabbed at it with his neck cloth.

“Use a handkerchief, man,” Laurence scoffed.

“Don’t have one.” Gareth’s gaze caught the imp watching him. There was no look of gratitude at their chivalry. She still glared.

He felt a stab of—well, not guilt. Recognition—that was it. His name-calling had wounded her pride.

The best remedy for wounded pride was the schoolboy’s solution—a good fight. Perhaps with enough goading, she’d kick him.

“Are you alone?” he asked. “Where is your nursemaid? Ought we to take you home?”

“Oh, she’s all right,” Laurence said. “Move out of our way, Flora.” He nudged her aside and he and Thaddeus walked on.

Gareth studied the chit while she stared back, her gaze far too steady for one so young. She couldn’t be more than five or six with the palest of hair, the lightest of gray eyes, and skin as white as a ghost’s, all wrapped in a white gown. Aside from a fringe of mud on her hem, a touch of light brown in her eyebrows and lashes, and some pink in her lips, the scrawny young stick had no more color in her than a skinned rabbit. His scrutiny wasn’t even raising a blush.

“Flora?” he said in the same teasing tone he applied to his infant cousins. And most other people as well, come to think of it. “You ought to be called Daisy, or Daffy.”

The pink bow of her lips thinned.

“Or,” he snapped his fingers, “Petal. Just Petal. I shall call you that.”

She drew her tiny self up, as haughty as Headmaster Ingles before he took out his strop. “My name,” she said in perfectly accented English, “is Fleur.”

*Fleur? Flora, Daisy, Daffy, Petal... but Fleur?* The ridiculousness of it made him laugh as he picked up his gun and rabbits and ran to catch up with his friends.

Thereafter, Petal seemed to appear everywhere he and Thaddeus went fishing, hunting, tree-climbing. She’d even attended the end of summer picnic at Sherington Manor with

her guardian, still not speaking, except in the frowns and grimaces she showered upon him when he called her Petal.

The day he departed for a visit home to farewell his family before joining the regiment and taking up his ensign duties, he made one last walk savoring the peace he'd found at Sherington Manor. The little chit tracked him down and handed him a square of white cloth.

It was a man's handkerchief; golden petals straggled around the edges in clumsy, uneven stitches.

*A handkerchief.* His new messmates in the regiment would think he had an amour. Would he look like a fool if they knew this came from a mere baby?

A laugh bubbled up and spilled over. Despite himself, he was touched. But when he looked up to thank her, she'd disappeared.



*September, 1815*

On a brisk early autumn morning the day after his arrival in Cheshire, Captain Gareth Ardleigh rode past fields swarming with laborers harvesting corn. Back-breaking labor it was, as he well knew from his days growing up on his gentry father's modest estate. In bad years or good—especially in good—gentleman or not, all hands were needed. Returning to school for the Michaelmas term had always been a blessed reprieve, and he'd made good friends there, Thaddeus Sherington and to a lesser degree Thad's older brother Laurence. Gareth had been warmly welcomed for visits by George Sherington and his lady wife. Those had been good times. Sadly, Mrs. Sherington died a little over a year ago. And Thad...

He reined up and gazed down the long drive to Bicton Grange, a square-stone manse with a filled-in moat and overgrown hedges. Tall grass had overtaken the lawns too, except where wheel tracks carved crescents around a crater-sized hole in the bumpy lane.



The Bicton-Morledge family had fallen on hard times. It was unfortunate, but not something he could help with. He had a small—very small—income from his late uncle, and somehow, he would live on it. His elder brother had not demanded Gareth's return to the family fold; had been grateful, in fact, for one less mouth to feed.

He'd come to Reabridge first to visit the Sheringtons, and then... Well, once he finished here, if roaming around the country as an officer on half pay became boring, he could return to active duty and risk dying of a fever in either the East or the West Indies. He was, at least, alive now, as Thaddeus wasn't, having fallen, finally, after so many battles, at Quatre Bras.

Laurence might be an annoying complainer, but he'd accepted Thad's personal effects with almost as much grief as his mournful father and his watery-eyed widowed cousin, Mrs. Esther Smythe, who had served as the Sherington chatelaine since Mrs. Sherington's passing. They'd invited Gareth to stay on through the harvest, and longer, if he wished.

Which served Gareth's needs quite well. For, much as he was honored to perform the task, delivering Thad's things wasn't his only reason for visiting Reabridge. He had a debt to repay, and to do so, he must find a female whom he'd last seen here.

He'd start looking in earnest tomorrow. Today, he'd ride back to Sherington Manor and open another bottle of champagne.



“Mr. Sherington won't have you, gel. I'll wager you a quid on that.”

Fleur Hardouin sent the snowy-haired lady next to her a haughty look. Lady Dulcinea Ixworth, the granddaughter of a duke and widow of a long-deceased viscount, perched perilously on the seat as Fleur handled the lines, making no

move to clutch the siderail of Bicton Grange's rickety gig. Dulcinea was, as usual, fearless, and full of vinegar.

"If either of us had a quid to spare, madame," Fleur said, "I would take that wager."

She suspected she might lose, of course, but that would be fine. No one in her life had been more generous than Dulcinea Ixworth in sharing small bounties.

"Perhaps he won't see us, as ill as he's been," Dulcinea said, pressing her lips together.

Fleur glanced at her companion. Fearless Dulcinea might be, but Fleur sensed a heightened tension in her employer. Dulcinea had donned her newest gown, lavender half-mourning trimmed in intricate silver embroidery at the neckline and hem by Fleur's own skilled hands. With her carefully coifed hair and newly trimmed bonnet, Dulcinea looked magnificent for this call on an old acquaintance.

Providing that Mr. George Sherington was able to receive them. Just months earlier, the fever that had taken Mr. Bicton-Morledge to the grave had struck Mr. Sherington. Mrs. Knollwood, the housekeeper at Bicton Grange, who'd been a beloved housemaid when Fleur was a child there, had learned that the local doctor said Mr. Sherington ought to have come out of his Bath chair weeks ago.

The doctor apparently had returned from Waterloo with a penchant for drink that sometimes loosened his tongue too much.

"The son will be more likely for you," Dulcinea said, interrupting Fleur's reverie.

"But not more manageable." Fleur urged the horse onto the lane leading to Sherington Manor. While one son had gone off to the army, Laurence had been home for school holidays, and she remembered him well. Unless he'd changed, he'd be bossy and careless of a wife. One could tolerate a bossy man for a few years, but Laurence would likely live another thirty.

She glanced at the small smile turning up her employer's rouged lips. "I would have liked one more day of rest after our

journey, but I suppose we must strike while the iron is hot. Today Sherington Manor and tomorrow—”

“Yes, yes.” Interrupting was rude, but Fleur’s nerves were on edge. She’d never pursued matrimony before. “Since this visit to Reabridge was your idea in the first place, madame.”

Dulcinea snorted, something she only did in private with Fleur. “Rife with prosperous older men, it is. A better hunting ground for you, gel, than any other place we might have chosen.”

*Or been able to afford.*

It would at least be a new one. Ten years before, she’d left Reabridge, naught but a scrawny girl of twelve, cast off by her frustrated guardian to serve as the companion of an aging relation who lived with a scholarly cousin in Staffordshire.

She’d grown to be a woman there, one not allowed to indulge in sulking. From the very first day, Dulcinea had poked, prodded, and even laughed at her silent stubbornness. Until the dam broke and Fleur talked, shouted, screamed back.

Dulcinea had allowed it. She’d listened. She’d drawn out the hurts, the resentments, the sadness. She’d made Fleur talk. She’d paid attention, pushed her to learn from books and intelligent conversations, taught her to manage a household.

As Fleur reached womanhood, Dulcinea shared more—naughty stories from her youth, lessons about men, about how to deflect the unsavory suitors an attractive young woman with no dowry or male relative might expect.

Dulcinea had saved her.

They’d reached Bicton Grange the previous evening, a visit arranged by Dulcinea, fortuitously since the two of them had just been put out of their prior home by the death of Basil Quidenham, Dulcinea’s cousin. Such were the vicissitudes of fate for widows and orphans.

It had, however, been clear upon their arrival that Mrs. Helena Bicton-Morledge positively needed them. She’d aged considerably in the years since Fleur last saw her, and was now immensely with child—twins, Mrs. Knollwood

suspected. Plus, the Bicton-Morledge girls, three misses ranging from sixteen to four years of age, were running amuck, and the remaining servants were stretched thin.

Fleur would take the young chits and the household in hand this very day, as soon as she'd begun this campaign to see to her own future.

Twenty minutes later, she excused herself from the stiff settee and the overly warm drawing room of Sherington Manor where their hostess, Mrs. Smythe, poured tea and made excuses for the Sherington men. Neither of the Sheringtons was at home for the ladies, but the cousin was more than happy to have the likes of Lady Ixworth, the granddaughter of a duke, visiting.

While Dulcinea probed Mrs. Smythe about Sherington's health, Fleur decided to act. She waved off the offer of a guiding hand to the retiring room. She'd visited Sherington Manor on one or two occasions as a child and knew where to find the water closet.

Her quest, however, was the location of the male voices echoing from another part of the house. Laurence would be there, maybe with his steward discussing the harvest, and perhaps even his father would be present. The men must be in high spirits for their voices to carry all the way to the drawing room, and wasn't that interesting? They were probably happy to pawn their guests off on their middle-aged cousin.

She arrived at a paneled door that fairly quivered with masculine vibrations. As her hand touched the knob, a man's laugh made her pause. She pressed her ear to the painted wood.

## CHAPTER 2



“*I* will show you the art of sabrage, Laurence. Only but watch my technique.”

A shiver passed through her, followed by heat that turned her hands and cheeks clammy. The voice, the cocky intonation... She paused, gathered her composure, and then turned the knob.

The door opened on silent hinges, cigar smoke wafting to meet her. Silver flashed. An object shot out and bounced against the fireplace shovel with a loud bang, and the air bubbled with the scent of fermented grapes.

A well-dressed gentleman sat behind a heavy desk, cigar in hand. The other, his curly dark locks in disarray, coatless, and with very fine legs encased in tight buckskins, stood before the desk, his back to the door.

“*Dans la victoire,*” the man in buckskins proclaimed, “*tu mérites du champagne, et dans la défaite tu en as besoin.*”

*In victory you deserve champagne, and in defeat you need it?*

Her stomach twisted, thoughts stirring in her muddled mind. It had sounded like *him*, but it couldn't be, could it? Nor was it Thaddeus—he'd fallen at Waterloo.

Had *he* lived?

If it wasn't *him*...would Sherington be hosting a blasted *Frenchman*?

Laurence—surely the weak-chinned blond fellow behind the desk *was* Laurence—noticed her. Thaddeus had been the handsomer of the two boys. Poor Thaddeus.

Laurence's smile fell away as he stood and set aside his cigar. The man with him, the man clutching a foaming bottle in one hand and a saber in the other, turned his head. His lips widened and softened, and his eyes darkened with what she recognized as a man's carnal interest.

And then they widened with shock. A smile dawned, flooding his face with something that looked like relief.

Her own heart thundered. *Gareth*. This *was* Gareth, grown into a man, with thighs that would send Dulcinea into embarrassing public ecstasies.

"Petal," he cried. "It's *you*."

"Flora?" Laurence stepped closer, his gaze traveling over her like an annoying insect buzzing around. "I haven't seen you in years. Is it *really* you? All grown up?"

The tone was lascivious and didn't deserve a reply.

Laurence rounded the desk and scoffed. "Don't tell me you still don't speak, Flora."

That again. The fool.

"*My name*," she said, "is Fleur. Not Flora. Nor is it Petal."

Gareth's eyes twinkled, flecks of gold sparking among the brown, and his whole face lit from within as if he was holding in one of his hearty laughs, like the one that exploded out of him the last time she saw him.

Did he still have the handkerchief she'd labored over? He'd probably thrown it into the fire the same day he'd received it.

And that was fine. Gareth had no place in her plans.

"Welcome back from the wars, Ardleigh." Broad shouldered and narrow waisted, his only visible scar traced one jawline. Were there others? *She'd* never know. "I see you're in blessedly good health. But Mr. Sherington, may I

offer my condolences to you on your brother's death? I'm sorry for your loss."

Laurence dipped his head, and a cloud passed over Gareth's face, ever so briefly.

He hadn't changed. Nothing could shake him out of his native good humor for long. "You may both address me as Miss Hardouin," she said. "Do please come along to the drawing room, Mr. Sherington and be introduced to Lady Dulcinea Ixworth. She is most anxious to meet you, and to renew her acquaintance with your father. Might you persuade him to join us?"



Gareth allowed himself a smile at her boldness, Laurence's gaping mouth, and the fact that she hadn't included Gareth in the commanding invitation. Fleur was as much a pert little baggage as ever, more so now that she was a gabby one, and she'd grown in all the best ways, from the golden curls peeking from under her bonnet to the trim ankles under her too-short skirts. And all the curves in between.

Especially those.

If Thad were here to see how the skinny little chit had grown...

But he wasn't, dammit. Gareth had been the lucky one, in battle, in his rescue, even in his case of the precious Vin de Comête.

And now this: Fleur Hardouin was right here. His search was over. He could send a letter to Etienne Marceau telling the Frenchman he'd found him his bride, and then be free to be on his own way.

"Beg pardon, Miss, er Hardouin," Laurence said, interrupting his thoughts, "but Ardleigh and I are—"

"Oh, why don't we join the ladies, Laurence?" Gad, she was lovely, and he wanted to know more about her. He had to make sure she was the right Mademoiselle Hardouin, didn't

he? Not that there was any doubt—she looked astonishingly like the miniature of her mother. “That is, if I’m included in the invitation.”

Fleur waved a regal hand. “Do bring the champagne,” she said. “It is a particular favorite of my lady when she can get it.”

He chuckled. “Is it indeed? Then I shall look forward to hearing her opinion on the vintage.” This particular bottle was not the Vin de Comête. He’d smuggled in a case of the coveted 1811 vintage champagne, a hedge against poverty in the unknowable future. Putting aside his saber, he grasped the bottle in one hand and set his other lightly to her elbow, inhaling the delicate scent of floral perfume. Not lavender—his old nurse had reeked of the stuff. Not roses either.

He dipped his head her way and sniffed. “*Mmm*. Lilac?”

Her eyes turned a steely gray, and the slight wash of color creeping up her pale neck cheered him beyond reason. Fleur was a flower, but not a fragile one, and not one to blush easily at an importuning man’s flattery.

Or... he suspected that the cynical young girl had not grown into that sort of woman. What did he really know of her in the years since he’d last seen her?

She was still a Miss Hardouin, so she hadn’t married.

“Come along.” True to form, she quick-marched out of the library with him tagging along attached to her arm.

“Who is this Lady Dulcinea Ixworth?” he asked.

She sent him a side-wise condescending look, the sort you’d bestow on a child who’d asked a stupid question.

Another grin tugged at his lips, and he swallowed a laugh. He’d always enjoyed young Petal’s silent testiness, but in Fleur the woman? The challenge was as intoxicating as champagne.

A new thought nagged: would Etienne Marceau appreciate her?



“She’s a distant cousin to the Bicton-Morledges.” Fleur’s frosty tone pulled him out of his reverie. “I’ve been serving as her hired companion.”

“Does she live at Bicton Grange?”

“No. Well, that is, we only just arrived from Staffordshire.”

“Staffordshire.”

“Yes.”

“How did you come to...” He thought of the sulking little girl Fleur used to be. “Do you mean that Bicton-Morledge sent you away?”

Fleur tugged her arm free and turned on him. “Think you that Mr. Bicton-Morledge and his lady would cast off an orphan?”

He passed by the ravaged drive and unkempt park at Bicton Grange. Perhaps clothing and feeding Fleur had been too much of a burden. But surely Fleur had some money from her parents.

He’d learned some of her history from his time spent in France. If she was, in fact, the right Miss Hardouin—and how could she not be?—her father had been a son of a crafty textile and wine merchant. While Fleur’s grandfather changed sides as needed during the revolution, Fleur’s father opposed the *sans culottes*, and then, perforce, was disowned by his family. He’d joined the counterrevolution and been executed in Lyon when Fleur was no more than an infant.

Gareth had seen a miniature of Fleur’s mother, a blond and strikingly beautiful daughter of a minor *seigneur*. All of that family had been lost to the ravaging peasants. Perhaps there truly had been no money following young Fleur to Switzerland when she and her mother escaped.

Unless the late Bicton-Morledge had squandered his young ward’s inheritance. Always a possibility.

Fleur still watched him, a glint in her eyes that was not humor.

He touched her elbow again. “Perhaps they were tired of your long silences.”

Her shoulders rose and fell in a huff, and she continued down the corridor.

He ought to apologize, but this was Fleur, and she’d never been a child to appreciate insincere coddling. As a woman—well, time would tell, but he doubted she’d developed a taste for polite lies.

“How long have you served the lady?” he asked.

“Ten years.”

“*Ten years?* You couldn’t have been more than—”

“I was twelve when I came to her.”

*Sent off as a child to serve as a companion? Why? What had his Petal done to deserve that fate?*

Their arrival at the drawing room door silenced his questions, and he stepped aside to let Fleur enter first, watching the sway of her hips and the delicate slope of her shoulders under her gown.

Serving as drudge to an older lady hadn’t dampened her pride or her spirits. Yet what an awful life, fetching shawls, brewing possets, and who knew what other more disagreeable tasks were required.

The marriage to Marceau planned by her grandmother, the Veuve Hardouin would save her from that life. She’d have her own home, wouldn’t she? Or would she and Marceau be required to live under the thumb of the Veuve?

Mrs. Smythe sat near the fire, an elegant older lady nearby. Curls as white as his neck cloth burst from under the visitor’s bonnet. The lady wore lavender, as did Fleur. Half-mourning? For Bicton-Morledge or someone else?

“Good day to you, ladies.” Gareth bestowed his most charming smile.

He watched as Fleur’s back stiffened, suppressing a chuckle. Her hair had darkened over the years, and the coil of

regal gold sparkled under the back of her tiny bonnet. By God, Fleur ought to be a royal princess instead of a princess of the champagne world.

Sherington's Cousin Esther looked up, relief easing her tense mouth. A timid, compliant widow who'd needed a home, she'd been happy to take on hostess duties when Sherington lost his wife a year earlier.

The older guest raised a quizzing glass to her eyes, and he felt that bright, magnified eyeball creeping from the top of his head to the tip of his boots. And then up again pausing overlong at his unmentionables.

He smiled and raised the bottle of champagne in a salute.

"Dulcinea? Is it really you?"

The gravelly voice behind him caught him by surprise. He'd missed the creaking of Laurence's father's Bath chair rolling behind him.

"Indeed, Sherington." The lady's mellifluous voice had none of the raspiness of aging. "What's the meaning of you gadding about in a chair with wheels? Are there no good chairmen in Cheshire to carry you about the house?"

George Sherington laughed long and heartily.

"Father?" Laurence sent Gareth a curious glance at this rare display of good spirits. Sherington's illness had taken him down, Laurence said, but even before that he'd been grieving dreadfully since his wife's death. The losses that followed, of his friend, Bicton-Morledge, and worst of all, Thaddeus, had been heavy blows.

Sherington's man wheeled him closer to the ladies and helped him transfer to the settee where the visiting lady sat.

Laurence sent a servant to fetch champagne glasses, and then introductions were made. Lady Ixworth extended a slim regal hand while her gaze skipped over Laurence and settled on Gareth again with a glittery interest that would have put a Covent Garden dove to shame. He swallowed the urge to laugh.

Fleur surely noticed the older lady's interest. Her lips and eyes squeezed shut for the briefest of moments. Was she embarrassed?

When she cleared her throat and spoke, she told Laurence's father how wonderful it was to see him after so many years.

Fleur, transformed, as genteel as a Mayfair maiden or her mother.

He chuckled. What was she up to?

Mr. Sherington looked just as perplexed, but he was quickly distracted by Lady Ixworth, who peppered him with the sort of teasing that signaled more than a mere acquaintance. Gad, as if they'd once been much, *much* more than mere acquaintances.

What an entertaining visit this was proving to be.

When the glasses had been filled and passed around, Fleur pulled a chair next to old Sherington, listening as if captivated.

Perhaps Lady Ixworth's health was failing, and Fleur was fishing for a position as Sherington's nurse.

Unless she thought being kind to the father might hook her Laurence's hand?

No. She couldn't marry Laurence. She was to marry Marceau, though she didn't know it, and Marceau didn't deserve her, and wouldn't know how to handle a girl like her.

Fleur carried the mercenary blood of the Veuve Hardouin, a woman who had wriggled her way through the revolutionary madness and charmed Bonaparte with sparkling wine. Marceau was a mere watered-down distant cousin. No proper match for Fleur.

And yet... he needed to tell Fleur he'd discovered her family. Not here, though, and not now in front of an audience.



*The next day*

Fleur settled a breakfast tray on the table in Mrs. Bicton-Morledge's bedchamber while sixteen-year-old Cora helped her mother from the bed.

“So kind of you to help, Fleur,” the lady called, struggling to sit up. Her white linen nightgown flowed like stout canvas tenting a heavy boulder. Cora knelt before her mama and helped her into her slippers. “If only I could see my feet. Thank you, my darling girl.”

A pretty, petite lass, Cora was the image of what her mother must have looked like at that age, with dark curling hair and deep blue eyes. She was the eldest of the three Bicton-Morledge girls; that is, the eldest at home. Phyllis, who must now be nineteen, had run off with a soldier three years prior. The son of the family had died tragically in a fall from a horse. The two younger girls, Jemimah, aged eight and Suze, aged four, were in the nursery with one of the few remaining servants, a devoted nursery maid.

Cora helped her mother through her ablutions while a maid popped in to carry out the night waste, and they soon had the lady settled more or less comfortably into a chair.

Fleur drew the table closer and lifted the covers revealing shirred eggs, ham, and buttered toast.

“Heavens, how am I to eat so much?”

“Try, ma'am,” Fleur said.

Cora tucked a napkin over her mother's expansive lap and dove for it when it slid to the floor. “Tuck this into your bodice, Mama, and eat. Cook says you must keep up your strength.”

The lady grasped her daughter's hand and smiled. “Are you gossiping about me with the servants?”

Fleur's heart twisted. Mrs. Bicton-Morledge had been a distant, almost cold guardian to her younger self, and perhaps it had been in part her own fault. The lady had just lost one child and had another on the way when the family took in

Fleur. Having a surly young girl thrust into her care must have bewildered her.

Cora dropped a kiss on her mother's cheek. "It's only that we care about you. All of us."

Fleur turned away from the tender scene and took a step toward the door.

"Wait, Fleur," the lady said. "Thank you, Cora. Now, will you run along and see to your sisters? I want to speak with Fleur a moment."

## CHAPTER 3



**D**read threaded through her. Surely the lady wouldn't send them away, not yet anyway.

"Come pull that chair closer." Mrs. Bicton-Morledge beckoned her. "Would you like some of this toast? I couldn't possibly eat all of it."

"No, thank you, ma'am." Fleur drew a chair a fraction closer and smoothed the skirts of her lavender kerseymere gown under the white smock she'd borrowed from Mrs. Knollwood.

"You left here as a child, but you've come back as a lady. I think you must call me Helena. Will you do that?"

Stunned, Fleur almost refrained from speaking. But perhaps she'd done too much of that in the past. Mrs. Bicton-Morledge, did not deserve any more defiant silence. "Why... yes. Yes, I will."

Helena grimaced. "It is better than the Mrs. Bicton-Morledge mouthful. Now why are you wearing that smock? You're not a servant."

"Dulcinea—Lady Ixworth—and I, we're grateful you took us in. And we mean to help you in any way we may."

There. It had been said.

The lady's dimpled hand reached for hers. "I'm so happy to see the person you've become. I've been troubled all these years about not doing more for you as a child. About sending you away. There. I've said it."

Fleur let out a breath, marveling at the echoed sentiment, and her heart lifted.

Helena squeezed Fleur's hand. "Do you remember..." She took in a breath and started again. "I wanted to tell you what I could of your mother, but my husband felt it would make your... your troubled state worse. And then as you got older... I hoped we might visit you or you might visit us and I could tell you in person, rather than putting it into a letter."

Heart pounding, Fleur nodded. "I am here now, Mrs., er, Helena."

"Yes. I won't die knowing I ought to have told you this. Do you remember anything of the time before you came to us?"

Fleur straightened in her chair. Sometimes an image would flash, cloudy, dream-like, a woman with hair like her own, and soft. But crying, always crying. And another, dark-haired—though she couldn't put a face to either of them. Often, a strong whiff of jasmine would unsettle the fog, though never enough. Was that why she favored the scent?

She must find out what Helena knew. "No," she said.

"A Swiss woman who worked as a modiste brought you to my husband. She told him what she knew of your parents, their names, where they were from, and where you born, and he wrote it down. He did give you that, didn't he?"

Fleur nodded. She'd always known her parents' names, but the brief account had been among the legal papers she'd received when she'd reached her majority the year before.

"Your mother had sewed for the modiste, but... she died, and apparently, they found you crying beside her body. We were packing to leave—oh there was such chaos, with uprisings and the French army advancing. My husband brought you home, and we took you with us. No one dreamed the war would last this long, but now that it's surely over, perhaps you'd like to see what remains of your family?"

A familiar flash of anger warmed her face. As if her meager funds would support such a quest.



And what an ungrateful thought. Though she didn't have much, Mr. Bicton-Morledge had arranged a small income for her before his own family fortunes declined.

"Lady Ixton is my family now," she said.

Helena squeezed her hand again. "As are we, my girls and I." A frown creased her brow. "Dulcinea mentioned your wish to find some security through marriage. When the time comes, you must make certain of a proper settlement, a dower and a promise to provide for children. And if there is an entail..."

Ah, yes. Bicton Grange was entailed. Helena and her girls were perilously close to being homeless.

"You mustn't worry," Fleur said. "Dulcinea and I, between us, have enough income for a roof over our heads, and yours, and your girls' as well." It would be a tiny roof, but they'd have shelter. "Dulcinea will delight in bossing the little girls and you while you recover from childbirth. You are going to be just fine."

If need be, she'd pour coffee down the village doctor's throat to sober him, be sure of that.

"Nevertheless..." Helena took in a shallow breath. "Oh heavens, I can barely breathe with this girl kicking me. You are kind, Fleur. And should I not make it—"

"You will."

"But should I not, it does my heart good to hear you say you'll help my girls. I fear my husband's cousin will be as ungenerous as Dulcinea's cousin's heir." She shuddered. "Jedidiah Morledge pounds his bible prodigiously, but when he came for my dear husband's funeral... He insisted on speaking to the doctor about my condition. Mr. Sherington hadn't yet fallen ill, and it took his intervention—acting as Justice of the Peace and guardian to my girls—as well as that of our solicitor who'd come down from Manchester, to convince Jedidiah he must wait until this child is born to claim ownership and evict us." Helena's hand shook around her teacup. "Poor, dear, Sherington. We almost lost him, too. What would I have done?"

“Mr. Sherington seems to have rallied,” Fleur said.

“Thank goodness. Now, we must not worry, my girls won’t be entirely penniless either after their new sister arrives. And I know Sherington and our solicitor won’t fail them. My dear, don’t let your concern for them keep you from marrying.”

“Why, Helena,” Fleur said, “that wee one kicking you might be a boy. And you’ve borne five healthy children before; you will come through beautifully, providing you keep your strength up. Please do eat, or Cook will fret.”

“Cook will always fret. I believe I must bestir myself and attempt to go downstairs for dinner tonight, if only to keep her from leaving us like the butler did.”

Fleur stood. If the worst should happen, the very worst, she’d write the Bicton-Morledge girls into any marriage agreement she made. A husband who wouldn’t help care for orphans was no man at all, at least not a man to suit her.

“Don’t go just yet,” Helena said. “I want to discuss the plans for the Harvest Festival. I intend for Bicton Grange to participate as we always do with biscuits and cakes for the parish booth, and the girls will take part in the fun. Cora *must* attend the ball that night—she has an admirer in Mr. Haskell, you know. And then,” she squeezed Fleur’s hand, “let us review the list of available bachelors for you in Reabridge.”



It was after noon when Fleur found Dulcinea settled into a chair by the waning fire in her bedchamber. “And where have you been, gel? I had to wait for the kitchen maid to carry away my dishes.”

With her back turned, Fleur rolled her eyes, and fetched an extra shawl from the bed. Dulcinea had been in to chat with Helena after Fleur left, so she knew perfectly well Fleur had visited the nursery, helped in the still room, and accompanied the lone footman, James, delivering the harvest crews’ meat pies, another tradition that Bicton Grange would keep up. The

harvest had begun in earnest, and she would be lucky if she wasn't asked to grab a pitchfork and help.

And that would be alright. The talk with Helena that morning had unsettled her. Keeping busy meant she didn't have to think.

Avoiding Dulcinea's bright gaze, she settled the colorful cloth over the older lady's legs and went to poke at the fire.

"Hah. Squash your lips together like that, gel, they'll stay that way permanently and no man will want to kiss you."

If she kept to her plan and captured an old man, not being kissed would be just fine.

"Not speaking, are you? You said little enough at the Sheringtons'."

That was a lie. She'd been all that was polite toward old Mr. Sherington. It was Laurence and Gareth she'd ignored.

Dulcinea twirled her quizzing glass. "You'll not win Sherington by mere fussing, you know. He always fancied the gels with some spark. When he was younger... What a man. What thighs." She shivered. "That horse-faced son must take after his mother. But the other fellow, Ardleigh made me wish I was forty years younger." She laughed. "Or twenty years. After Ixworth died, a young man with fine legs like his—"

"Yes, yes," Fleur said. "You ought to have turned your flirting on Ardleigh and given me more of a chance with Mr. George Sherington."

"Softening him up for you, is all. He and I..." She sighed and a dreamy look came over her. "There was a ball, oh some thirty years ago—"

"Oh, do spare me the talk of your conquests, my lady," she teased. Dulcinea had been a beauty in her youth, and she was still quite comely, with a trim figure and skin she'd guarded well from the sun. "Shall you set your cap for him, then?"

"Heavens, no. Play nursemaid to an old goat in his dotage? In a Bath chair? No, no, he'd have to break that up for kindling." She glanced toward the cheery flames, her lips

quivering into a small smile. “Though there was a time when he was like a prime stallion. Times were different then.”

“Perhaps you can, er, revive him,” Fleur said. “He clearly favored you over me. Mrs. Bicton-Morledge has promised to help me meet Miss Farnham, whose widowed father is sure to be nearby.” Miss Farnham kept house for her father on a very fine manor in Lower Reabridge. The presence of the spinster daughter might pose an obstacle to matrimony, but Fleur wasn’t greedy. If he would but provide a small cottage for Dulcinea, she would do her duty by everyone and when the time came, would settle for a small income upon Mr. Farnham’s passing. All else might go to the daughter.

“Will you come along on this call?” Fleur asked.

“And if young Sherington and his friend call tomorrow?”

“There is no guarantee they’ll call, and I must be about the business of securing the future.”

“With an old man.” Dulcinea shook her head. “It is a good plan, sensible, and yet I cannot truly like it for a spirited girl like you. Are you sure this will answer? There was a spark in Ardleigh’s eyes when he looked at you.”

“Ah yes, the spark. You’ve always told me to beware the spark.” She bit her lips to keep from smiling. “Ardleigh is a younger son, and likely has no income, or next to none.”

Dulcinea harrumphed.

The sound of a carriage on the drive drew Fleur to the window. A landau had drawn up. Gareth jumped out and turned to help another man who leaned heavily on his arm, a cane bracing him on the other side.

“Who is it?”

Fleur hurried to the clothes press. “Sherington is here. We must get you dressed.”

“Pah” Dulcinea flapped a hand. “You go visit him. What a pity he didn’t bring his friend Ardleigh.”

Fleur whisked away the lap blanket. “Oh, Ardleigh has come along as well. And the Sherington with him is George.”

She smiled. “And he’s walking.”

Dulcinea’s eyes glinted. In fact, they positively sparked. “Is that so? Well come along, gel. Don’t stand there dawdling.”

A few minutes later, Mrs. Knollwood caught them in the corridor, winded from hurrying up the stairs.

“Oh, miss, my lady, before you go down...” She paused for a breath. “News. Mr. Sherington is bringing news. I don’t know how we’ve only just heard but...” Frowning, she paused again.

“Well get on with it,” Dulcinea said.

“There’s a babe at the vicar’s. Belongs to one of the village girls as followed the drum.”

Dulcinea clucked her tongue. “Which one?”

The hair at the back of Fleur’s neck prickled and she sent Dulcinea a quelling look. Despite relishing gossip, Mrs. Knollwood was a placid soul. Fleur had never seen her this agitated.

“That’s just it,” the housekeeper said. “No one knows.”

“Phyllis,” Fleur whispered. Helena would need to hear this possible news of her daughter and grandchild. She touched the housekeeper’s arm. “Get Mrs. Bicton-Morledge dressed for callers. We’ll bring them up to her sitting room.”

“Oh, miss, Mr. Sherington barely made it up the few steps to the portico.”

“Then we’ll have James carry his mistress down.”

The housekeeper wrinkled her nose. James was not quite as sturdy as the usual footmen.

“Or Captain Ardleigh can,” Dulcinea said.



“You did not need to accompany me.” The cross tone in Fleur’s voice cheered Gareth.

He’d spent the call at Bicton Grange observing a demure Fleur chatting quietly with all and sundry and pouring tea for Mrs. Bicton-Morledge, who, with the help of Gareth’s steadying arm, had waddled down the stairs for the occasion. Her daughter, Cora, a dark-haired young beauty who must be turning heads was present as well. The other two daughters, mere urchins, popped in for cakes before being shooed back to the nursery.

Lord Barlow had called on Sherington that morning with astonishing news. A child—a mere baby had been left with the vicar by an English couple who’d been visiting Toulouse. A year or so ago, the locals discovered the newborn in a barn next to the body of his mother who’d died giving birth. Miniatures of a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl and a British soldier were likely portraits of the lad’s parents. The English couple brought him to Reabridge because of one more found item, an amulet. They’d recognized it as one given to Reabridge girls at the annual harvest festival.

Barlow had called out of concern that Thaddeus might have been the child’s father. Neither of the Sherington men had heard Thad had married. Thaddeus wasn’t likely to be the father.

As for the mother’s possible identity, Mr. Sherington insisted he must personally deliver this news to Mrs. Bicton-Morledge. Gareth had been only too happy to accompany him.

Mrs. Bicton-Morledge had taken the news with quiet composure, deeming it unlikely the boy was her daughter Phyllis’s. Phyllis’s hair had been brown, not blond.

Still, one could see sadness and worry lurking beneath the lady’s calm surface. She’d excused herself early, and Gareth had insisted on carrying her up the stairs, Cora walking alongside.

When he returned to the drawing room, Sherington was saying his farewells and Fleur was retrieving her shawl. She’d come along for the return trip to Sherington Manor with the

excuse of borrowing a novel that Lady Ixworth wanted. Then, novel, in hand, she'd declined the offer of a carriage ride home.

Gareth had snatched up the book before Fleur could quick-march from Sherington Manor with it. *The Monk* was now carefully wrapped in oilcloth against the possibility of rain and tucked under his waistcoat next to his heart.

He needed this time alone with Fleur. What sort of woman had she become? What experiences had she had? What did she want in her life? He needed to know her better before he wrote to Marceau with the news that he'd found the Frenchman's prospective bride.

At least that was his excuse.

"I confess," he said, "I was surprised to find you unmarried."

She made no reply.

Fair enough. This was Fleur, after all.

"You are accomplished and dare I say beautiful? Do the men of... Derbyshire... not have eyes in their heads?"

"Staffordshire," she said. "Eyes? Yes. Brains? Not many. But those who do know that beauty won't pay rent or buy food. At least not in the respectable way."

That was more words than he'd ever heard out of Fleur at one time, and it told him much. She had no income, and the men of Staffordshire wanted her, but not for matrimony.

"I see. Yet you and Lady Ixworth plan to return there after your visit here?"

Fleur stopped, pivoted, and studied him. "You are impertinent, Ardleigh. But then you've always been thus, haven't you?"

He supposed that was true. Yet he needed to know much more before he wrote Marceau. The Frenchman would have to know how to woo her, after all.

Good old Fleur. Ever honest—*if* he could get her to talk—and if that required frank questioning, so be it.

Perhaps he ought to apologize, but he wasn't one to grovel. "I've offended you."

"Much offends me." She grimaced. "I suppose you'll run back and share whatever I tell you with your circle of so-called gentlemen. Oh yes, I know that you men gossip as madly as any females."

Unfortunately, that was true. He thought of the many drunken conversations in the officers' mess. "Hand to heart." He touched the rectangle under his coats. A book such as this had once shielded him from a stray piece of shrapnel. "Your secrets will be my secrets."

"Hmm." That grimace again. "We have lost our home in Staffordshire. Put out by the new heir. So, no, we will not be returning there."

The last rays of the setting sun sparked diamonds in her hair and in the corners of her eyes. Incipient tears?

The notion of his Petal near tears tugged at his heart. Fleur had feelings. He'd always suspected that, but she'd always hid her hurt behind a steel cage.

By God, she was lovely, and so strong. Not at all like the Frenchwoman Marceau had been keeping. Marceau had made commitments to her that involved a two-year-old and another on the way, so Gareth supposed she'd been well within her rights in her weeping. What the *Veuve* thought of it all, Gareth didn't know.

How unfair the match with Marceau would be to Fleur.

A promise was a promise though, and his debt to the *Veuve* had to be repaid. He must at least introduce Fleur to Marceau.

"It's a marriage you need," Gareth said. "It will secure your future."

"Yes," she said, astonishing him. "And that of Lady Ixworth."



“Lady Ixworth?” He laughed, shocked at her agreeableness to marriage and appalled that she would attach such an unlikely requirement. “Surely she has family who—”

“She has *me*. And a small—very small—income. It’s no secret that the late viscount gambled away almost everything. We will stay with Mrs. Bicton-Morledge and make ourselves useful until...” She shrugged. “She *might* have a son.”

The Bicton-Morledge females’ predicament was common knowledge. Those gossiping males again.

“And she might not, and then what?”

One of Fleur’s long silences ensued, and she stepped out again.

He kept pace with her. “You are here husband-hunting, I take it? Don’t count on Laurence. I believe he intends to sow his wild oats for a few more years. In fact, now that his father is much improved, he’s returning to London perhaps tomorrow or the day after to see to business there.”

Her pace slowed. “You don’t offer your own hand, Captain Ardleigh?”

## CHAPTER 4



From any other woman, that would have been flirting, but there was a cynicism to Fleur's tone that irritated, reminding him of his own financial circumstances.

"Poor as a church mouse," he said, wishing it wasn't so.

Her lips curved in a tight smile. "You are safe with me, as is Laurence. I have no interest in finding a young husband."

"No interest... What?" He slapped a hand to his forehead. "You mean to say you're after Laurence's father?" A laugh exploded from him.

"I mean to say no such thing," she said. "But why not an older man? Someone settled, seeking companionship, less likely to gamble away everything or beat me."

"While you use your wiles to wrap him around your finger. Ah, you French women."

"I am not French. I am English. I despise all things French."

That would certainly make his task more difficult. Marceau was not a naturally charming man unless he was striking a deal with a wine merchant. It would be up to Gareth to convince Fleur to make her home in France.

"But why? There are many good people in France."

"Like the ones who killed Thaddeus?"

"That was war, Fleur. They killed us, we killed them. It's the way of things for soldiers. There's no point in holding on

to resentments.”

She eyed him sideways, a look of puzzlement in her gaze, and walked on.

“Don’t you ever wish to visit there? You certainly have family there.”

“Do I? Why have they not sought me out?” Her voice crackled with rare emotion, but the wings of her bonnet hid her face.

*They have left me to do that.* He could see it must be done carefully. Even the hardiest of flowers could be blown over by a strong wind.

“Perhaps... perhaps you’re an heiress.”

“Bah.”

“What if I investigate? Look for your family? Will you promise to meet them?”

They’d reached the front steps of Bicton Grange. Fleur held out her hand. “You’ll find no one. They were killed in the terror and the fighting. And those who weren’t, those who supported the revolution and Bonaparte, they are dead to me. Now, please may I have the book?”

He handed it over and waited until the door opened and then closed on her.

Fleur was more resentful than most of the soldiers he knew. He turned and retraced his steps to Sherington Manor, remembering the taunts young Fleur had received from those ruffraff children from Lower Reabridge. He could still feel the satisfying crack of the bigger fellow’s nose under his fist.

Fleur had been hurt deeply. He ought to have realized that business of not speaking had been young Fleur’s punishment against her small world. To lose her parents, to be placed with strangers, to come to a country where she was taunted about who she was... Marceau would not understand. He might well become the kind of husband who would beat her.

Walking back to Sherington Manor in the descending twilight, he passed groups of hired harvest workers heading to

their rest. Some looked surlier than others, grownup versions of those bullies taunting his Petal so many years ago. It was good he'd escorted her home. At least he could offer her that sort of protection.

The rest though... The Veuve wanted this match with Marceau, and he'd promised to try to arrange it as a matter of honor.

But what of Fleur's wishes? He ought to have expected the same stubborn Fleur, grown stronger with age, but this Fleur—she was stubborn, that was true, but she was also homeless, desperate, vulnerable...

And here to find a husband. If Gareth delayed an introduction to Marceau much longer, Fleur might find someone else.

There was talk of the ladies paying a call on a family he didn't know tomorrow. Perhaps he'd look out and attach himself to their party.



“Miss Farnham is a lovely girl,” Dulcinea said. “A pity Mr. Farnham was out, but I'm happy to learn that the vicar is at home today.”

From her perch on the gig's cargo box, Cora chattered away about her friend, Miss Farnham, and the vicar, who was one of her guardians, and the Reabridge shops, all the while nibbling biscuits from the basket on her lap.

Fleur scarcely listened, pretending to concentrate on handling the lines. It had rained the night before, and there were muddy patches to navigate.

Besides, she was feeling low. Not only had she been unable to meet Mr. Farnham, but she'd learned more about the orphaned child abandoned on the clueless vicar. The foolish man had sent the child's nursemaid packing, expecting various local women to care for the terrified babe. At least now he'd found a woman to live in and care for him.

But she was French.

As they approached the town, her thoughts turned to Gareth and the conversation of the previous day. She'd almost expected him to dog her steps today again, but there'd been no sign of him as they passed Sherington Manor, nor when they drove through Reabridge earlier. She must stop looking for him everywhere.

There was a reason she always chose to speak as little as possible. She'd told Gareth too much. She'd given him too many ways to taunt her.

There was also the temptation he roused in her. She'd come a hair's breadth from flirting with him. Teasing him had only led to him turning the tables and asking questions about her family in France.

Bah. France—a place where demons sporting cockades lurked behind every bush. No one in France had cared for her mother or father or bothered to look for Fleur. To Hades with them.

And the same went for Gareth Ardleigh.

The look on his face when she'd teased him about offering his own hand? She'd mustered a smile because pride had demanded it.

“The captain,” Cora called over her shoulder. “He’s coming up behind us. Captain Ardleigh,” she shouted. “Good day to you.”

“Ladies.” He doffed his hat. “Where are you off to today?”

“We’ve just called on the Farnhams,” Cora said. “Mama wanted to come, but she thought better of it and sent me along to make her apologies and to make the introductions. And now Fleur has promised to stop in the village so I may buy a new ribbon.”

“Has she, Miss Cora? I declare, I shall make myself a nuisance and accompany you.”

Fleur winced, refusing to look his way. She'd bet a quid he was grinning.

“But first we’ll call on the vicar, Mr. Owen,” Dulcinea said. “He was a regular correspondent of my late cousin. We have biscuits for him, if Miss Cora hasn’t eaten all of them. If you wish, Fleur, you may set me down at the parsonage while you run off shopping.”

Would it be bad of Fleur to stay at the vicarage and send Cora off shopping with the captain? Having put her daughter in the care of Fleur, Mrs. Bickton-Morledge would probably frown on the notion.

“May I join you on your mission?” Gareth asked. “I’ve seen Thom Owen at the Book and Bell, but I’ve not had a chance to call on his father.”

“Oh, I hope Thom is there,” Cora cried. “In any case, I must visit as well. The ribbon can wait. My mother will want a report on this baby the vicar has taken in.”



As they reached the vicarage, Gareth quickly dismounted, and Cora bounced down with her basket.

“Come help me down,” Dulcinea said, beckoning Gareth.

Fleur sighed and busied herself securing the lines. Dulcinea and Cora were already headed up the walk when she turned to climb down and felt Gareth’s hands on her waist lifting her as if she were a child instead of a woman of two and twenty.

Her breath left her in a whoosh, heat surging from her middle, up into her cheeks, and down into...

She *must* get hold of herself. “You may release me now,” she said to his black neckcloth. Raising her eyes, she saw he was frowning.

“May I? I suppose I ought to. In case anyone comes down the lane and sees us. Are you quite well? There for a moment you seemed a bit breathless.”

A corner of his mouth was turning up.

A fresh wave of heat rose in her cheeks, and she silently cursed.

“How was your quest with Mr. Farnham today?”

Mustering some composure she said, “He wasn’t at home.”

“What a shame.” The smile tugged at the other corner of his mouth. “I suppose you’ll return another day?”

Suspicion dawned. *He wouldn’t have...*

Of course, he would have. This was Gareth.

“Did you have anything to do with his absence, Captain Ardleigh?”

“In point of fact, I met him last night in the taproom of the inn and we made an engagement to go riding this morning. Capital fellow and quite hardy. Still in his forties. His father lived to be eighty. Not old enough for your plans, my dear.”

An angry pulse thrummed in her head. “I see. Well then.” She pushed at his hands, and he quickly released her, tucking her fingers over his arm.

“You look positively blooming today, Petal,” he said.

If she had her parasol in hand, she would beat him to within an inch of his life.

She mustered a breath and said, “Thank you.”

The front door of the vicarage stood open. She pulled her arm from his and hurried along behind Dulcinea and Cora to the drawing room. While a manservant announced them, the people gathered there rose. The soberly dressed man must be the vicar. A woman of middling years eyed them, and a petite, dark-haired younger woman of perhaps thirty set a toddler in skirts onto the floor before standing.

Fair-haired and blue-eyed, the child looked up with the face of an angel, and then quickly dropped to his knees on the Aubusson carpet and crawled over to a scattered set of blocks.

Mr. Owen greeted Cora and introductions were made.

The French nanny, Miss du Pessac, watched the boy as he played, looking ready to jump up and protect him. Her gown, though of good quality, was of a style more out of date than those in Fleur's wardrobe. Where on earth had the vicar found her?

"Mr. Owen," Dulcinea said, "you and I have met before when you visited my cousin Mr. Quidenham. He was kind enough to invite me to live with him after my husband died."

"Quidenham was a great correspondent of mine. We shared an interest in St. Paul's travels in Greece. I was very sorry to hear of his passing. Will you be staying in Reabridge for long?"

"We shall see," Dulcinea said. "For now, we're abiding with Mrs. Bicton-Morledge. She's just learned of the presence of young Sam. As you can imagine, we're here on her behalf."

"For what purpose?" Miss du Pessac's back stiffened and her sharp little chin came up. Cora's mouth dropped open, and the vicar opened his mouth to speak, but Fleur jumped in first.

"Her daughter, Phyllis Bicton-Morledge, followed the drum," she said, "and the family hasn't heard from her since she left three years ago. Sam may be Mrs. Bicton-Morledge's grandson. Cora might be his aunt."

The French woman's terse nod was not a friendly one.

The vicar told them about Sam's arrival in Reabridge with an English couple and repeated the story Mr. Sherington had shared with him.

"Mademoiselle," Gareth said, turning the full force of his charm on the French nursemaid, "Mr. Owen. Is it possible for Cora to see the miniatures of the couple believed to be the child's parents?"

The vicar retrieved a large locket from the mantel, opened it, and handed it to Cora.

"Oh." Cora's gaze traveled around the room ending at Fleur. "She looks more like you, Fleur, and Phyllis's husband looked nothing like this."



In that moment Sam, wide-eyed and curious appeared at Fleur's knee and presented her a block. Her heart did a flip, and the wobbly smile on the little face drew a smile out of her. "Thank you, Sam," she said.

"*De rien,*" Miss du Pessac said coaxingly, reaching for the boy and drawing him up onto her lap. "He speaks some English but will understand better if you speak French."

*You're not teaching him English?* She closed her mouth on the words, remembering the fear and uncertainty she saw behind the child's smile. No need to stir trouble, at least not in the little boy's presence.

Gareth jumped in, conversing easily with Miss du Pessac, so easily he was almost flirting, while Fleur battled her rising irritation.

## CHAPTER 5



As Gareth escorted the ladies to their gig, Mr. Sherington passed by and hailed them from the window of his carriage. Chuckling, Gareth saluted.

It was astounding how quickly Sherington had discarded his Bath chair. Either Fleur or Lady Ixworth—and Gareth’s money was on the latter—had raised George Sherington from his funk.

In fact, today Sherington insisted on taking the older lady up into his more comfortable equipage, promising to convey her back to Bicton Grange while the younger ones shopped.

“What a lucky thing that Mr. Sherington came along, and Cora met up with a friend equally enthusiastic about ribbons.” They’d tied up the gig and his horse and were strolling the market square. “I’m rather glad you and I have this time alone together,” he added, squashing a smile.

He was alone with an even more silent than usual Fleur.

“Interesting morning wasn’t it?” he said. “Perhaps we’ll learn something more about the child very soon.” The vicar had been speaking with all the families who’d lost sons in the war and had daughters unaccounted for. “I heard that he almost had a cat fight in his parlor between Mrs. Pownell and Mrs. Buckley.”

“More gossiping with your gentlemen friends?”

“Yes. I suppose it was that.” He smiled, but she didn’t look his way.

“I at least know who my parents were,” she said finally.

*Ah.* His heart skipped a beat. Fleur had found a bittersweet blessing in the poor lad’s tale.

For his part, the mystery had induced a great deal of... Unease? Was that it? War—the relentless boredom, the sudden fierce battle, the jittery realization that one had survived—all produced unaccountable unions: soldiers with wives following the drum and suddenly widowed, soldiers with local women—taboo but inevitable, and soldiers with the usual assortment of other camp followers.

“Might Cora have been wrong?” he asked. “Might that have been her sister in the miniature?”

Fleur glanced up at him. Her eyes, gray and luminous, looked as though storm clouds were gathering.

“I hadn’t seen Phyllis since she was a child. But surely Cora is right.” She chewed her lower lip. “Helena—Mrs. Bicton-Morledge—is fr-fragile.”

His Petal’s voice broke on that last word.

“Mrs. Bicton-Morledge? Do you care for her? She sent you away, didn’t she?”

Fleur studied the window of Randall Clark’s Mercantile, though he knew she wasn’t looking at the crockery displayed there. “At first... well, you know what sort of child I was. I was angry, frightened. But I came to be grateful. Dulcinea—well...”

He clutched his hands behind his back, fighting the urge to hold her, waiting as she gathered her thoughts.

“Helena spoke with me about it, seeking to make amends. She fears dying in childbirth. She w-worries what will become of her girls.” Her voice shook, and she turned away from him again.

He eyed her sidewise, thunderstruck. Meeting Sam had certainly stirred her, but this uncharacteristic display of emotion was not about *her* sorrows. She’d mentioned her desire to secure not just her own future but Lady Ixworth’s as

well. Now she'd be planning to include Mrs. Bickton-Morledge and her daughters in her marriage settlements.

He ought to have noticed before: she wore the same dress he'd seen her in yesterday, and the day before that, an unadorned lavender that might be half-mourning for Lady Ixworth's cousin or for her former guardian, Bickton-Morledge. Her dress, her bonnet, the twist of her hair, were all simple and unaffected. Her half boots had scuff marks that no polish could cover. Her only jewelry was a garnet cross at her neck.

Fleur's quest for a marriage wasn't solely about money to save herself. She would sacrifice herself on the altar of a loveless marriage to save Lady Ixworth and all of the Bickton-Morledge girls as well should the very worst happen.

Touch his heart it might—and it did—but it also spelled trouble for his matchmaking endeavor. Marceau wouldn't take in a whole flock of females of all ages, nor would the Veuve support it. The lady had barely come to tolerate him, a British officer. He didn't fool himself that it was his charming personality; the Veuve had a mercenary streak, and he was useful to her.

“When is the babe due?”

“It ought to arrive in October. But she is grown so very big... These things are not always easy to determine.”

The child's birth would be a day of reckoning for the household of women.

“Surely the heir won't put her and her girls out,” he said. *At least not immediately.*

She shrugged. “Perhaps not, but from what she tells me about him, he certainly won't allow Dulcinea and me to stay.”

He hadn't written to Marceau yet. There was time. The Frenchman's last letter had mentioned negotiations with wine merchants and the possibility of traveling to Manchester for an auction. His London host had steered him toward the best evening entertainment, and he was availing himself of the most discerning establishments for gentlemen.

In other words, Marceau was visiting every decent brothel in London, steeling himself for the upcoming nuptials. Having thought to eventually gain the Veuve's approval of a marriage to his amour, he'd bristled at the notion of an arranged marriage to a cousin no one knew. His mistress's tiresome weeping and the Veuve's nagging had brought about his final agreement.

Fleur was only a year or two younger than Marceau, but she was much older in other ways. The Frenchman didn't have the disposition for a strong wife, much less a strong wife with Lady Ixworth in tow.

A sickening feeling swept over him. Honor was important, and he'd defended his own ardently all through his young years, mostly with his fists, only once with a sword. But this... this marriage? Debt of honor or no, Marceau shouldn't have Fleur. It wouldn't do. He'd travel to France himself and explain all to the Veuve.

And Fleur... she could travel with him and meet her grandmother. Lady Ixworth could come as well. Neither lady would expect luxury; he could sell one of his precious bottles to pay their passage.

"That poor lad," Fleur said, interrupting his planning, "Perhaps his father is still alive." She stopped and frowned up at him. "*Could* he be Thad's?"

"Unless Thad was secretly married, no."

"You would know if he'd married, wouldn't you?"

"I... I lost touch with him quite often. We served in different regiments and for a time... well, I was captured by the French."

Her gaze skittered over him. "*Captured?*" She stopped dead and put her hands to her hips. "Captured, Gareth?"

"Yes."

"Did they... harm you?"

He drew in a breath, a memory flashing, quickly squashed. He'd never been one for grudges or crying the victim. In fact,

he'd had it easier than many others. "No, no not really. Oh, there was a bit of thrashing about, but their commander soon saw that I was an officer and a gentleman."

"And tried to wheedle secrets out of you."

Yes, he'd first been beaten and then charmed. "It didn't work, if you're wondering."

She eyed him up and down. "I never thought to ask—besides the scar on your jaw, were you wounded?"

Wounded? More likely than not, he'd carry the shrapnel of battle to his death along with various scars. But most of those, of course, he'd received earlier, in Spain. A French surgeon had kindly and cleanly removed the only bullet he'd received. "Only a few scratches."

"You were beaten and tortured, and yet not injured?"

He shrugged. "As it happened, I escaped."

Was this the right time to bring up Etienne Marceau?

"I was helped by a Frenchman and his old aunt. They took me in, hid me, tended my, er, scratches."

Her mouth dropped open and then she frowned. "You *were* wounded, Gareth. How long were you with *those people*?"

"A mere few weeks. And the wounds were nothing. I was lucky. Very lucky. The French are not all bad, you see."

"Huh," she said with disgust.

"No." He caught her arm, stopping her, and drawing her into an opening between two buildings. "I like the French generally. And in particular," he touched his fingers to her jaw, "I like you."

A tiny gasp escaped her. "I am not—"

"But you are. And certainly, you have family there."

"No." She pushed past him and hurried back to the square.

"Thank you for reminding me why I must marry," she said, bristling with anger as he caught up with her. "I am French by

birth, but as soon as I marry an Englishman, I will take my husband's citizenship."

"So who is it to be? Sherington? Farnham?"

"Perhaps whoever takes the baby will need a nursemaid... But no. That Miss du Pessac will have the position."

"Perhaps. But... I've heard rumors that she and the vicar's son are engaged."

She stopped and her brows drew together. "If that's so, I might yet find work."

"Have you ever cared for a small child?"

"Only Phyllis and Cora when all of us were little."

"And if you're a nursemaid, what of Lady Ixworth?"

"Sherington likes Dulcinea. We might both have a home." She threw up her hands. "I'm grasping at straws I suppose."

"Well there is still Mr. Farnham," he teased. "Perhaps he'll be smitten and offer for you."

He thought it unlikely. Farnham had spoken fondly of his late wife. He didn't seem like a man in search of a new one.

"Is Mr. Farnham sensible?"

"I suppose so. Obsessed with his drainage. We rode all about his acres. Fascinating stuff, if you like that sort of thing." His own family estate was on higher ground. Most vineyards were as well.

"Financially stable?"

"I didn't poke into finances."

"Handsome?"

Mr. Farnham was, in fact a lean hardy man who appeared to have all his hair and teeth.

"I'm no judge of that, I'm afraid."

Fleur snorted and waved. Cora and her friend had stepped out of a shop.

"I'll bid you farewell, Captain."

A tall man dressed in laborer's clothing stopped Cora and tipped his hat. There was something familiar about him.

Cora smiled up at the fellow. Even from here, Gareth could see she was flirting.

"Who is that?" Gareth asked. "He's awfully friendly with Miss Cora."

Fleur shaded her eyes and an assessing look came over her. "You don't recognize him? That's Bevan Haskell. He manages the crews of itinerant harvest workers. He's visited the steward at Bicton Grange to arrange the wages, and even paid a call on Helena."

"Cora oughtn't to be so familiar with him. And you—after the way he treated you?"

"We were children then. And... as for Cora, well, Haskell has a reputation as a hard worker. After his father died, he held the family together. He has a freehold he shares with a brother-in-law, and he's respected in the community."

"He's a brute and beneath her station." He stepped out to cross the square, but Fleur's hand stayed him.

"Don't," she said. "Helena is not any more concerned about him than any other young man. He's not likely to whisk her off to follow the drum."

Haskell had spotted them. He lifted his hat, said a few words to Cora, and departed.

"There now," she said, "he's gone, and I see Cora has a package. She and I will be off. Haskell is a man with important work to do, and Cora and I have duties to attend to. You may go as well and be about whatever your business is."

He winced at her dig. It was true, he was taking a break from soldiering, but he had important business of another sort.

She wouldn't get rid of him that quickly. "I'll ride along beside you and gather the latest gossip from Cora to share with Sherington, and perhaps stop at the Book and Bell later for more news. Someone might know something about the lad's parents."



“Intelligence gathering. Did you do a bit of that during the war?”

In fact, he'd been on a mission when he was captured. A long moment passed, and she scoffed. “Silence, Captain Ardleigh? Well then, I'll be careful to guard the names of the gentlemen I'll be calling on, so you don't get to them first *again*. Unless you'd be willing to help me? Surely somewhere in England there's a man for me.”

“And for your elderly companion.”

“In fact, Dulcinea has just turned two and sixty, and she is healthier than many ladies half her age, and still very attractive. She's kept her figure as well.”

Lady Ixworth did look well for her age, but the only lady whose figure interested him was the one next to him. He took her hand and set it over his arm, itching to touch more, to wrap his arm around her waist and feel again the softness where her hip curved.

Alas, there was another man for Fleur, Etienne Marceau, if she'd have him. With him, she'd have the security of family, and an entrée into a prosperous business. She'd have a husband who wasn't likely to leave her, but who would cheat like the devil on her and never love her.

*If* Gareth would allow Etienne Marceau to have her. Because, God's truth, he wanted her for himself. Fleur ought to be his. She ought to be not just taken to wife, she ought to be loved.



While he rode silently and Fleur deftly handled the gig, Cora told them about the plans for the Harvest festival the following weekend. On Saturday, the booths would go up on the green. On Sunday, there'd be a special afternoon church service, and following that, some of the landowners would hold dinners. On Monday, there'd be a parade of wagons, a fair, and dancing. There'd be Morris dancers, games, booths, and a grand bonfire.

For the second time this day, Gareth became lost in his thoughts, something he generally avoided at all costs. The cropped fields and hedgerows they passed brought to mind other hedges he'd dragged his injured self in and out of, hiding from the French.

When the hedgerows of Champagne ended, the road ran along sweeps of trellised vines, the naked twists sporting green buds here or there. At the sound of an approaching cart, he'd staggered into a row where he must have fainted. The next thing he knew, a strong, wiry Frenchman was half dragging him along, all the while cursing under his breath about a woman.

Struggling for one last gasp of strength to break free, Gareth spotted a cart. It wasn't a gendarme holding the lines, not unless they were enlisting old women.

She railed at the young man to put the stranger into the cart bed, and then to cover him with a scratchy tarp in case of patrols. Once horizontal, Gareth succumbed to the blackness again and woke up in a creaky cot on a lumpy mattress in a room warmed by a small brazier. It felt enough like heaven that he'd slept for three days straight.

He discovered his wounds had been tended to, his clothing cleaned, and a covered dish and flask of wine left on the side table for him.

Etienne Marceau had saved him from the peril of a cold hungry night passed out in the vineyard. Not so much because he'd wanted to; Marceau's great aunt, the Veuve Hardouin had demanded it.

At this point of the war, helping an enemy officer held little risk for them. Marceau had been too young for the Jacobin madness. Later, he'd avoided conscription in the Grande Armée by keeping his emperor supplied with champagne from the family winery. The Veuve was no fool; she could see the end of the war coming. She'd staged cargo in the lowlands, awaiting an armistice, and seized the opportunity to forge bonds with an English officer who could help Hardouin and Marceau weather the precarious time between

armistice and a return to peace and the expansion of their trade.

Plus, Gareth's death in the vineyard might have spoiled the next year's harvest.

He chuckled to himself.

"What's funny?" Cora called, shaking him out of his reverie. "Oh look. They've finished the north field."

The brisk autumn air carried the scent of freshly mowed barley, bringing old memories of his family home, and more recent ones of Champagne where he'd immersed himself as fully as possible for a sheltering enemy soldier in the operations of the vineyard.

He'd risen from his sickbed and joined the Veuve and her nephew for meals, conscious of the need to attempt to contact his regiment. Before he could do so, news came, first of the emperor's defeat at Toulouse, and then of his surrender. Meals and conversations had led to tours and chats with the Veuve's workers, and a few months later, a visit during the height of the harvest. He'd pitched in and helped, relishing the excitement of harvest, the soreness and sense of accomplishment after a day of physical labor.

At some point, he'd remembered a little girl with the surname of Hardouin, setting in motion his current quandary.

He was in love with Fleur.

*He was in love with Fleur.* He, with his two hundred pounds a year. His family didn't have room for him, much less a wife and children if he married.

He thought of the softness of Fleur under her garments. There would be children, plural.

He wanted to marry her. It was madness. There'd be no champagne for them. They'd be scrimping to have a roof over their heads and food on the table. It would be foolish, reckless, irresponsible.

"Captain, you've passed the turn off for Sherington Manor," Cora called, breaking him out of this particular

reverie.

“Why so I have,” he said. “I believe I’ll just ride along the rest of the way and call on your mother.”

“You don’t have to,” Cora said, subdued. “She’ll be resting today. Yesterday about did her in. She was worried but... I don’t think the girl in that locket was Phyllis. Nor did the soldier look like her William. William had dark hair like yours, Captain.”

“You met him?”

“Oh yes. The militia camped near here and came to all the village fêtes. He was very kind. When he offered for Phyllis, Papa said they must wait.”

“But they didn’t.”

“They married in Scotland. That’s all we know.”

Another foolish jump into matrimony.

It wasn’t a leap he would take. In the long run, it wouldn’t be kind. It wouldn’t be honorable. He’d write the letter summoning Marceau to Reabridge as soon as he returned to Sherington Manor.

## CHAPTER 6



With the Bicton Grange housekeeper, Mrs. Knollwood, beside her, Fleur set out early the next day in the gig, leaving Cora and Dulcinea behind to keep company with Helena and see to household matters.

They would first do some shopping, and then address the more important business. Mrs. Knollwood had known all the Bicton-Morledge girls since they were wee things and having grown up in Reabridge she'd known many of the girls who'd left the village. She'd asked Helena for leave to see the baby everyone was talking about and view the locket. They would pay a call at the vicarage.

"It's glad I am, miss, that you and your lady have come to stay with us," Mrs. Knollwood said. "It does a heart good to see my mistress is not alone. Mayhap it's not my place, but her own family could have done more. Will have to if this child is not a boy."

"I recall her mother visiting her," Fleur said. Helena's mother had showered Phyllis and her baby brother and sister with affection and completely ignored *the French girl*.

"Passed away some years ago, her mother did. My mistress's brother was killed in France, and her only sister is in India."

Fleur had forgotten about the brother killed in the early days of the war. No wonder Helena's mother had shunned her.

"Struth and I hope that this child is not Phyllis's," Mrs. Knollwood said, "for 'twould mean Phyllis is lost to us

entirely.”

“A sad thought, that. Cora feels certain the babe is not Phyllis’s. When was the last time anyone heard from her?”

“’Twas a few months after she left. She’d married in Scotland, and then she and her man had sailed for Spain to rejoin his regiment.”

“That they married was some comfort, I suppose.”

“Oh, aye. Her mother’s heart wasn’t broken entirely. Her da ought to have let them marry, I say. It’s all well and good to be practical, but young William was a good lad.” She drew in a breath. “What of you, Miss Hardouin? Are you hoping to marry?”

She turned over several answers in her mind. She could set the housekeeper in her place, but that seemed inordinately missish.

Mrs. Knollwood wasn’t a malicious gossip, nor had she ever been unkind.

“Yes,” Fleur said. “I fear I must.”

“If I do say so, miss, Captain Ardleigh seems very attentive.”

*Gareth.* Despite the chill autumn air, warmth surged in her. “Captain Ardleigh?” she said, managing a bland tone.

Mrs. Knollwood shifted on the seat. “Such a jolly young man.”

Fleur pretended that a difficult patch of road required all her attention.

“So handsome too,” the housekeeper said. “I recall him as a goodhearted lad.”

They had reached the bridge to the island. “Yes,” Fleur said, “he was kind to me as a child. Now, let us see if the vicar is home.”



Gareth paced the four walls of the Bicton Grange parlor, listening to the distant wails and screeches from the nursery floor.

The distracted maid answering the door had ushered him here and hurried out, promising to fetch someone without ever asking Gareth who he was calling on.

When the door creaked, Lady Ixworth entered, back straight, head regal, and a smile on her face that he'd call cheeky—perhaps even devious.

She was a lively one for an older lady. He understood why Sherington admired her so.

He crossed the room and greeted her.

“She’s gone into the village.” Lady Ixworth curved her hand around his arm and brushed her shoulder against his. “She took the housekeeper along in the gig. Helena is resting, the little girls are in the schoolroom arguing, Cora is in the kitchen, and so, you have me to keep you company.”

They’d reached a sofa, and she seated herself, patting the cushion next to her. “Do sit. Or do you want to run after Fleur?”

Her face had grown solemn, reminding him of his warmhearted granny when she had to administer discipline. He couldn’t help grinning. “Why do I sense a scold coming?”

“I never scold, Captain Ardleigh. I state what I think dispassionately.”

“Ah.” She was much like Fleur. “Well, then, perhaps I’m in for an interrogation?”

She raised her eyebrows and looked down her nose at him, rather like Wellington the one time he’d been in his lordship’s lofty presence.

“You have my full attention, my lady.”

“Fleur means to marry.”

“So she has told me.”

“And you, Captain? Do you mean to marry?”

“Do I mean to marry?” Irritation had crept into his voice. He cleared his throat. He was usually better at concealing his feelings. “I fear my income—”

“Is small.” She waved a hand. “But you have a profession. And if there are no wars for you to fight, you are healthy and have a good head on your shoulders. You can find a position. Sherington speaks highly of you.” She pursed her lips. “My gel isn’t entirely penniless, you know. She has a pittance of an income her guardian preserved for her.”

Fleur had more than that. She had a family in France well on their way to wealth, a family that wanted to reclaim her. He stood and paced to the fireplace.

He’d planned to write to Marceau the previous evening, but when he returned to Sherington Manor, a letter from Marceau had awaited him. Fleur’s cousin would arrive in Reabridge in time for the harvest festival.

He needed to speak with Fleur before then, and before he shared her secrets with anyone else, even this lady who cared so much for her.

A rap on his arm brought his gaze back to Lady Ixworth. “Since you’re being intentionally obtuse today, let me be direct: you’re showing my gel a great deal of attention. Do you intend to offer for her?”

A bead of perspiration crept under his neckcloth. He returned to his seat on the sofa.

“Fleur has prospects beyond an impoverished soldier. I’ve just come from France and... I must speak to her first about the matter.”

“Prospects? In France?” She shook her head. “I doubt her practical notions about marriage will cross the English Channel. Especially not when her heart is engaged here.”

“With whom?”

The lady raised an eyebrow.

With himself? Could that possibly be true?



“If you mean me, you’re mistaken. She’s never expressed any, er, interest. In fact, she’s often sniping at me.”

“Would Fleur wear her heart on her sleeve?”

“Where you are concerned, ma’am, she certainly does.”

“Hah.” She shook her head. “It’s because I love her as she is. I know not to expect sweetness and light in my gel’s words. But her actions? Ah. Look to her actions, sir.”

“She’s proclaimed an intention to marry an older, well-established man. And I am neither of those. She doesn’t want me. In fact, she’s avoiding me.”

Lady Ixworth shook her head. “You are acting the dolt. Of course, she’s avoiding you. She finds you too tempting, and she’s taking the easy way out.” She stood and made a shooing motion. “Now get you gone. Find her and tell her about these prospects in France. And then be prepared to duck when she boxes your ears.”

“She hates France that much?”

“So she says. Claims she doesn’t remember the language, though her mother certainly must have spoken it to her, and she’s refused to be fashionable and learn it.”

The Veuve Hardouin was another strong-willed lady. He’d recalled her pleasure at his own fluent French. For her granddaughter not to speak it? She’d tolerate the insult to her country, but she’d hate the snub to the mother tongue.

As it happened, he didn’t have far to go to find Fleur, but encountered her and the housekeeper in their gig returning to the Grange.

Mr. Farnham rode alongside, escorting them.

“Captain Ardleigh, well met,” he called.

Gareth reined up and lifted his hat.

Fleur murmured a greeting, her expression blank. The older lady seated next to her, Bicton Grange’s housekeeper, dipped her head and looked equally stoic.

“I’m off to pay a call at Sherington,” Farnham said. “Are you headed that way?”



Fleur watched the emotions play across Gareth’s handsome face. He looked positively ashen this morning, as if he’d received bad news, and his normal sure-footed jolliness had been replaced with uncertainty and hesitation.

He wanted time with her and that was the one thing she couldn’t stomach right now.

Mr. Farnham was *interested* in her. She could feel it down to her baby toes. And he was—or might be—perfect for her. He was ruggedly handsome in an older sort of way, well-spoken and seemingly intelligent, and had legs that would meet with Dulcinea’s approval.

She must avoid time alone with Gareth. Must, must, must. If he touched her as he’d done yesterday... if he kissed her, if he asked for her hand...

Of course, he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. Her plan was a good one. She must follow through with it.

“Do run along, Captain Ardleigh,” she said. “I have promised to spend the afternoon with the girls in the schoolroom.”

“Working on their French?” he asked.

Her knuckles whitened around the lines she was gripping. “Needlework,” she said.

His face relaxed into the start of a grin and his eyes brightened. “Ah. Embroidery. I recall that was a specialty of yours.”

That dreadful handkerchief. How had he remembered?

Oh, but it touched her heart that he did, and embarrassed her too. Though she’d been awfully proud of it, it had been a clumsy piece of work. “More likely we will be darning ripped

frocks and torn stockings.” She clucked and the horses moved on.

So what that he remembered her farewell gift? He’d no doubt chucked it into the nearest privy as soon as he’d waved goodbye.

She glanced behind her and saw his proud back moving down the lane.

The wind blew a chill under her shawl, and she bit her lip, straightened her shoulders and drove on.

At Bicton Grange, Fleur hurried to grab her workbasket, and found Dulcinea exiting Helena’s bedchamber.

“She’s resting,” Dulcinea said. “I declare, seeing Helena’s discomfort, I’m glad Ixworth never got me with child. Bring your work and come along to the parlor. Cook has all the girls in the kitchen baking cakes for the festival.”

Dulcinea made her way to a fireside chair in the parlor and settled in. “Now, have a look at this note.”

Fleur unfolded the paper, scanned the first line, and looked up. “It’s an invitation to dinner tonight at Sherington Hall. From Sherington, not Mrs. Smythe, and addressed *My Dear Dulcy*. Is there something you haven’t told me?” She held the paper to her nose and sniffed it.

Dulcinea turned her gaze to the fire, a wicked smile forming.

Fleur glanced at the rest of the note. Laurence had returned to London, but Captain Ardleigh and Mr. Farnham would join them.

“I see. Did you reply?”

“We are going. Did you meet Mr. Farnham today?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Fleur shrugged. “On the face of things, he is highly unobjectionable.”

Dulcinea laughed merrily. “My gel,” she said, wiping tears. “Oh my gel. In any case, you must wear the primrose gown.”

“But that is your—”

“It’s yours now. It will show the man you have a bosom worth looking at.”

Fleur sighed and poked through her basket. “Then I must fix the hole in my best stockings.”



Farnham left Gareth at the Sherington Manor stables, saying he would be up at the house a bit later to call on Sherington. After seeing to his mount, Gareth stopped in the kitchens, wheedled a sandwich and small beer from Cook, and was dusting off crumbs when the butler found him and summoned him to the study where Mr. Sherington was waiting.

It was just as well. He needed to tell him about the upcoming appearance of a Frenchman in Reabridge. Not that he’d expect Sherington to host Marceau. He’d never ask that of them.

When he pushed open the door, he saw that George Sherington had visitors. His elderly steward, Mr. Chigwell, sat across from him, while a weather-worn man in boots and well-worn coats stood. Haskell was here.

“You needed me, sir?” Gareth asked.

“Ardleigh. There you are,” Sherington said.

Chigwell rose and exchanged greetings. Haskell’s gaze was assessing.

“Meet Haskell,” Sherington said cheerfully.

Well, of course, he didn’t know of that fistfight so many years earlier.

“He’s in charge of the hired workers,” Sherington added.

Gareth's shoulders tensed, but he extended a hand. "We've met before." Haskell's grip was firm but not threatening.

"Aye," Haskell said. "Ye gave me this some years back." He rubbed the crook in the bridge of his nose.

"And well you deserved it," Gareth said in a pleasant tone.

The fellow's lips quirked; in the start of a smile or a grimace, Gareth couldn't discern.

Let the ass try himself on Fleur again; he'd crack more than his beak.

"Your men have done well," Sherington said. "Haskell, let Chigwell know when they've finished that last field."

"Aye, sir, and then I'll get you a final accounting," Chigwell said. "Now, begging your pardon, I promised I'd show Mr. Farnham that drainage work needing done. He has some thoughts on it."

Chigwell and Haskell departed and Sherington directed Gareth to a chair.

"Laurence has gone up to town," Sherington said without preamble.

"Town?" Memories of the fight with the Haskells had driven out all other thoughts. The satisfying crunch of the bully's nose; Thad jumping in to fight Haskell's brother; Laurence shrinking back like the bullies' sister.

Damn, but he missed Thaddeus Sherington.

He cleared his throat. "Do you mean London, sir?"

"He's keeping close watch on the 'Change. War's over—for good this time, we hope, and things will be volatile. He's not much for the land, and there it is. If Thaddeus had lived..."

Mr. Sherington tapped the desktop. "What are your plans, lad?"

"Sir?"

"Back to your family in Derbyshire? Or back to the army? Or somewhere else?"

*Somewhere else, if you please.* He thought of the rolling hectares of brimming vines; the chalk caverns filled with racks of riddling bottles; late evening meals under warm skies.

That would be Fleur's life—if she'd take it. Impossible for himself.

“I'll pay my brother a short visit, of course.” The shorter the better. “The army will take me back on full pay, I'm sure.” If he wished to risk yellow fever or typhus in some far-flung station.

A long moment passed, and he realized Sherington was watching him.

The older man smiled. “In short, you've not decided.”

Gareth laughed. “That's the long and the short of it.”

“Chigwell wants to retire. While you're considering the army or the somewhere else, think about staying at Sherington Manor and working for me, as my steward. I'm offering it to you first.”

He sat straighter. Sherington was a much larger property with a much larger income than the Ardleigh family estate. The land was good, the tenants stable, the park filled with small game, and the stream that cut through brimming with fish.

“When I say staying at Sherington Manor, I mean living in the manor house until Chigwell vacates his cottage, which he plans to do soon and move closer to one of his children. It's a good-sized dwelling. You can find a wife and fill your nursery.”

A blush needled its way up from under his neckcloth. He cleared his throat again. “Very generous, sir.” And very managing. Sherington had a matchmaker's glint in his eyes. It was the sort of thing Gareth had encountered from regimental wives with marriageable daughters, but from his old friend's father?

Gareth swallowed a chuckle. “And who did you have in mind, sir?” *Not cousin Esther, please.*

Sherington raised an eyebrow. “Are you being coy with me, lad?”

“Never, sir.”

Sherington laughed. “You were always a rascal. Well, then. Fetch a bottle of that *Hardouin* champagne and your saber. I’ll see this sabrage Laurence was crowing about, and we’ll have a chat.”

## CHAPTER 7



*J*ealousy gnawed at Gareth as he watched Fleur at dinner.

She'd donned a yellow gown that skimmed just over the top of where her nipples must be in a delectable revelation of breasts he'd only speculated about.

She'd done something with her hair as well, with curls and braids twining here and there among pearly beads.

And it was all for Farnham, who to his credit was trying to avoid staring at Fleur's bosom.

*Damnation.*

While opening the champagne that afternoon, Gareth seized the opportunity to tell Sherington how he'd obtained so many cases. It was a story he'd only hinted at before, deflecting Laurence's questions.

Today he'd told him the tale: his capture, his escape, his rescue by the Veuve, the upcoming visit by Etienne Marceau, and Fleur's kinship with the family.

He hadn't quite told him the full truth of the arrangements for marriage, but Sherington must have intuited it. When Gareth spoke of his plans to ride over to Bicton Grange that afternoon and speak with Fleur, Sherington said he had a better idea. Fleur was coming to dinner, and they'd be allowed a private conversation. He added that he could see Gareth cared for her, but before he could say more, Farnham appeared.



Some plan this was that Sherington had concocted, with Fleur attired like a society lady and batting her eyelashes at Farnham.

He glanced up the table and saw Sherington's sly grin. Gareth picked up his fork, addressed the fine piece of trout on his plate, and took up his conversational duty with his dinner partner, Cousin Esther.

"Whist," Sherington proclaimed. "Shall we play ladies against gentlemen? Farnham, you're with me. Dulcy and Esther will oppose us. We shall have our work cut out for us, Farnham, for I know both ladies to be wicked good card sharps."

Sherington didn't look his way, but he knew this was his chance. He took Fleur's hand and tucked it over his arm. "Shall we take a turn about the gallery?"

"Why not fetch us a bottle of champagne, lad?" Sherington said. "Gareth has not returned from France empty handed, Farnham. Go along, Miss Hardouin, and see my cellars. The captain is on good terms with my butler. He'll serve as chaperone."

Gareth snatched up a candle and hurried her out, ignoring her sputtering objection. When the door of the drawing room closed, he paused in the chilly hall.

The twilight filtering in through the floor length windows illuminated her breasts, the twin globes rising and falling, sending his heart racing.

He looked around. No servants lingering—they were alone.

They could go to the cellar with Sherington's ancient butler tottering behind them.

Or they could go to the place where his most exceptional wine was stored. There they'd have privacy.

And temptation. *Yes.* Just one taste of her lips before he lost her. That's what he wanted.

Fleur's gaze fixed on him, her eyes luminous, her full lips trembling.

Fleur trembling? His protective instincts stirred.

She was saving herself for marriage; he could respect that. And blast it all, she would be safe with him, though it might kill him. He'd claim one kiss, if she'd let him, but he'd never hurt her.

He took her hand and led her up the grand staircase and down a long corridor to his bedchamber.



Fleur's hand and arm and shoulder tingled where the parts of her touched the parts of him, and her breath came in short bursts. Her free hand itched to pull her bodice higher, though she'd tried that in private without success. All through dinner, she'd caught him watching her. Each time his eyes slid down her face and neck to her décolletage, heat spurted down to her nether regions. She was heady and jittery and, now that they were away from the safety of their older companions, filled with anticipation.

An answering tension radiated from him. Wherever they were going, he was going to try to kiss her, and maybe more.

She'd been kissed before by some of Quidenham's more devious guests. She'd even deflected attempts at the *maybe more* from the so-called gentlemen. On occasion, she'd experienced *tingles*.

But never like this. She'd never experienced this...this... magnetic pull, this urge to throw off all caution—along with this indecent gown.

He opened a door and nudged her inside, still holding her hand.

*A bedchamber.* Too breathless to speak, she squinted until her eyes adjusted to the room's dimness. A discarded waistcoat draped a chair, and a man's brush and toiletries

rested atop a side table. Embers smoldered in the fireplace, ready to be stirred. This was *his* bedchamber.

Her heart beat a frenzied tattoo. “Gareth,” she said on the first breath she managed. He was going to make love to her.

Behind her the door snicked closed, and his hot breath touched her neck.

Perhaps *she* would make love to *him*.

She must not. What of Mr. Farnham, playing cards below?

Oh, Hades, Mr. Farnham had barely looked at her bosom, and that one glance had been not a bit spine-tingling. He’d made no declaration of interest tonight, much less courtship.

Gareth’s familiar scent—shaving soap and brandy and tobacco—floated around her. She closed her eyes and savored it.

A kiss. A kiss wouldn’t ruin her.

“Gareth.” She swallowed and hugged herself. He moved away, set aside the candle, and returned.

“I’m not... Oh Fleur.” He nudged her arms open and took her hands.

A speechless Gareth was a sight to see. His dark gaze sent her insides melting, sensation curling through her. She freed a hand and traced the scar etching his square jaw, watching his eyes darken and glitter. His was a strong face, usually a jolly one, probably a hard one when he was fighting, but not with her. The boy he was, the man he’d become, were not so very different.

“Dear Gareth,” she said. Her shawl slipped from her shoulders, and she let it.

His mouth softened and he touched his thumb to her lips. “Dear Fleur.”

Her hand slid from his jaw to the back of his neck. Her heels lifted her closer. Her lips sought his and pressed against them, softly, secured in a tender embrace.

His hand skimmed her waist and settled upon her back, the other wandering lower and pulling her against him. He angled his head, deepened the kiss, and breached the barrier of her lips.

*Mon Dieu.* A shaky moment passed wherein she tasted brandy so potent it burned through her like liquid heat. She surrendered and then gave back with all of her heart.

When his lips left hers, she muttered a protest until she felt the soft press on her neck, and groaned. The hand on her bum pulled her even tighter, the other slid under her breast, and then up, stroking her through her gown until her nipples became hard points, every gentle caress echoing in her nether parts. She was burning, burning.

*The bed—let's go to the bed.*

Gareth's mouth stilled against her breast. A growl escaped his lips. He straightened and brushed her cheek. "We mustn't, Fleur."

She'd spoken the words aloud.

Fleur held her breath while he tucked her breast away and straightened her bodice with his long deft fingers. Gareth was right, of course, but why should he be right? Why shouldn't they... why shouldn't she...

She swallowed. Of course, she had others to think of, not just her own desires.

He picked up her shawl and draped it over her. "How beautiful you are tonight, Petal. I confess, I couldn't help myself."

*Petal*—the cheeky pet name brought her further back to reality.

"Come." She heard the shakiness in his voice. He cleared his throat. "I have something I must show you."

"In your bedchamber, Gareth?"

"Actually," he said tugging her along to a door near the fireplace, "in my dressing room." At the door, he stopped and

pulled her shawl higher around her shoulders, casting a dazed glance at her breasts. “There’s no heat in there.”

A closed trunk and a chest of drawers sat against one wall, wooden crates against another, and against a third, a cot with a thin mattress and a folded blanket.

“Your valet is very tidy.”

“I have no valet.”

He set the candles upon a wooden crate and lifted the lid on the one next to it. Fleur pushed up next to him to look. Rows of bottles lined up neatly in a grouping of twelve.

“The champagne,” she said.

“Not just any champagne, Fleur.” He lifted a bottle and dusted the neck with those long bare fingers, sending another frisson of longing through her.

She shook herself.

“This is the *vin de comète* of 1811.”

*Wine of the comet.*

“This wine, it’s fantastic.” He blew a kiss to the case. “It’s said that the comet affected the grapes that year.”

“I know of the comet.” In fact, she’d seen the great comet of 1811 herself when it was visible over England around harvest time. Dulcinea’s dilettante cousin had been in his astronomy phase, all abuzz about the event. He’d allowed her a look through his telescope.

“But there’s more to tell you.” He moved the candles closer and lifted the paper label tied by a string to the bottle.

His hands trembled. Her gaze met his, and she caught a troubled look.

“The label. Look closely.”

Squiggly, ornate cursive circled around a central name in large, bold letters: *Veuve Hardouin*.

Below that in small letters the label proclaimed *Hardouin and Marceau*.

“And so?” They were no relation to her. She had no relatives.

Gareth cradled the bottle so tenderly, irritation stabbed at her. “The Veuve—the Widow Hardouin, Fleur, she’s your grandmother. It’s true. It was she who rescued me when I was all but done for. When I told her I’d once met a little girl named Fleur Hardouin, she showed me a miniature of your mother, and I thought... As a little girl you resembled her. And now, you look just like her. The Veuve asked me to find you. She wants to meet you.”

Stunned speechless, Fleur stared at his simply tied neck cloth, unadorned with the sort of bejeweled stickpins other men affected. He’d remembered her surname, after so many years. She blinked back a surge of moisture.

He gentled the bottle into its case and took her hand. “I thought it would be difficult to find you but... She wants to meet you.”

“The Veuve Hardouin.”

“Yes.”

“Who believes she’s my grandmother.” It certainly couldn’t be true. “She’s mistaken, I’m sure.”

“The Veuve is one of the most famous winemakers in France. Inventor of remuage—er, riddling we call it in English. Ridding the wine of sediment. It’s fascinating, and it was her idea. The bottles, you see, are stored at an angle and then turned a fraction every day. Simple, but effective. Did your father or mother never speak of her?”

She shook off his hand and tugged her shawl closer, wishing she could throw it over her head and disappear. It was cold in this dressing room, and dark in the dim candlelight. No wonder he stored his precious wine here—it was almost as cold and dark as the cellars.

A flash of memory left her breathless. The scents of jasmine and grapes, a woman’s soft shoulder, cold darkness. She slowed her breathing and straightened her back.

“No,” she said. She knew almost nothing of her father. Angered that he’d dumped them in Bern, her mother had never spoken of him. Bicton-Morledge’s report said he’d died at Lyon under the guillotine.

“Fleur, there was a man with the Veuve when she rescued me, Etienne Marceau, her great nephew. Though the business still carries his family name as well, the Marceaus have only a small stake left.”

Who cared about this Etienne Marceau? He’d be only a distant relation, if he were any relation at all. The Veuve Hardouin would be her father’s mother. If *she* were any relation at all.

*She wants to meet you.*

Her insides were trembling. She shook her head. “I’m not traveling to France.”

“Fleur.” He pressed a finger to her chin and lifted it, a determined look in his eye. He’d put the precious bottle aside and was preparing to turn the full force of his charm upon her.

Moisture pooled in her eyes, unbidden and unwelcome.

“You don’t have to, at least, not right away. Your cousin, Etienne Marceau, is in England. He brought cargo and has been in London dealing with wine merchants and auctions. He’s coming to Reabridge for the harvest festival. And most especially, to meet you.”

At those last words, Gareth had winced.

And then she knew. Gareth hadn’t been interfering with her marriage plans because he wanted her for himself. He was attempting to match her with this Frenchman.

Rage pounded through her. She drew herself up, hands clenched against more trembling, jaw aching. “I shall meet him,” she said, “to settle this madness. Does he speak English?”

“Some.”

“Dulcinea shall translate for me. And I shall write a letter for him to carry to this widow and ask her...” she took in a

breath.

*Why didn't you come for me?*

She shook off the self-pity. Would this Veuve share with her the bounties of war? If the house was famous enough, there must be those.

Imagine—she and Dulcinea, English women supported by the profits of Napoleon's wine-swilling?

“I'd much rather grovel to a stuffy English husband than to an old Frenchwoman.”

She turned and fled the room with as much dignity as she could muster.



The next day, and the days following, Fleur had no choice but to keep herself busy. While Dulcinea sat with Helena, all able hands were needed in the kitchen, still room, and herb garden, even those of the little Bicton-Morledge girls. Haskell stopped in more than once, passing through the kitchen on his way to the steward's office, making a point to exchange pleasantries with Cora. Cora's blushes told Fleur his interest was welcomed.

She still wasn't sure she approved. The Bicton-Morledges were solidly of the gentry class, and the Haskells were laborers. So far, though, Haskell had not set a wrong foot forward, and he'd earned the respect of local landholders and the men he managed.

She put that worry and her own husband-hunting aside though. Helena's time was drawing near. The work needed to be done, and if they had to leave, they'd take the preserved fruits of the kitchen garden and orchard with them.

On the Thursday before the harvest festival, a hired chaise disgorged Mr. Jedidiah Morledge, the presumptive heir to Bicton Grange, on the doorstep. He'd come, he said, to attend the harvest festival and stay on through his dear cousin's confinement. An unpleasant man of middling years, Fleur took



an instant dislike of him, and the sentiment was returned. She was all for sending him off to the Book and Bell, but Helena, perhaps wisely looking to her own future, gave him Cora's bedchamber and had Cora move in with Fleur.

Gareth had called only once while she'd been off running errands. Thereafter, she hadn't heard from him. Perhaps he was busy helping with the harvest at Sherington Manor.



On the Friday before the festival, Mrs. Knollwood waylaid Fleur in the still room, begging her to visit Mr. Clark's Mercantile for lemons they'd need for the new mother's caudle.

She was approaching the turnoff to Sherington Manor when she saw a man running toward her.

Fear made her clutch the lines, slowing the gig, and then she realized it was Haskell. Movement behind her and to her left caught her eye. In the field to the south, men were gathered around something.

The crowd shifted and she spotted a man stretched on the ground. She stopped the gig and jumped out.

One of the field workers waved. Fleur clutched her skirts and dodged through a clump of low hedging, with Haskell an arm's length behind her.



Gareth poked his head into the study and found Mr. Sherington pouring over his harvest reports.

"All's well in those last fields, sir." He handed over a written report. "Your tenants there have finished."

"I thank you, Ardleigh."

"How goes the rest?"

“I wish I knew. Where is Chigwell? He promised to report to me an hour ago.”

“Not in his office. I stopped there first.” He’d scraped the mud off his boots and dusted his buckskin pants before making his way deeper into the house. “Shall I go look for him?”

A few minutes later he was mounted and making his way down the drive. At the turn onto the lane, his heart thudded.

Men were huddled in a nearby field. The Bicton-Grange cart—Fleur’s cart—was stopped on the roadside. She was running—toward Sherington Manor, with a man chasing her.

His blood pounded and he spurred his horse. Even at this distance he recognized Haskell.

The devil. She ought to be shouting. Why weren’t the others running to help her? Unless Haskell was chasing her toward them.

He’d break every bone in the bastard’s body.

Before Gareth could reach her and scoop her up, she swerved and ran towards the group in the field.

The men parted, waved, shouted.

Gareth reined up, leapt from his mount, and hurried to join them. The bulky body, the shaggy white hair—it was Chigwell.

## CHAPTER 8



S ometime later, he found Fleur in the steward's cottage kitchen heating water for tea; a fresh pot, it seemed as Haskell was seated at the plain deal table drinking a cup, his gaze following Fleur's every move.

Outrage rose again in him, the same anger that had roared to life when he thought Haskell was chasing her.

When he stepped into the room, both Haskell and Fleur turned his way. He exchanged nods with Haskell and glared at Fleur.

She shouldn't be alone with this rough fellow.

"Doctor Wagner is with him," she said in a distant, flat voice. "You've informed Mr. Sherington?"

They'd found Chigwell conscious and breathing, but too weak to walk. While Gareth fetched the doctor, the men loaded the steward into Fleur's cart and moved him home.

"Yes," Gareth said. "He came back with me. He's just gone up to the bedchamber."

The kitchen was surprisingly modern, fitted out with a Rumsford stove. In fact, the cottage was larger than what he'd expected, with a hectare of land for a large garden and grazing.

It would indeed be a good situation for a man such as himself. If only Cheshire had the climate for grapes.

Fleur's arm wobbled hefting the steaming pot. "Let me." Haskell jumped from his chair and touched her arm, nudging her away from the stove.

It ought to have been him helping her, not this fellow. He himself had hefted many a pot around a campfire or in the mess, whereas Fleur... French, English, what did it matter? She was a lady.

Eyes blazing, her gaze met his. He pulled out a chair and settled in for a cup of hot tea. Let her be angry. He wasn't leaving.



“And this woman, she will be at this fête?”

Marceau stood preening at the mirror in his inn room and applying a noxious scent. Having fallen in with the right crowd, his negotiations in London had gone well and he was thinking of himself as very much the bon vivant.

On the other hand, his journey to the English countryside by public coach had not been so pleasant, and when he arrived late that afternoon in Reabridge, the innkeeper at the Book and Bell had looked askance at renting a room to a Frenchman. But a bottle of decent champagne and Gareth's appearance in his regimentals to vouch for him had moved the man.

“Will she be there?” Marceau repeated.

He hoped so. He hadn't seen her since Chigwell's spell on Friday. The Sherington steward had succumbed to exhaustion, but with Haskell and Gareth supplying information, Mr. Sherington was able to tally up his year's harvest, and it had been a good one.

On Saturday, Gareth encountered the doctor coming from Bicton Grange and stopped him for news. Mrs. Bicton-Morledge was having pains; the baby might come tomorrow, or it might be several more days of misery.

Fleur might not attend the festival if she was needed at home. “If Miss Hardouin doesn't appear,” Gareth said, “We shall go to her. She has agreed to meet you.”

“And to marry me?” Marceau asked, watching himself in the mirror as he adjusted his neckcloth.

*Irritating, pompous, jackanapes frog.* “You want me to do your wooing for you?” Gareth asked.

Marceau turned abruptly from the mirror, his dark eyes flashing. “Is *that* what you’ve been doing? Why you didn’t write when you first discovered her? Do not tell me you got to her first.”

Gareth tossed the other man’s hat, hitting him squarely in the chest, wishing it had been his fist. “She is a lady, and you will speak of her with respect.”

The Frenchman shrugged.

“And while we’re discussing respect, Marceau, you must be on your best behavior.” They’d been speaking in French, and Gareth switched to English. “You’re a Frenchman, visiting a village filled with veterans of Waterloo and all the battles that came before, and many villagers whose sons will never come home.”

“Bah, *oui*, Anglais. You are right. Eh, the coach ride, it was all evil eyes.” His lips firmed and his eyes narrowed. “And here, you, you will... will guard me as I guarded you. You have a debt to me, *n’est pas*, and to the *Veuve*.” He wrinkled his nose. “Tell me at least, is she pretty?”

*Too pretty for you.* He walked out of the room and headed for the brisk air of the innyard, scented as it was with horses and the smoke from the landlord’s kitchen fire, smells he preferred over Etienne’s eau de cologne.



Gareth wasn’t the only man sporting a uniform this day. There were men decked out in the blue coats of the Cheshire militia, some in the green tunics of the Rifles, and others in the red with varying colors of sashes. Reabridge and environs had stood stoutly for king and country. Marceau had best mind his Ps and Qs this day.

He saw the housekeeper from Bicton Grange bending over the wares in a stall laden with colorful beads. Telling Marceau

to wait, Gareth stalked over to speak to her.

“Ma’am.” He lifted his hat. “Is Miss Hardouin here today?”

“She’s gone to the dressing tent to help mend a costume.” She pointed to a closed pavilion on the edge of the green. “If you go that way, tell her I’ll be right along. We’ve got to get back to Bicton Grange and relieve Cora. Her ma insists Cora will have some fun tonight at the ball.”

“Fleur won’t be there?”

The housekeeper shook her head. “Lady Ixworth will chaperone Cora. With her time this close, we won’t leave the mistress with just the maids.”

Gareth had best hurry then. Excusing himself, he walked that way, beckoning Marceau.

He ducked his head under the turned-up flap and stifled an oath.

Costumes cluttered one table, and another held threads and sewing implements. Fleur’s back was turned, and she was not alone.

Haskell saw him first. The ass was decked out in a crown woven from barley and a mantle embroidered with tufts of various grains. In his hand, he held a scythe swathed in ribbons.

“Hold still.” Fleur tied off a thread and snipped it. “There. Your wheat will stay in place, your majesty.”

In the far corner, a woman giggled. She held a baby and was doing up the ties on her gown, as if she’d just taken it off the tit.

“Don’t let it go to your head, Bevan Haskell,” the woman said.

Gareth cleared his throat and Fleur whipped around. A work smock covered her plain lavender gown, but lovely golden tendrils had escaped her bonnet, kissing her forehead and cheeks. Her gaze shifted ever so slightly to the man

appearing next to him, and the color that had pinkened her cheeks drained away.

Her stillness, her stoic mask, tore at his guts. But they must go on.

Gareth nodded to the Lord of the Harvest and the woman. “Haskell,” he said, “a moment with Miss Hardouin, if you please?”

Fleur nodded.

“I’ll be right outside.” Haskell’s proprietary glance raised Gareth’s hackles. Lord of the Harvest or not, the upstart had no claim on Fleur.

“You remember my sister, Sadie?” Haskell said.

He’d had a moment’s thought that this was Haskell’s woman and child, but his cringing sister? Gareth inclined his head as they passed, exchanging parting glares with Haskell.

When he turned back to Fleur, she’d frozen, a pair of scissors poised like a weapon.

“Shall I take those?” She surrendered them without resistance, and the chill of her hands made him want to grasp them and warm them. Instead, he set his hand to the small of her stiff back. “Miss Hardouin,” he said. “May I introduce to you Etienne Marceau?”

As he watched, her lips sealed together in a tight line. Still, he must soldier on.

“Etienne Marceau,” Gareth said, “Miss Fleur Hardouin.”

To his credit, Marceau gave a courtly bow. Fleur inclined her head a fraction like a duchess meeting the lowliest of courtiers.

Her color was coming back, and his heart lifted. Whether she married Marceau or not, the Frenchman was part of her family. At least Gareth had managed to give her that.

“My dear cousin.” Marceau moved closer, and Fleur’s eyebrows rose a fraction. “We have found you after so many years. Captain Ardleigh didn’t tell me how beautiful you are.”

Marceau did look stunned. If he was feigning interest, he was doing an admirable job of it.

“I must speak to you about a delicate matter. Perhaps in private?”

She raised one shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know you. Captain Ardleigh will stay.”

Irritation flashed across the younger man’s face. “But of course. We don’t know each other. But I have traveled all the way from France to bring you this news that your family wishes you to return. It is your grandmother’s most fervent, er, desire that you and I, we join our families more closely together.”

He paused for a breath. Fleur blinked.

“I am of the family Marceau and you of the Hardouins, and together, Hardouin-Marceau, we are makers of the finest sparkling wine in all of Champagne. I am to bring you to France to meet the Veuve Hardouin, and there, my dear, we will be married.”

After his pause for breath, Marceau had switched to French.

“Marceau,” Gareth said, gently, in English, “Miss Hardouin doesn’t speak French.”

Marceau’s eyes widened. “A Frenchwoman who does not speak French?”

“I am not French,” Fleur said. “I am English. It is my most fervent desire to stay in England.”

“I like England,” Marceau said, nodding. “London, to be precise. And it is my hope to spend much time here about the business. I shall arrange a house for us there.”

“Arrange a house for yourself then. I will not marry you, sir.”





Fleur held her breath, watching the play of emotions across young Etienne Marceau's handsome face. He was indeed young, and though his coat was a sober blue, and his buckskin trousers were fashionably tight, his waistcoat sported bright red flowers with curling vines on a primrose field, and his starched white neckcloth had been tied up to his ears in an intricate knot and pierced with a red-jeweled stickpin. His dark good looks would turn heads among the ladies of Reabridge.

Not her head though. The younger man paled next to Gareth Ardleigh who was a picture of virile masculinity. Selfish, scheming, virile masculinity, perhaps, but the arrogance had been tempered by something special in him.

Had always been.

"But you must marry me," the young Frenchman said. He turned to Gareth. "Tell her she must. It is all arranged," he said in French. "Why did you not write me? Are you sure this is the right woman? Why, her mother's grandfather was a chevalier, and look at her, a colorless drab; why, even the modistes of London dress better."

Fleur's hands curled into fists and her pulse pounded in her ears as the words rolled over and through her and overwhelmed her.

She didn't, couldn't *speak* French, but she'd understood all of that.

"That's enough," Gareth growled.

Still, the Frenchman's tantrum raged on. "No polite greeting, no smiles, no femininity." He paced and pounded a table sending the needles, spools, and scissors jumping. His eyes bulged and a vein throbbed in his forehead. "*Mon Dieu.*" His fingers launched his carefully arranged curls in all directions. He was much like the youngest Bicton-Morledge girl when she was in a nursery room snit.

Fleur smothered a chuckle with her hand and backed away.

"You," the Frenchman said, poking his finger in Gareth's chest. "You deceived me, me, who saved your life. You present me with this, this drab, this milkmaid, this—"

Gareth's fist flew with a powerful crack and the Frenchman lurched backward knocking over a chair. "You will cease insulting Fleur, here and now," he shouted.

The Frenchman bounced up, and punches flew back and forth, some landing with sickening thuds. Blood trickled from the Frenchman's nose and the corner of Gareth's mouth.

Haskell appeared at the tent's entrance, a Morris man poking in next to him. Fleur skirted the fight, edging toward the exit.

"Fleur is beautiful." Gareth punched. "Kind." He struck again. "And wise."

The younger man blocked the next punch and landed a blow that struck Gareth's shoulder, sending him staggering back, gasping.

*His shoulder.* Was that where he'd been wounded? If so, it was a low blow by a man who would have known of the wound. Fleur took a step closer and stopped.

Eyes wide, the Frenchman advanced. "I'm...I'm sorry," he said. "But—stop hitting me, Ardleigh."

Fleur touched Gareth's elbow. "Your shoulder?"

He glanced at her, dazed.

"Will you want the constable?" the Morris man asked.

"Don't be daft. It's a gentlemen's dispute." Haskell nudged the other man out of the tent.

Gareth nodded, and something passed between Haskell and Gareth.

"All settled?" Gareth quirked a bleeding eyebrow at the Frenchman. "Yes?"

"*Oui.*" He nodded. "Yes. A thousand pardons, Miss Hardouin. It is a relief that you didn't understand."

Gareth turned and looked down at her. "Oh, but you did understand, didn't you, Fleur?"

Heart pounding, insides shaking, she struggled for a breath to speak. No one else but Dulcinea knew her so well.

“You’re bleeding,” she finally managed to say. She lifted a corner of her shawl, but he covered her hand with his.

“Wait.” He reached into a pocket and dug out a large square of cloth. “Use this.”

It was no more than a rag, sporting stains and holes here and there. And a border of yellow flowers, some of them partially unraveled.

“My lady’s colors,” he said. “My lucky talisman.”

That summer’s day flashed in her memory, and she saw the young Gareth, laughing at her pathetic attempt at needlework. Since then she’d improved, imagining she was just as skilled as her mother had been.

Thoughts of her mother brought more memories: a doll with stitched gray eyes, flaxen silk hair, and a gown embroidered with flowers and bees. Lost, somewhere, in a dark place.

The stitching blurred. The beautiful man before her blurred. She crumpled the cloth in her hand, and her breath came in short, panicked gasps and she backed to the door.

“Miss Hardouin.” Mrs. Knollwood was at her elbow. “The dancing starts soon. Miss Cora—”

“Yes, yes.” She had duties.

She dabbed at her eyes with the cloth, and then handed it back to Gareth. “Use this for the blood. I must go. Helena needs me. Cora must go to the ball.”



Gareth held the cloth still damp from her tears and swiped at a drip of blood. Wide-eyed and vulnerable, Fleur looked stunned behind a misting of tears. Fleur was crying. His Fleur.

Haskell hovered nearby. Oh yes, Cora must come and dance with the King of the Harvest.

To hell with that.

She slipped off her smock and handed it to the housekeeper.

“Fleur, wait.” Gareth grabbed her free elbow. “Not yet. Don’t leave yet.”

She shook her head. Tears glistened on her cheeks.

“I...” The words stuck. He cleared his dry throat, swallowed, and tried again. “I love you, Petal.”

Astonishment lit her face, and his confidence rose.

“Marry me,” he said.

Her labored breath sent her chest rising and falling and he remembered the swell of her breasts in the yellow gown she’d worn to dinner at Sherington Manor, and the taste of the lips she was biting.

Her eyes fluttered closed a moment, and she shook her head. “Not now. I must go.”

“Wait, Fleur.”

But she was already gone, and Haskell had left with her.

He hurried out of the tent, prepared to chase her, but a hand gripping his arm tugged him back, wrenching his sore shoulder again.

Gareth turned in anger.

“Sorry,” Marceau said, holding up his hands. “Sorry. But don’t run after her, my friend. Not yet.”

Some minutes later, Gareth found himself in the tap room of the Book and Bell. Too numb to fight more, he’d allowed himself to be dragged off by the impertinent Frenchman, who’d pushed him onto a bench and set a pint and a bottle before him. Having noticed the curious looks from other patrons, Marceau kept his voice low and spoke carefully in English.

“I would have brought champagne with me to your village,” he said, “had I known we would both be made fools of by that chit of a woman.”

Gareth glared at the Frenchman and started to rise. “No, no,” Marceau said. “You’ve beat on me enough today. I apologize again. She’s not a chit—whatever that word means. She’s... cold; stubborn, and, and... hard. She reminds me of the Veuve.”

Gareth tossed back his brandy and poured some more. Had he not made that comparison himself before?

But Marceau was wrong. Fleur wasn’t cold. One only had to look at her determination to take care of Lady Ixworth and the Bicton-Morledge females.

“You don’t know anything,” he said.

“No?” Marceau shrugged. “I made an offer of marriage and was refused. My pride, it was crushed. I’ve never offered marriage before, though Marie has hinted at it often enough.”

Rightly so. She’d borne his child, and Marceau in his own selfish way, cared for the girl. Gareth didn’t hold with the notion of men keeping more than one household.

“But then I see her tell you no, and me, I feel better,” Marceau said.

“Shut up,” Gareth said.

“I say to myself, ha, not only a marriage offer, but a declaration of love. And the girl, she cries. She loves you too.”

“She doesn’t love me.”

“No? What was that rag you handed her? Her heart, it was in her eyes when she saw it.”

Was it? All he remembered was her tears. Tears. From his Petal. What was he to do?

“I had no notion you were so... so... I say to myself, c’est un véritable romantique. I should have known, eh bien, the way you... you whipped the Veuve around your small finger. You’ve done the same to the granddaughter.”

Gareth drained his glass again, letting Marceau babble on.

“Tonight, my friend, you get drunk. Tomorrow, we shall go visit my cousin again.”

Gareth reached for the bottle, but Marceau pulled it away from him. “But first, before you are too... too... How do you say it, bosky? First, we must make a plan for how you will win the hand of your lady and whip the Veuve again around all of your fingers and your whole hand.”

## CHAPTER 9



“*I*t’s the whole bloody business of war,” Gareth said. He’d listened to a litany of bad memories, and now it was his turn to speak.

His head pounded like the devil and the breakfast Marceau forced on him threatened to come up. He was damnably hungover, and this hastily assembled meeting of Reabridge veterans at Doctor Wagner’s surgery wasn’t helping his disposition. “We do our duty,” he said, “they do theirs, and in the midst of all the dutiful are the madmen who enjoy it.” He’d seen that in the eyes of all stripes—French, English, and Spaniards; men and women; soldiers and civilians. “Not that I don’t enjoy a good fight, God knows, but...” He took in a breath. “Not just what they did to us, or what we did to them, but what they did to each other.” What they’d done to Fleur, who like other children bore the wounds of abandonment.

He rubbed his scraggly jaw. Marceau’s razor had been dull by the time he’d borrowed it. “I’m not making sense I guess, but when I close my eyes I see that last battle and what came after...”

He straightened and prayed that this damn meeting would end soon. Pain settled about the men and one woman gathered there, as thick and stifling as the smoke they’d all fought through in Flanders and every other bloody battlefield.

Still, discipline held as they listened to stories, all different and yet the same.

Finally a desperate knocking at the door brought a pause. Dr. Wagner went to the door, spoke to someone, and turned back to the room.

“I must go deliver a baby,” he said.

Gareth stood. “Whose?”

Wagner gave him a long look.

“Is it Mrs. Bicton-Morledge?” Gareth asked.

Wagner nodded.

“I’m coming with you.”



Gareth arrived at Bicton Grange to find George Sherington on the doorstep. The maid greeting them said the doctor was upstairs with the ladies of the house, the little girls were in the nursery under Cora’s care, the footman had gone for the family’s solicitor, and Mr. Morledge was in the parlor.

They were in for a long afternoon, and Gareth offered to check on the Morledge girls in the nursery and fetch tea. When he returned with a tray, he found Sherington deep in conversation with a stout man, dressed all in black, as if attending a wake. So this was Morledge.

“About time,” Morledge said. “I’ve pulled the bell three times. Who are you, and why don’t you have a decent shave?”

“Captain Gareth Ardleigh,” Sherington said, “Meet Mr. Jedidiah Morledge. And thank you for doing footman work.”

“All in the name of duty,” Gareth said. He sent Morledge a terse nod. “There’s a baby being born here; the staff is busy with more important things than your bell-tugging.”

“Are the girls well?” Sherington asked.

“Yes. Cora enjoyed the harvest ball last night.”

Morledge harrumphed. “Made a spectacle of herself with that bumpkin, the Lord of the Harvest.”



Gareth straightened to his full height, six inches taller than the other man. "How so?" he asked.

"Danced with the fellow twice. A common laborer."

"A common laborer who might find himself a job as a land steward soon. Lady Ixworth and I were there," Sherington said. "There was nothing untoward about it." He poured his own tea and looked up. "Very kind of Miss Hardouin to spend the evening with Helena so Cora could attend."

She'd been needed here. How could he fault her for not staying to speak with him?

Hope rose in him. He would try again, soon, after this baby was born.

Turning, he paced to the window. But if it was a girl, what were they to do? He couldn't in good conscience promise to provide for all of them. Perhaps if he took Sherington's offer they could all live at the Manor. He'd have to give up his dreams of vineyards, but he'd have Fleur. Dear Fleur.

But... what had Sherington said about a land steward? Was he thinking of hiring Haskell if Gareth didn't want the position?

Oh hell. That would set Haskell up well to marry Cora. How could he interfere with their happiness?

"Tea's too strong," Morledge complained. "What kind of staff does Helena employ?"

He itched to snatch the fellow up by his neck cloth. "I made the tea." Gareth came and loomed over the oaf's chair. "It's just like the tea we served in the officer's mess. I say, Morledge, why are you here, anyway?"

Morledge spluttered into his cup, grabbed a napkin and wiped at his mouth.

"Damned nuisance for the family having you lurking about, waiting for this babe. Your presence won't make a damn bit of difference."

Sherington nodded and sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers and watching the other man stutter for words.

“Are we in some medieval mystery play?” Gareth said. “Are we worried someone will slip in a male child? A peasant boy to take the king’s crown?”

“I don’t have to answer to you. Why the devil are you here, Captain?”

“Friend of the family,” Gareth said.

“Well, I *am* family. I’m the heir. *And I want you gone.*”

“No. Captain Ardleigh is here at my request.” Sherington’s tone was affable. “If you’ll remember, Morledge, I’m both the Justice of the Peace and a guardian to Bicton-Morledge’s children. Captain Ardleigh will stay.”

“Now see here, Sherington. You threw me out once—”

“And I’ll do it again.”

A tap came at the parlor door. Haskell’s muscular bulk was framed in the doorway.

Gareth was glad to see him. Haskell had no cause to be an ally of Morledge. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

“Ah, Haskell,” Sherington said. “Come in.”

“We didn’t hear the door knocker,” Morledge said.

“We came in through the kitchens.” Haskell stepped aside, and Gareth recognized the woman from the tent, Haskell’s sister with the same sleeping baby, a child several months old.

“Sadie,” Sherington said, “did they send for you already?”

“Yes sir,” she said, bobbing a curtsy. “Reckon it will be soon.”

“What’s this?” Morledge stood. “You make jokes about substituting a male child, and see what we have here—”

“This here’s my baby girl.” Sadie lifted her chubby chin. “Any soul with a brain knows a ten-month-old from a newborn.”

Gareth bit down on a grin.

While Sherington made introductions, Gareth picked up the tea tray. “I’ll just replenish these and maybe there’ll be

news.”

He stalked out and was surprised to find Haskell following.

“What news?” Haskell asked.

“Nothing so far. The doctor and the ladies are with her. I passed that floor on my way to the nursery and heard a great deal of groaning. Cora has the girls well in hand. I suppose it wouldn’t go amiss for you to visit the nursery and check on them.”

Haskell sent him a puzzled look.

“That ass is just biding his time to put them all out of the house,” Gareth said. “I hope you’re not planning to leave. Am I correct that your sister is here to help with the, er, feeding?”

“Yes.” Haskell nodded.

“I’ll fetch a whole plate of tarts for her.”

Haskell nodded again. “Thank you. I’ll check on the little ones, and then after Sadie is fed, we’ll send her up to see what’s what.”

“A good plan.”

They parted ways. He was in the kitchen putting the final touches to his tray when the housekeeper herself rushed in, tears streaming.

His heart dropped into his stomach as the older woman threw herself into his arms. “Oh, Captain.” She stepped away, breathless. “Oh Captain. It’s a *boy*. And the doctor says there’s another babe crowning. I must have the caudle, Cook. And more hot water. And clean linens. Send whoever you can find to the linen closet.”

She grabbed a steaming pitcher and rushed out again.

On his way up the stairs with the burden of tea and cakes, a noise like a cat crying filtered down from above.



Fleur wiped tears on her sleeve and held Helena's hand and her own breath as with one final straining push, the second baby arrived.

She'd never witnessed childbirth before. Helena's bravery was astonishing.

"Another boy." Dr. Wagner grinned and handed the wailing babe off to Miss Barlow. Mrs. Knollwood set the first babe to Helena's breast, and his crying stopped.

"A boy," Helena said.

"Two boys." Dulcinea mopped the exhausted lady's forehead with a dampened towel. "And Miss Barlow has tied a ribbon around the heir's foot."

"Indeed I did." Miss Barlow said, gently cleaning the second babe. "We'll know better soon, but I don't think they're identical."

"We've one more task here, Helena," Dr. Wagner said. "Let's get all of that afterbirth out."

A short time later, Fleur was taking away soiled linens when Haskell's sister Sadie entered the room, a baby in her arms.

"Two boys," Fleur said.

Sadie grinned. "*Two?* That Morledge will be fit to be tied. When Captain Ardleigh came up from the kitchen—"

"Captain Ardleigh is here?"

"Aye, and with Mr. Sherington. Bevan too."

Her heart did a flip and she was suddenly nervous. *Gareth was here.*

"Fleur, go tell the gentlemen the good news," Dulcinea called. "I'll be right along to do battle with Mr. Morledge."

"You won't have to," Sadie said. "My brother and the captain are up to the task."

Fleur took off her soiled smock, smoothed her hair, and made herself walk sedately down the stairs, though her insides

were quaking.

Watching Helena's struggles made her realize she'd been taking the coward's way out. Gareth was right: she needed to visit this woman who claimed to be her grandmother.

And, oh, if he would have her, if he would ask her again, there was no one better than Gareth to journey with.

When she entered the parlor, the heated conversation in progress halted.

Morledge stood, looking trapped between Haskell and Gareth. Mr. Sherington pushed himself to his feet.

"The crying has stopped," Morledge said. "Is the child still alive?"

Fleur gasped. "Indeed, he is, Mr. Morledge. And so is his little brother. Helena has delivered twin boys."

The color drained from Morledge's face and then rose again in a flare of anger. "Gloat if you will, but many infants die unexpectedly."

Gareth gripped his arm. "Are you threatening murder?"

Morledge tried to pull away. "I'm saying what's true. Why, a careless nursemaid, a fall down the stairs, a passing fever—"

"Morledge," Mr. Sherington said. "I caution you to stop speaking. There are four witnesses here. If something should happen to either lad, some accident, why, you have motive, and you are discussing means."

"It's too unbelievable. After a passel of girls, she has two boys? I would see these babies."

"It's best if you would leave," Sherington said.

Morledge stuttered a protest. Gareth and Haskell exchanged a look, Mr. Sherington nodded, and Fleur scurried out of the way as the men grabbed the villain's elbows, carted him to the front door, and all but tossed him out.

They were dusting their and hands grinning like two schoolboys when the knocker sounded again. Gareth frowned and yanked open the door.

Etienne Marceau stumbled in. "I say." He glanced over his shoulder. Morledge was climbing into a cart. "That's my cart," Marceau called.

"Let him go," Gareth said. "We've just tossed him out."

Marceau frowned. "Bad news, my friend?"

Gareth clapped him on the back and laughed. "The lady of the house has just had twin boys. Fleur, may we make your cousin welcome?"

She threw up her hands. "Why not? Make introductions and I'll go find some brandy."

"But look," Marceau said, drawing a bottle out of the pocket of his great coat. "I have brought champagne."

Gareth exchanged a look with the Frenchman and then crossed the room to take her hands.

"Brandy would be welcome as well. If you please, Fleur, tell me where it is, and I'll fetch it."

The tenderness in his voice rendered her speechless. She shook her head and pulled her hands free.

As she hurried away, she heard Gareth whisper, "We haven't got that far yet. Fleur has been busy."

He'd spoken in French.

She sniffed, swiped at a tear, and made her way to the butler's pantry.



By the time she returned to the parlor, she'd composed herself. Dulcinea had joined Sherington on the sofa. Haskell and Marceau stood eyeing each other warily.

Gareth hurried over, took the tray with the bottle and glasses and set it aside.

He grasped her hands and dropped to one knee, and her heart froze. Before she could summon her brain, he spoke.

“I won’t wait another moment, Fleur.” He spoke loudly enough to be heard in the next county. “I love you. Would you make me the happiest of men? Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She heard her own shallow breath, and the ticking of a clock, and the rustling of footsteps somewhere in the house.

Gareth’s gaze held steady on hers, perspiration beading on his forehead and trickling down to his jaw.

“Have you your handkerchief?” she asked.

He blinked, and his lips turned up. The corner of his mouth had scabbed from his fight yesterday. She wondered if it would bleed again if she kissed him.

Gareth freed a hand, reached into his pocket, and placed a cloth in her hand. The same one.

“I carried it all through the Peninsula. Took it to Flanders. I didn’t have it with me when I was captured.”

Her vision blurred as she dabbed at his face. “I must make you a new one.”

He jumped to his feet. “You haven’t said yes, but don’t say no yet. I don’t have much, but I have prospects.”

She raised up on her toes, leaned close to his ear, and whispered. “And you have me.”

“For heaven’s sake, Fleur,” Dulcinea said.

“Now, now,” Sherington said. “While you’re deciding, Dulcy and I have an announcement. “We are to marry. You will always have a home with us, Fleur. Unless you decide to make other arrangements. I understand that Mssr. Marceau’s great aunt wishes you to marry him.”

Gareth’s arm tightened around her. “She won’t marry him. She’s going to marry me.” He grinned down at her. “Yes?” All of his great heart shone in his eyes.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Yes, I will. And I think... I think we must visit Champagne. I think your enthusiasm for wine must be pursued.”

“Bien,” Marceau said. “At last. You see, Ardleigh, the Hardouin blood runs true. You will not regret it, cousin, and you will be much happier married to Ardleigh than to me.”



*A few weeks later.*

The highest and lowest families filled the pews of St. Beonna’s for the double wedding of two joyful couples. The joint wedding breakfast took place at Bicton Grange, after which George Sherington carried his new bride off to Sherington Manor.

But Fleur and Gareth would spend their wedding night in a cottage on the grounds, one hastily spruced up for the newlyweds. The larder had been filled, but they would otherwise have to do for themselves, which suited them just fine.

When they arrived, Gareth swept her up and carried her across the threshold, and then into the bedchamber with its tester bed and new mattress. Covered plates sat next to a bottle of champagne—vin de comete—nestled in ice. The bedding had been turned back and a nightgown laid out.

Gareth settled his arm around her. “Shall we turn in early?” he teased.

“I see my nightgown. I’m wondering where is your night shirt?”

His low chuckle tickled her ear. Moments later his lips followed, moving from her ear down to the place below it, sending shivers through her.

She turned in his arms and linked her hands behind his head. “Dulcinea thought it necessary to explain the wedding night to me.”

“I would have loved to have heard that lecture.” He swept one finger along her jawline, past the pulse in her neck, and along the edge of her décolletage. Pleasure pulsed along the places he touched.



“As if after years of her sly innuendos, not to mention living on an estate where animals were bred, I wouldn’t already have a somewhat clear idea of matters. I just never quite understood why the eagerness to engage.”

Gareth blinked and then a slow smile formed. “You, puss, are challenging me.”

“Am I?” She grinned, and then laughed, and when he slipped his hand under her bodice, she gasped and surrendered.

## EPILOGUE



*September, 1816*

*Champagne France*

Fleur tucked up her bodice and handed her bundled lass to the older lady, who clucked and patted and dropped kisses on the forehead of the gurgling baby before setting her to her shoulder.

“She’ll spit up on you, madame,” Gareth said, pulling Fleur out of her chair.

The Veuve sent them both a crinkly smile. “Enjoy the moonlight, while I sing this little one to sleep.” She set off for the house, already crooning off-key.

“Walk with me,” he said. “Under the harvest moon.”

She glanced up at the clear night sky and pulled her shawl tighter. Just one year ago, on a night like this, he’d asked her to marry him, and she’d run away.

When she shivered, he tugged her against him, putting his arms around her. The scents of starch and the musk of hard work and virile manhood filled her as the warmth of him seeped into her. She rubbed her cheek against his linen shirt and turned her lips up for a quick kiss that tasted like sweet champagne.

“This moment.” He sighed. “Ah heaven. A good harvest. Good champagne. A magical full moon.”

She smiled up at him. “A Champagne moon.”

“Yes.” He leaned in and she lifted her chin expecting another kiss.

But he stopped, and his rumbling murmur made her quiver. “Who would have thought it? You, my beautiful woman, and me, under the Champagne moon.”

With a laugh, she pulled him down for a kiss that went on, and on, and on.

THE END



I hope you’ve enjoyed reading Fleur’s and Gareth’s story as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. The real widowed Frenchwoman whose innovations spurred the development of champagne was the Veuve Clicquot, Barbe-Nicole-Clicquot, who led her family business through the chaotic times of Napoleon’s France. I’ve taken the liberty of making Fleur’s grandmother much older than the real Veuve, who was only thirty-eight in 1815. You can find out more about her and my other Regency romances at my website, <https://alinakfield.com/champagne-history-meets-womens-history/>

## ABOUT ALINA K. FIELD



USA Today bestselling author Alina K. Field earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and German literature but prefers the happier world of romance fiction. Her roots are in the Midwestern U.S., but after six very, very, very cold years in Chicago, she moved to Southern California where she only occasionally misses snow.

Learn more about Alina at:

**Website:** <https://alinakfield.com/>



# THE QUIET HEART



ELIZABETH ELLEN CARTER

# THE QUIET HEART

ELIZABETH ELLEN CARTER

Widowed in the Napoleonic Wars and traumatized by the horrors she has seen, Veronica Petersham's road to Reabridge has been paved with tragedy.

Now she is here as bearer of bad news for one of the families in the town.

But she falls ill just short of her goal and finds herself in the care of kind and stoic Martin Bromelton, a local farmer, and his family.

As Veronica recovers, she learns there might be hope for the future after all and the opportunity to find love once more.



# THE QUIET HEART

*Autumn comes, the summer is past,  
Winter will come too soon.  
Stars will shine clearer, skies seem nearer,  
Under the Harvest Moon.  
Autumn comes, but let us be glad.  
Singing an autumn tune,  
Hearts will be lighter, nights be brighter.  
Under the Harvest Moon.*

## CHAPTER 1



*Reabridge*

*Cheshire, England*

*M*artin Bromelton made his way through the market booths with single-minded purpose. He used his imposing size to press his way through the Wednesday crowd in the market square, knowing without a second glance that his collie remained at heel.

He also knew without looking at the sky that rain would be on its way by afternoon and he had much to do at the farm before it came.

The lambs were growing apace and this year's crop of wheat looked good. Then there was the small herd of cows he kept. Cheesemaking had become a new enterprise on his farm and one championed by his sister Rose and her husband, Stanley Templin.

Rose had been very specific in what she wanted from his journey into town—plain muslin, undyed—a whole bolt of it with which to strain the curds, or something like that. Martin had to confess to taking in only part of the detailed explanation she insisted on giving him over breakfast this morning.

“Marty, have you listened to a word I've said?” she asked in exasperation at his apparent lack of enthusiasm.

“One bolt of plain muslin,” he answered as he devoured a breakfast of sliced fresh ham and three boiled eggs, washing it down with scalding hot tea from a large earthenware mug, the size of a tankard.

In truth, Martin had only caught every other word his sister had spoken—not that he'd ever let her know that. Still, he had listened to Rose sufficiently and had even looked up from his breakfast to make note of the open weave of the cloth from a scrap she held in her hand.

He was spreading himself thin and knew it. He did what needed to be done—and there was so much that needed to be done—for the farm and those who relied on him.

The hard-won success of his freehold had not come without cost. To his regret, it was a sight his father had never lived to see. Even now, Martin recalled the days where the farm couldn't even manage to feed the family let alone bring in an income.

There had been more than one night in his youth that he'd gone to bed hungry. He didn't intend to do it again as an adult.

They would have had a much easier time of it, he was sure, if their family had been wealthy and connected like Earl Barlow, with whose farm the Bromeltons shared a border.

Martin made the observation without rancor. It was what it was. There was no point in being envious of another man's fortune. He didn't have to go off to foreign shores to fight the French, unlike Stafford Barlow.

Also, not the man's fault that he had lost his two elder brothers and was now, unexpectedly, the Earl.

Lord Barlow was a good man. And he was a good farmer. Now the man had the responsibilities of his title, Martin would miss sitting down with him over a pint at the Book and Bell Inn to discuss animal husbandry and how to get the best yield from the soil.

Before Martin knew it, he found himself fronting up to the haberdashery, more than aware of his large frame as he stepped inside a store selling feminine fabrics, ribbons, buttons and other fripperies to which he never before paid any heed.

“Stay.”

With that one word, his faithful dog Bennett stopped still, just shy of the door. He cocked his head to one side and then

another, silently asking why a man like him would be in a place like this, no doubt.

“Sit.”

In one graceful movement Bennett dropped on his haunches and rested his head on his paws.

Martin smiled to himself. If only people were as straightforward as dogs.

Inside the haberdashery, Martin looked about at the bolts of fabric and reels of ribbons. He waited while the man with the reddish hair behind the counter spent an inordinate amount of time ‘assisting’ a pretty miss with her selection of ribbons.

The sound of barking caught his attention. Martin turned and looked at the street through the window. A scruffy dog, chased by a couple of boys, galloped down the street with a string full of sausages in its mouth.

Bennett had raised his head to take in the scene, but stayed exactly where he was.

“Good morning, Bromelton, is there anything I can help you with today? Silks? Satins? Stuff?”

Two girls who lingered in the shop giggled behind their hands.

He heard the mockery in Randall Clark’s voice and acknowledged the man with a curt nod of the head.

“A bolt of muslin, Clark, good enough for cheesemaking.”

The man’s expression looked crestfallen—this was not going to be the day’s biggest sale.

“Was there anything else?”

Martin shook his head, handed over the coins, took hold of the bolt and headed back outside just as two women deep in conversation stepped right in front of him. Martin reared back and pulled his arm away to prevent the women colliding with the bolt of fabric.

“They say the babe showed up on the vicar’s doorstep yesterday,” he overheard the woman say to her companion.

“Well, who does he belong to? No one around here has given birth that I know of,” asked the other.

“No, no, no, the child is older than that. A couple of years at least. The boy has been well cared for up until now—that’s for certain and—”

The woman leaned in closer to her friend and Martin heard no more—not that he was eavesdropping. Town gossip meant nothing to him.

He reached the end of the market square and looked up at the sky on this warm August morning. It was still blue, but large billowing clouds touched with grey filled the sky to the west as they had not done in the morning.

Worse than rain.

It would be a storm.

There was no satisfaction in being right. It was what it was.

Martin crossed the bridge to Upper Reabridge and passed the Book and Bell. He would love to linger for one of Mrs. Pownall’s hot pies and a pint or two, listening to the plans for the Harvest Moon Festival. His neighbor, George Lyne, was taking charge of the Morris dancers for the first time this year, since old man Cooper died last spring.

A glance down revealed Bennett was not at his side. Martin let out a piercing whistle. A moment later, the large dog trotted up to his side to be rewarded with a tickle behind the ears.

The animal appeared to look past him to the pub then back to him, knowing his master’s customary habit.

Martin shook his head.

“Home, boy.”

The final mile back to the farm was strenuous. The wind had got up something fierce, and he wanted the sheep penned before the weather hit. Even now he could smell the scent of rain carried by the breeze.

After placing the bolt of muslin safe in his sister's hands, Martin headed out to one of the furthest fields and let out a sharp set of piercing whistles.

Bennett set to work, running down the left flank of a flock of sheep, getting their attention. The bellwether, the brightest of his breed, seemed to know what was wanted. He trotted toward an unlatched gate. A small mob followed, but not enough of them quickly enough.

Another set of whistles brought two pups Bennett had sired. They were too young to be trained directly but they were old enough to watch their elder and mimic what he did. It was good enough for now.

With the job complete and the sheep penned safely, all three dogs trotted behind while Martin made a brisk pace to the brow of the ridge that overlooked the paddocks where the cattle grazed. They'd be safe enough there. And, if they feared the weather too much or the River Rea begin to flood, they would make their way to the milking shed for shelter.

Satisfied, Martin turned up the collar on his jacket against the sudden chill wind. He looked in the direction of the storm and watched the grey towering clouds advance as a streak of lightning cut through its inky blackness.

*It's going to be a bad one. God help anyone caught in it.*

## CHAPTER 2



*15 miles north of Reabridge*

The August summer sun beat down mercilessly.

Veronica Petersham wiped the sweat beading on her brow, shielding her eyes from the glare of the afternoon. Her plain green travelling dress was stained by weeks of travel. There had been no time to wash it. Not when there was so much further to go.

Every day she journeyed further west, much further to the west of England than she'd ever been in her life. Across the Atlantic to the occupation army in France, then across the Channel to England, and now to the other side of the country.

Home.

She shook her head.

England was supposed to be her home—she was born down in Suffolk, after all—but she felt less like an Englishwoman and more like the French and Belgian emigres who were on the boat with her. Those people searched for a new life, fresh opportunities on this wind-swept isle. Veronica only wished for her old one back.

A large carpet bag fell from fingers now aching and raw.

Just like her heart.

She shrugged out of the leather satchel slung across her back and it too dropped beside the carpet bag. Rolling her shoulders to ease the tension and wiping a hand across her brow, part of her screamed to return to Manchester and start

over, unburdened by the bedside promise to a dying man made ten months ago.

Still, she'd come too far to give up now.

One more day and she would be there, the town of Reabridge.

There she could lay this burden to rest.

Tears sprang to her eyes but Veronica ruthlessly wiped them away. She'd cried so much at her husband's death, such gut-wrenching sobs that turned her hoarse. Since then, she wondered whether she still possessed a voice, given she'd used it so infrequently over these past eight months.

Muscles ached as she bent forward and grabbed the handles of her satchel and hauled it back over her shoulders. Next was the carpet bag. Muscles all over her body complained of exhaustion but she ignored their protests.

Just one more day.

Just one more step forward, then another and another.

It hurt. Everything hurt. But once she relinquished her burden she would be free.

Free to feel nothing.

Oh, how she craved that numbness, a small taste of oblivion that she wished could go on forever...

A puff of cool breeze seemingly came out of nowhere and pushed at her back, nudging her from the darkness of her thoughts. The leaves on the trees either side of the path she took clapped as though in encouragement.

Perhaps it was a sign that things would get better.

Veronica glanced behind her.

Large ominous storm clouds banked in the sky.

This time a gust of wind hit her in the face.

*Then again, perhaps not.*

Tempting though it was, Veronica knew she couldn't linger and savor its coolness. There was rain on that breeze and she



still had many miles to travel.

She pressed on.

Soon advancing clouds caught up with the sun, sending the lightly wooded fields into shadow. There was a faint rumble of thunder in the distance.

Gritting her teeth against the pain of blisters on her feet, Veronica increased her pace. Now it was imperative to reach Reabridge, because, despite the care she'd taken to protect her precious cargo from the elements, rain would do it no good at all.

She had been used to walking. She had followed the allied army across Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal—that's what one did as the wife of a soldier. Hardship had become second nature and she had borne so much. Nature herself would not force Veronica to stop now.

By the time the first spots of rain hit her bonnet, she had noticed the landscape change. Hedgerows had given away to ancient stone walls that followed the ridge line before disappearing down a dell.

*Farms.*

That meant she was close to her goal. Seven miles perhaps? Or could it be five?

Perhaps there was hope after all.

Relief was short-lived. The few drops of rain increased to a steady pour. A clap of thunder reminded her that worse was nipping at her heels.

Veronica half-ran, half hobbled as the rain increased. Being soaked to the skin was bad enough, to be caught outside when there was lightning about didn't bear thinking about.

The thunder sounded like rumbling cannon fire and the memories returned. Never too long after cannon fire were the cries and screams of the returning wounded. Young men whose eyes were wide with shock and pain, unable to comprehend that they were whole no more. The smell of rain

dampened soil always carried with it the metallic tang of blood.

A foot slipped out from under her. Veronica was tossed from her trance-like state. She righted herself, but not before she stumbled a few more steps.

Clouds had covered the sky completely, making it more like evening than late afternoon.

*It's hopeless.*

The little clamoring voice increased in urgency.

*You may as well sit down here and die, as go on and break your neck.*

In response, lightning jagged across the sky and in that split second she caught sight of a structure, a large one.

*A barn.*

Veronica hobbled towards it, her shoe filling with water as she stepped in ankle deep grass. Another flash of lightning illuminated her way.

*A door!*

She approached it nearly at a run. She only had the intention to bang on the door beseeching shelter from the inhabitants. To her surprise, all it took was one hard push and the door was open.

Veronica faltered through the door a few steps before fearing she'd gone blind and deaf. It took a moment to realize that the building was in utter darkness and the sound of the relentless rain was dulled under its sturdy roof.

There were no other sounds.

She sneezed once, then twice before shouldering her satchel. She pulled out a small tinder box and set to work lighting a candle.

There was little in the place that she could see. Stalls along one wall were empty. Against another wall stood a half a dozen small stools and a cluster of twelve-gallon milk churns.

Veronica sneezed again. She looked about and spotted a pot belly stove.

Disappointment at not reaching Reabridge was somewhat alleviated by finding a dry shelter for the evening. With quiet efficiency born of years of being a camp follower, Veronica set the fire in the stove, found a pan which she filled with rainwater and set it on the stove.

She stripped off her rain-soaked clothing and set the items to dry over the doors of the timber stalls.

The contents of the carpet bag were wet through, but the small leather satchel remained dry and the only piece of clothing in it was a flannel night shift. It would have to do.

Veronica added tea to the water that had begun to steam on top of the stove. The small amount of bread and cheese she had with her was damp, but it was better than nothing.

She rummaged through her wet carpet bag for the things she had travelled so far to keep safe. These were dry, a letter in an envelope addressed to Mrs. Edith Carr and another addressed to Silas Carr. Tucked in beside it was an unusual stone pendant into which was carved a sheaf of wheat, a circle in the shape of the moon and something else she couldn't make out.

It was an unusual piece to be sure. In truth she wondered why her patient went to such pains to insist that it be delivered to his wife. It wasn't a fine piece of jewelry by any means. The watch she also carried was worth far more. But he'd been insistent, agitating himself into such a state that the only way she could calm the poor wretch was to take the amulet and vow on her own life that she would return it to the family.

The young man died that night. She had planned to carry out her promise when the regiment returned to England, but they were diverted to Belgium when Napoleon escaped from Elba, and her husband died at Quatre Bras.

Veronica sneezed once, then twice, before a body-racking shiver went through her. She was damp, as was

everything else she had, so there was little she could do other than accept the warmth of the stove.

After finishing a meagre repast, Veronica watched the flickering orange and red flame through the grate, their hypnotic movement lulling her into a stupor before she shook herself out of it. Rest and warmth—that's what she craved.

She stirred, making herself a nest of straw lined with a blanket she'd found. Her cloak, still sodden, lay across a stall door and she looked at it wistfully. It would have made a good blanket.

At some point, Veronica woke from a dreamless sleep to the sound of shuffling. A moment later she was wide awake.

*Who is there?*

She listened to the movement and the occasional sound of grunting. She curled her hand and felt nothing but straw. She cursed herself for not keeping her knife close to hand. Veronica raised her head and saw her satchel and carpet bag drying by the stove. They were too far away to grab quickly.

The scuffling continued. Veronica held her breath. If she remained silent perhaps whoever was here would go.

The rain continued unabated, so did the noise, and yet nothing in it that sound like voices.

Veronica cautiously stood up and looked out. She chuckled in relief.

*Cows!*

Of course! What else could there be in a milking shed in the middle of the night and in a storm? Carefully, so as not to alarm the beasts, Veronica went over to warm her hands by the stove before going to her satchel and digging around for her knife until she found it. She lit her candle stub once more and looked around her. She was no longer alone. Cows and calves—too dark to tell how many—sought shelter but they stayed on the other side of the railing that divided the barn down the middle.

She found a lamp and lit it, bringing the barn into better illumination. Near her, a young calf huddled by its mother's side. In the dim light she could see a gash on the poor creature's leg. A booming roll of thunder caused the beast to bellow and the cattle shuffle closer together.

Her heart went out to the wee little thing. Perhaps she could do something to relieve its suffering.

There was still a little water in a pan. She took a kerchief and approached the calf, all the while keeping an eye on its mother. She seemed calm enough around her. Veronica's nursing experience made swift work of dressing her 'patient'.

Satisfied with the job, Veronica returned to the stove. She sneezed rapidly three times, accompanied by a sharp pain in her throat—all the tell-tale signs of a cold. She needed to get to Reabridge by morning. There she could rest and... well, never mind after that.

## CHAPTER 3



*I*t was morning and still dark, yet Martin had slept well despite the previous night's storm.

Such things never bothered him. He made sure he did his best to be prepared and was confident that his livestock was safe. As for the wheat, he could not help what the good Lord sent down from above, but he could make sure that the channels were cut to let the excess water drain away. It was too close to harvest time for him to lose the crop now. Just three weeks, by his judgement and it would be ready for harvesting.

As was his habit, he lay thinking about the day ahead, anticipating the cock's crow at dawn's first light. First would be the check on the sheep and cattle. He would start with the cattle, because they would be on their way to the barn for milking with the sunrise, if they weren't already there.

He idly wondered how the bridges fared which linked the Lower and Upper portions of Reabridge. Everyone grew up knowing the history and divisions of their town that ran deeper than the River Rea itself.

Deciding he was too awake to wait for the cockerel to announce the morn, Martin arose, washed, and dressed before heading downstairs to the kitchen. Bennett raised his head from his bedding in the corner close to the fire. Martin allowed few animals in the house. His best hound and pups were the exception—along with a big orange tabby that his sister was inordinately fond of and whose presence Martin and Bennett had learned to tolerate.

He set the water on the stove top to boil for a pot of tea and sliced off a hunk of roast beef to assuage his immediate hunger. Through the window, grey light from the east was beginning to give form to the outbuildings across the yard from the house.

The cock crowed as Martin finished his tea. He shrugged on a coat, pulled on boots and headed outside. Bennett, his own hunger sated, followed behind.

The scent of damp earth in the farm's kitchen garden mingled with the scent of the stables beyond the yard.

The sky was golden and a sliver of morning sun had come into view over the trees.

This was one of his favorite times of day where he would allow himself a little whimsical thinking and entertain the thought that the myths and legends of his forebears were perhaps rooted in a little bit of truth.

He walked the several hundred yards to the milking barn. The maids who lived with their families in the cottages in the outlying areas of Reabridge were not there yet, but the cows were, along with some of their calves.

Martin continued along the brow of the ridge until he reached the sheep pen. He looked out over the pasture and the tendrils of mist that still hugged the ground but would soon burn off.

He opened the pen and whistled. Bennett threaded his way through the sheep's legs, encouraging them out. He moved on, trusting his dog to do his job then find him.

Another four hundred yards beyond would reveal whether his two acres of wheat was ruined.

To his surprise, his brother-in-law Stanley was already there, inspecting the crop.

“How goes it?”

“Not bad, but I pray for good weather for the rest of the growing. Don't want ergot infesting the grain, not when it's so near to harvesting,” the man answered.

“It won’t,” Martin said with certainty. “It’ll be fine for harvest.”

Stanley nodded. “Then I’ll have enough reapers for the job.”

The two men fell into step to begin the mile-long journey back to the house, where Rose was sure to have breakfast cooking.

Martin knew he relied on his sister a great deal to help around the house. He knew he depended on her too much. After all, she had a husband of her own and would be in the family way soon enough.

Just down the road from the main house, there was a two-storey cottage that needed a bit of work. He would give it to them as a belated wedding present. He would speak to Stanley about it after the Harvest Moon Festival.

He would be on his own then.

The thought itself didn’t bother him so much for himself. He was a man of few words, not much company for a young woman. Still, he had to acknowledge that his home and farm needed a mistress.

What he needed was a wife.

On paper he was reasonably eligible—a moderately prosperous farmer, somewhat educated, not without refinement, but farming was not a life for every woman. Besides, when would he have time to leave the town to go to one of the bigger towns and look for someone who would want to share his simple life here in Reabridge?

*What of love?*

Martin tried to dismiss the thought. And yet it lingered.

Yes, he wanted a companion, a help-meet to share his life, but also someone who would be willing to share his bed, to start a family with him, a woman he could love... Not in a flowery, overly blowsy way one read in stories of chivalrous knights.

He was no poet or romantic of that type.



He knew nothing of flowers that weren't going to fruit into something which could be eaten.

No.

The woman for him would be as equally unsentimental and willing to work hard.

One of the older milk maids approached him as they reached the milking barn. Martin urged Stanley back to the farm house while he stopped to speak to her.

“The side door to the barn was open this morning,” she said. “One of the girls thinks there's still someone inside.”

Martin nodded once and followed the woman into the building. Inside, a girl patted the head of a calf. He looked down to see a piece of linen wrapped around its front leg stained with dried blood.

He removed the dressing and inspected the wound for himself. The calf injured itself in the storm. Not serious.

But who had done the nursing?

Martin stepped further into the barn and immediately noticed women's clothing hung over the stalls. He didn't know anything about women's clothes but even so, he knew it was a quality not worn by the farming girls around here. He approached the far stall.

His breath caught. There, lying on the straw, was a woman. The face was the prettiest he had ever seen. The brightest gold hair looked like newly harvested wheat. Her face was pale and despite the fact that the barn was warm and dry, sweat beaded on her forehead.

Tentatively he shook her shoulder but the woman did not stir.

That was not a good sign.

“Tell mistress Rose to prepare a bed in the house,” Martin said to the woman behind him.

The older woman went off immediately to do as he bid.

Martin bent down and picked her up. She weighed very little. Just as he had her settled in his arms, she opened her eyes. A shade of cornflower blue stared at him a moment. The young woman opened her mouth, probably to protest. The only thing that emerged was a croak before her eyes closed once more.

Heat radiated from her. Fever, he suspected.

How did she get here? Where had she come from?

The milkmaid had been swifter than he, so by the time Martin reached the house with his burden, Rose was already hovering by the door.

She took one look at the young woman and wrung her hands.

“Take her upstairs, Martin, the room opposite mine,” she instructed him. “Who is she? Where is she from? What’s her name?”

The woman in his arms stirred and tried to open her eyes.

“Hush, Rose,” he said firmly. “Let the girl sleep.”

He imagined that there might have been a look of gratitude before the lids closed and she let out a shuddering breath.

Martin set her down on the bed. She seemed small against the stark white sheets. Rose swiftly covered her in a blanket and began her fussing.

He backed out of the room, mindful of proprieties, but he couldn’t help take one glimpse back.

Rose’s questions were valid. He knew nothing of her but suspected that their unexpected guest was a lady of quality.

Why was she here?

*The babe showed up on vicar’s doorstep yesterday...*

Perhaps she hadn’t been going to Reabridge but leaving it.

## CHAPTER 4



Veronica knew she'd been asleep and now she wanted to wake up, so why did it feel like she was walking through fog?

No. A desert, because her throat was parched and sore. And her body ached. Why did it ache so much now?

She could hear sounds around her but couldn't make out anything. Worse, she couldn't call out either.

Then it felt like she was falling. And yet not falling. Then she felt warm, cocooned. It was all very strange.

Veronica fought her way to wakefulness. She opened her eyes to see a face loom above her. Dark hair and eyes to match. Then she fainted.



Martin spread the contents of the strange woman's satchel and carpet bag out on the table—with the exception of her clothes, which his sister swiftly snatched up and took upstairs to an empty bedroom and closed the door.

At first he thought she was a girl, but it was a woman's curves he felt in his arms as he carried her back to the house. She already suffered the tell-tale sign of fever.

Rose would know what to do. But the mystery remained.

Where had she come from? Given the woman was too ill to speak, her belongings would have to tell the story instead.

There were two bundles of letters now travel-stained. A watch, a small purse filled with coins, several sixpences, a crown, a number of pennies, but among the small haul were coins he couldn't identify. Foreign money.

There were plenty of soldiers making their way home now that Europe was at peace.

He glanced at the letters. Martin was a private man and he guarded himself jealously. He would not like it if someone went through his private papers, but equally, were he gravely ill and away from home, he would want someone to contact his family.

Martin untied the ribbon on the topmost stack and unfolded the paper and tried to make sense of the writing. It was prettily done but he could not understand a jot of it. French?

Perhaps their mysterious visitor was not English at all, but French.

Two sealed letters caught his attention—they were names he knew.

One was addressed was to Edith Carr. He knew her, although not well. She was raising three children on her own after her husband Edward had deserted her.

The other letter was addressed to Silas Carr. Edward's father. The Carr family lived on the other side of the river and didn't associate much with the folk on this side.

He picked up the pendant. He recognized this. It was an amulet—something given to every Reabridge girl at the Harvest Festival closest to her sixteenth birthday, and to every woman from outside who married a man from the town.

He knew everyone in Reabridge. Everyone knew everyone else's business here. But he did not know his sick guest.

So, how did she come by the amulet?

Martin took the items and locked them in his desk drawer where he kept a small strongbox.

They would wait until their guest had recovered.

Rose bustled through the door.

He looked up.

“The poor creature must have travelled through that storm last night,” she said. “Martin, I am concerned about her. She’s come over with a fever and I fear we’ll need something stronger than we have here.”

“Fetch doctor, then?” he asked.

His sister hesitated—not that Martin could blame her. Dr Wagner meant well, might even be a very good doctor—if he relied a little less on the brandy. Such an observation might be considered indiscreet, but in Reabridge, very little remained a secret.

“I don’t think it will come to that,” she said at length, “but we should let him know if her fever doesn’t break in a day or two.”

Martin nodded, then rose to his feet.

“I’ll go.”

Rose frowned. “Martin, there’s no need for that. I can send one of the girls to the apothecary.”

He shook his head and his sister knew better than trying to talk him out of something once his mind had been made up.

Besides, there was something other than just this young woman’s care that he needed to see to.

Martin’s long strides ate yard after yard and it wasn’t until he’d reached the mile marker from the town that he realized that Bennett was at his heel.

*Veronica Petersham.*

Petersham wasn’t a name he recognized from around here but Carr was. Martin recalled the sealed letters in the young woman’s possession. What connection did she have with them? Was this a letter of introduction to the family?

Well, whatever it was, it was hardly any of his business.

And yet that thought didn't sit well with him either. Whether he liked it or not, whether *she* liked it or not, Veronica Petersham was under his care and protection for as long as she remained under his roof.

As for Edith, there were a few in the town who kept an eye out for her and the three children. She was a proud woman, reluctant to accept charity but did accept odd jobs – a bit of cleaning and mending, yet it barely seemed enough to support the four of them. Martin was far too familiar with hunger to not try to do more for her.

He would speak to Stanley and George about whether there was more that could be done to meaningfully employ her for the harvest.

*Well, speak of the devil...*

Ahead of him, a man in a single horse-drawn cart approached. The driver called to his horse to slow to a stop and waited for Martin to reach him.

George Lyne called out.

“Fierce storm last night,” he said, a statement of the obvious that was meant as conversation opener.

Martin agreed with a grunt and a nod of his head.

“And your place? Any damage?”

Martin shook his head and asked “And you?”

“Lightning struck one of the fruit trees, killed it dead. Lucky no one was out there.”

“Yes, lucky,” Martin agreed, thinking of Veronica and how fortunate she was to have found his barn.

“Do you need more hands for the apple harvest?” he asked.

George nodded. “I wouldn't say no, once the men are finished in your fields. If we can get as many apples picked and sold as possible, I can think about planting that fallow field for next year. So, what brings you into town? I'd have thought you'd be the first outside with the scythe.”

For a moment Martin considered telling his friend about his errand, but that would waste more time than either of them could afford—not to mention the well-meaning questions he didn't have answers to.

“An errand for Rose,” he said. That was answer enough for George. The man nodded and snapped the reins.

“We can always do with another Morris dancer,” he called out as he passed.

At that Martin laughed. “It'll be cold day in hell, Lyne!”

George chuckled and said no more.

As Martin crossed the bridge to the island in the center of town, he spotted his destination, Beeson's Apothecary. He instructed Bennett to stay while he entered.

Martin could see the two brothers in the backroom, one at the pill press, the other decanting an amber fluid into a smaller vial and another woman impatiently waiting for her order.

A young apprentice approached and Martin handed over his order.

“Camphor, Eucalyptus, Turpentine, Menthol, Rosehip...” the boy muttered to himself before taking the order to the back of the shop.

“Is there illness at your farm, Mr. Bromelton?” the woman asked with pointed interest.

“Nothing to concern yourself with Mrs. Stutt,” he answered smoothly. Even if there was, he wouldn't give the town gossip the satisfaction of spreading stories.

The woman harrumphed but said nothing more, judging aright that she would receive no further information from him.

The lad emerged. “Mr. Beeson said it will be ready in an hour for you.”

Martin nodded and left. A bottle of brandy wasn't on Rose's list but it should be—a mixture of brandy, honey, ginger and lemon had been the family's home remedy for years.

He didn't pay much attention to the young boy sitting outside the inn with a glass of milk in his hand. Martin bade Bennett to sit in the shade while he went inside the tavern.

In a corner he noticed a group of men that he thought looked familiar. Then he remembered—by God, it had been years—Brandon Worthington, the younger son of another nobleman!

Martin shook his head. There were more bloody aristocrats in Reabridge than on the entire western side of the Pennines, or at least so it seemed. Because, if he wasn't much mistaken, there was also Viscount Eckersley and another man whom he did not know.

Martin went straight to the bar and asked Miss Hannah Pownall, the innkeeper's daughter, for a bottle of brandy. She was not much of a talker at the best of times, but even so, it was clear she was distracted by the party in the booth.

Still glowering at the aristocratic party, she handed over the bottle and swept the coins from the counter without once looking at him or the money tendered.

Martin took the bottle and left.

Outside he saw Bennett had a companion—the boy from outside the inn. The dog, despite his maturity, behaved like a pup, his eyes on the stick raised high in the boy's hand. The lad tossed it. Bennett raced after it.

There was something about the sheer delight of both dog and boy that stopped him from calling Bennett immediately to heel. He paused and watched his dog trot back to the lad with the stick in his mouth ready to begin the play over again.

When did life get so serious? When was the last time he had fun? When had he last played the violin?

It was too long. Far too long.

After watching the third throw, Martin whistled. Bennett immediately dropped the stick and trotted up to his side. Martin walked over to the startled boy who immediately stood to attention.



“He your dog, mister?”

Martin nodded.

“He’s a fine one.”

“That he is. I’m Bromelton. What’s your name, lad?”

“Trevor, sir. Trevor Smith.”

“You be new in Reabridge.” It was a statement.

“Aye, sir. I came with the Captain.”

Martin frowned.

“Captain Worthington,” said the boy in a tone that suggested that the man’s fame ought to have been self-evident even in the backwaters of Cheshire.

“Lord Brandon Worthington?”

“Of course! I served with him on the Continent. I was the company’s drummer,” he said and nodded toward the window where he could see the party of men sitting. “I serve him still, especially while he’s recovering.”

Martin could feel the pride and the deep love emanating from that young chest.

“Then I won’t keep you from your duty, Master Smith.”

The young man’s eyes fell to the dog. Martin glanced to Bennett and there seemed to be something in the collie’s eyes that suggested for all the world that he had become attached to his play companion.

Bennett continued to look up at him beseechingly. Martin offered a single nod. Bennett broke from his side and sat next to the boy. Trevor scratched the dog’s ears for a moment.

“You’re good with dogs,” said Martin. “Do you like them?”

Trevor nodded eagerly.

“Look after him while I run an errand. Tell the Captain you and he are welcome pay us a call at Bromelton Farm.”

The boy nodded eagerly and Martin found himself with a smile on his face as he turned away.

How nice it would be to have the sound of children playing on the farm; to see the wonder in their eyes as they learned something new.

The ache of loneliness became acute for a moment.

The reality was that he stopped living the moment their father passed away. The weight of responsibility for his sister, the farm, and those who depended on it for their livelihood was heavy and lonely.

Could he remember how to enjoy himself? It seemed so long since he had, that the very notion of it seemed foreign.

And what of Veronica Petersham? What was her story?

Martin entered the apothecary once more. The order waited for him, wrapped in brown paper and tied off with string.

Outside, across the green, Martin spotted the Reverend Owen taking a stroll. With him was one of stalwarts of the church altar society, carrying a little boy. Since her own children were rambunctious youths, Martin assumed this was the baby boy who had been the subject of speculation in the town.

That child, too, had been found with a Harvest Moon talisman, Rose had told him.

All in all, too many ghosts from the past had all come to gather at Reabridge.

## CHAPTER 5



*A week later*

Veronica refused to see the doctor in her bed despite admonitions to stay as she was. It had been the better part of a week since the owner of the farm brought her under his roof. She knew this, because after the second day she was aware enough to observe the sounds of the farm, starting from that quiet hour just before dawn when those whose day relied upon the sun anticipated the cock's crow.

Then it was the sound of chatting and singing, cattle lowing as those four legged and two made their way to the barn. Late in the day, the bright and lively call of the sheep punctuated by the sound of the dogs barking their commands.

Day after day, the sounds of the country and its progression during the day became comfortably predictable. It was something that would continue on and on, modified only by the change of seasons. Some might consider it boring. For Veronica it was peace.

She had been grateful, enormously grateful, for the kindness shown her, which was the reason she was not going to remain an invalid, even though she was certain that Mrs. Templin, the farmer's sister, secretly enjoyed having someone to fuss over.

But the moment the woman left her room, Veronica threw off the covers, washed and dressed before seating herself on the chair beside the bed.

In truth she *was* on the mend. The fever disappeared within two days, along with the aches and pains that were not just from the ague alone. For the first time in months she felt completely rested.

If she had any regrets at all, it was that she had only seen her benefactor once since he brought her inside. That was the day before yesterday when she caught a glimpse of him in the hall outside the bedroom when he was speaking to his sister and enquiring about her health.

The door opened. Veronica sat up straight and ignored the surprised expression from Mrs. Templin's face. She fixed the doctor with a winning smile.

"Well, I see that you have very little need of my services," he said with an easy-going smile, "although I would like to take a look at your throat to make sure the inflammation has gone down before I give you a clean bill of health."

Yes, that was the thing. Her throat had been so sore that all she could do for the past couple of days was to nod 'yes' or 'no' to questions posed of her. The fever had left her so weak that to write more than her own name taxed her strength.

But there would have to be a reckoning soon. Mrs. Templin was full of curiosity but was too well-mannered to ask too many questions. The glimpse she caught of Martin Bromelton outside the door put her in no doubt that he would like some answers too.

"I have done as instructed, doctor," Veronica said hoarsely. "I am feeling much better."

The man nodded indulgently before approaching and asking her to open her mouth wide for his inspection. After a moment, he 'ah-hmmed' and felt the side of her neck. The lumps were there but a lot smaller than they were before.

"Well, doctor?" Mrs. Templin asked anxiously.

"The patient feels well enough to be out of bed, but I will caution her about overdoing it. Spending some time in the fresh air and morning sunshine would be my only additional prescription."

“Thank you,” Veronica whispered.

The doctor shared a glance with the other woman.

“I don’t mind saying that you’ve been the subject of much interest in Reabridge,” he added. “When you feel up to it, I’m sure the vicar would only be too happy to provide a listening ear.”

The smile on Veronica’s face faltered.

*What an odd thing to say.*

There was more to his words than she knew and that immediately put her on guard. She looked at her hostess once more. The woman, to the best of her knowledge, had no guile—although lots of curiosity.

Not wanting to risk her voice any further, Veronica simply nodded.

“Just one last question—just for my records, of course,” he said. “Are you able to tell me your name?”

“Mrs. Petersham,” she answered. “Mrs. Veronica Petersham.”

She watched the reaction of Rose and the doctor carefully. Were they expecting another answer?

The doctor got to his feet and took his leave, along with a prescription to deal with any lingering pain. That left her alone with Mrs. Templin.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Petersham,” she said. “You must call me Rose.”

“Veronica, please—you have been so kind.”

Rose beamed at that. “Do join us downstairs for tea tonight, if you feel up to it.”

“I’d like that,” she said. “I would like to thank your brother for his hospitality too. I’m sure I have put you all to a great deal of trouble and expense.”

Rose shook her head in undoubted politeness.

“Think nothing of it, we’re glad you’re on the mend.”

And with one glance back and a smile, Rose left.

There had been something decidedly odd about the exchange with the doctor and the look of relief on Rose's face when she gave her name. Why was that?

Veronica stood slowly. Her illness had left her weaker than she would like. But that could be no excuse for returning to bed.

She went downstairs and noticed that the harried young girl from the kitchen had simply placed the plates and cutlery on the side of the table before running back into the kitchen. Before she second guessed herself, Veronica was setting the table, placing each piece as it ought to be.

She smiled. How long had it been since she laid a table?

It had been years.

Before the battles there were regimental dinners and servants saw to the task. On the field, there was little call for such formality, and as the wounded returned from battle there was little time for such niceties as sitting down to a meal—not when there was so much work to do.

This felt... well, *normal. Ordinary.*

And ordinary was good.

*It was very good.*

With that small task done, Veronica wanted to do more. She spied a small earthenware vase on the sideboard, half hidden behind a large platter.

Flowers. The table should have fresh flowers. She stepped outside the front door and out into the late afternoon sunshine where, on the edge of one of the pastures, she spied some blooms—the flowering purple and yellow spikes of cow wheat, the sweet, small white flowers of mouse ear and the vivid yellow of the meadow vetchling.

Veronica gathered a bunch. The act of bending over sent her into a spasm of coughing.

“You're all right, then?”

The unexpected male voice behind her made her jump. She almost dropped her flowers but she felt a steadying hand at her elbow.

Martin Bromelton regarded her with what she considered to be a mix of surprise and amusement.

“Thank you, I am,” she rasped out just before she coughed again.

*My goodness.* In daylight he was more handsome than she recalled. Tall and broad shouldered, skin darkened by the sun, his dark hair slightly longer than polite society would approve of.

The man gave her a skeptical look but said nothing. She simply stared at him until he looked away, seemingly embarrassed.

“I’ll let you get on then,” he answered before making his way past her toward the house, a cattle dog at his side. Not toward the front door, she noted, but around the back, no doubt to wash up before supper.

Veronica made her way to the house feeling better than she had, not just in days, but in weeks. Before she entered the house, she stopped and took a look at the landscape around her. Cheshire was a beautiful part of the world indeed. The plains provided a sweeping vista of green and there, from the elevation of the farm, she could see the spire of the church that had to be St. Beonna’s. She knew she had to be close to her destination, but she hadn’t realized how close.

The gentle questioning of the doctor told her that her arrival was the subject of gossip in the town, already.

She owed her hosts an explanation and her thoughts immediately turned to Martin Bromelton.

Veronica shook her head.

*He didn’t even ask my name...*

Did Bromelton already know it? Perhaps he did, but it was clear that not everyone was privy to that information. *Why was that?*

## CHAPTER 6



Martin felt eyes watching him rinse his face at the sink in the vestibule that connected to the kitchen. He knew his observer to be Rose even without looking.

“The doctor came today,” she said. “Our guest is awake and she even has a name.”

“I know,” he answered.

Rose frowned. “What do you know?”

“Mrs. Veronica Petersham is the lady’s name. She is out in the yard picking wildflowers.”

Martin reached for a cloth to dry his face, taking a peek at his sister’s face as he did so. Her look of astonishment, tinged with annoyance, amused him more than it should.

“How do you know?”

“I locked her valuables away when we first brought her in.”

“You knew all this time who she was?”

He turned.

“I knew the lady’s name. That’s all. Anything else is for her to tell us.”

“Oh Martin, if you’d said something then we might have stopped the gossip around the town.”

“Who’s been spreading gossip?”

Rose regarded him as though he were a simpleton.



“You can’t bring home a lady in your arms—a woman not known to us—and not expect there to be speculation.”

“There’s no reason to suspect that Mrs. Petersham is connected to the child at the vicarage. He was abandoned in France and delivered here by an English couple,” Martin pointed out, the full story of the child’s discovery and arrival having made its way even to his ears.

Rose harumphed. “She might have followed him from France. Or that is what people are saying.”

“We do not share gossip in this house,” Martin reminded her. Rose muttered under her breath something about this being the last time she would bring him news, since he already knew so much.

Martin smiled to himself. Perhaps it was the sight of seeing his little wood sprite out of bed with a touch of color on her cheeks, not born of fever, that sat well with him.

He was conscious of the fact that he felt protective of her, even to the point of withholding her name from everyone else—including his sister.

Mrs. Petersham was a lady of quality; of that he was certain. He determined she would be treated that way by everyone on the farm. He had begun to wonder about the protective feeling she aroused in him. When she was sick, he could easily excuse his interest in the most ordinary feeling of Christian charity.

But when he was returning home for supper his breath caught as he saw her.

She was lovely.

Martin stripped off his sweat-stained shirt and began to wash. He was not a man given to flights of fancy but he knew what his heart was beginning to tell him and that was a problem.

She was not meant for here. Once she was well, she would leave to wherever it was she’d been bound. Manchester perhaps, or down to Wales. In any event, it didn’t matter.

She'd be on her way, probably before the Harvest Moon Festival, so it wouldn't do at all to get attached.

And yet he was. He wanted to know more about her. Where she was from? Where she was going?

Did her husband still live? If so, why did she travel so far alone?

He went up the servants' stairs and to his room to don a fresh shirt. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. The dark edge of stubble lined his cheeks. He was struck by a sudden urge to shave before dinner.

Ridiculous.

He was no callow youth, making calf-eyes at a girl for the first time. Martin put a ruthless tamp on his musings—not that anyone who knew him would spot anything amiss. His sister told him that sometimes his face was carved in granite for all the expression he chose to share.

Aye, that may be true, but it didn't mean he didn't have *any* emotions.

A few moments later, Martin went downstairs, the table was set as though it were Sunday. In the center of it was a colorful collection of wildflowers.

"I hope you don't mind. I wanted to repay you for your kindness."

Despite the fact the voice was hoarse, he recognized it instantly as belonging to Mrs. Petersham.

"Not at all," said a voice that was not his own.

His sister had entered from the kitchen door and was speaking to their guest.

"The flowers are very pretty, I suppose I've never noticed them before, being wild flowers. You've reminded me how lovely they are."

Before Martin could say a word, Stanley emerged behind her.

"This our guest then?"

“Yes. Stanley, this is Mrs. Petersham.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance,” he replied.

Martin cleared his throat.

He might have country manners but he still had manners.

Rose frowned at him a moment before her eyebrows shot up.

“Oh, yes, of course. And Mrs. Petersham, allow me to formally introduce my brother, Martin Bromelton.”

Martin gave a slight bow and was surprised to see a rise of color to Mrs. Petersham’s cheeks. Her eyes were such a beautiful shade of blue and the more he looked into them, the more he found himself drawn into them.

He aided his guest to her seat before taking his own at the head of the table. As had been the family’s habit for years, Rose and her husband did most of the talking over dinner. His contribution required only a sentence or two.

After supper the ladies retired to the parlor, his brother-in-law waited to speak with him.

“The town is talking about her,” he said.

“I know.”

“Is she?... I mean could she be the one?”

Martin silenced Stanley with a sour look—mainly because those were questions he’d asked himself too.

If she had been the one to leave the child that was being cared for at the vicarage, then she must have had a good reason. And what of the amulet he’d found in her possession? To the best of his knowledge, she’d not asked for its return. Still, he knew he wouldn’t like to be interrogated, and he imagined she wouldn’t like to be either.

“There’s to be no gossip in my house,” he said.

Stanley was silent but Martin couldn’t help notice that his brother-in-law exchanged a glance with the kitchen maid

who'd come to clear the table. Gossip had already reached the doorstep, it seemed, but he didn't have to like it or condone it.

His brother-in-law wisely steered the conversation to safer matters to do with the farm and the upcoming Harvest Moon Festival.

"George has taken on Cooper's role of chief of the Morris dancers this year," Stanley noted.

Martin nodded.

"He's been pestering me to join them," he said, then added with a grin. "Can you see me, two left feet making a fool of myself?"

Stanley laughed. "Do you remember years ago, when we were lads we tried to knock off a beehive from that tree?"

Martin could hardly forget it, they'd both been eleven at the time and wanted some honeycomb. The bees weren't best pleased, and both he and Stanley were swarmed. He ended up hopping on one leg and then the other, waving his arms about.

"You'd dance just like that," said Stanley.

They both laughed.

"You could play the fiddle."

Laughter died on Martin's lips. He shook his head.

"I haven't played in years," he said softly. "I'm not sure I remember how."

Stanley raised an eyebrow. "There's no shame in wanting to shrug off the shackles of responsibility for a little while. No one would lose respect for you. On the contrary..."

Martin shook his head and Stanley knew him well enough to let the matter drop before excusing himself from the table to join the ladies.

The clock struck seven o'clock, just half an hour after the ladies had excused themselves from the table. What was the etiquette in such matters? Martin didn't know, but he figured enough time had passed for it to be acceptable to him to join them.

The sound of music could be heard before he reached the end of the hall. He paused.

Mrs. Petersham was playing his mother's spinet, an instrument that had been silent for nearly three years since no one else in the house could play it. The sound of it transported him back with a powerful ache of nostalgia.

So, he stood in the doorway and watched. And listened.

## CHAPTER 7



Veronica had spied a small spinet in the corner of the charmingly furnished parlor. It had been years since she'd laid fingers on the ivories.

On impulse she asked if she might be permitted to play it.

Rose looked surprised but readily agreed. "Though I fear the instrument might be out of tune."

And it was, but not enough to dampen her enjoyment of it. Veronica played a simple tune, the feel of the keys sure beneath her fingers.

After a little while she heard the door to the cozy parlor open and she became conscious of being watched.

She glanced to Rose. Her attention was on her husband who came to her side. Bromelton remained at the door, his expression inscrutable. She returned her attention to playing piece then glanced in his direction.

Had she over-stepped her bounds?

"Doesn't she play beautifully, Martin?" asked Rose. "It's so nice to have music in the house again."

There was something beseeching in the woman's voice that hinted at a family history that she was not privy too.

The expression on his face appeared stern, yet there was a softness around his eyes that suggested otherwise.

"I agree," he said. "Please play, Mrs. Petersham. So long as you feel well enough."

“Thank you, I should like that,” she replied. “Just one more tune, I am a bit more fatigued than I realized.”

“Yes,” Bromelton agreed, his voice deep. “It wouldn’t be well to overdo. And we’ve kept you so long already.”

Veronica felt her cheeks heat a moment. She turned away and played a pleasant little Flemish tune that she recalled. One that reminded her of a happy time, when she and Reginald Petersham were newlywed.

After his death, she heard it played in a café and had been overcome with tears at the pain of her loss. Now it left her heart just a little lighter.

That night, Veronica slept easily—one of genuine rest instead of the fatigue of illness, so it was a surprise when she awoke when it was still dark.

Surely it couldn’t be morning.

She closed her eyes and listened for sounds of an awakening household. It was only then that she gave consideration to the rest of her belongings. Her purse, her letters were not in the room. Perhaps Bromelton had them. She ought to retrieve them, so she could be prepared to go to the town and ask about the Carr family.



To her surprise, she’d fallen asleep once more and only awoke with the cock’s crow. Veronica quickly dressed and found the household only beginning to stir. A door across from the staircase was ajar and light from a lamp spilled through it.

Veronica ventured to the entrance. Hunched over the desk over what appeared to be a ledger was Bromelton himself. He was a big man, bigger than her late husband.

God rest his soul.

They were so young when they married. Reggie was little more than a youth. He was also young when he died. She missed the intimacy of sharing a marriage bed.

She blushed at the direction of her thoughts. And flushed even more when she noticed that Bromelton had set out down his pen and was now regarding her thoughtfully.

“I never thanked you for your kindness,” he said softly.

Veronica frowned. There on the edge of his desk was a freshly laundered kerchief. Her kerchief, the one she’d used to bind the leg of the calf in the storm.

“It was the least I could do,” she said.

He smiled at that, then opened a drawer at his side and pulled out her letters, purse and the amulet. The highly polished stone shone in the lamplight.

He placed the objects on the desk. She looked at them for a moment, then back at him, waiting for the litany of questions which, she supposed, he was entitled to ask, given that he had sheltered her, fed her, had even call a doctor for her.

“I owe you an explanation,” she said.

Bromelton shook his head. “You owe me nothing.”

Veronica glanced at the items on the desk. Seeing the direction of her gaze, the man pushed them towards her. She gathered them up, only glancing at the sealed envelopes and amulet before putting them in her pocket of her dress.

“Stay if you wish,” he said. “You are welcome.”

There was a lump in her throat which had nothing to do with her illness, it was raw emotion too long tamped down that threatened to come to the fore.

“You are very kind, Mr. Bromelton,” she whispered.

“Martin.”

Veronica frowned.

“No one around here calls me ‘mister’,” he stated. “It’s Martin. Or Bromelton, if you prefer.”

“Martin,” she said without much conscious thought. It was the name which sprang readily to her lips. The look on his face as she said it was one she would treasure. It was not joy as



such—what she knew of him would not allow such an extreme of emotion to show on his face. If she were to describe it, she would use a word like pleasure.

Before she could say anything more, the sound of the awakening household intruded and his soft expression disappeared like the morning mist as he rose from the table to address the day ahead.

If he would not satisfy his curiosity in payment, then perhaps there was something else she could offer—something more personal.

As he went to move past her, she laid a hand on his arm.

“Please, call me Veronica.”

She watched the expression change over his face and she wished she knew him well enough to understand what he was thinking.

What she received was a small smile before his broad shoulders filled the doorway and he departed.

Not wishing to disrupt the household from their morning chores, Veronica went into the parlor where she had played last night and pulled back the curtain to let in a stream of early morning light.

The first of the woodland birds nesting in a bush near the house trilled loudly and was soon joined by another chorus. A fine day moving ever closer to the reckoning that followed the change of the season.

She looked out across the yard to the pastures and hills beyond. It felt familiar, although Veronica knew she had never been to Cheshire before.

*It feels like home.*

The quiet thought whispered and her body reacted with a sudden yearning.

For more than five years her home had been wherever the army elected to set up camp. Her constant for much of that time had been her husband.

Veronica sought the morning light by the window and sat on a chair and opened her purse. She set the coins aside and examined her wedding band, the only piece of jewelry she had. She'd removed it during her travel for safekeeping but she wondered now about putting it back on.

Reginald's dying breath was to tell her that he wanted her to be happy and not mourn. She had promised him her faithfulness for all time but he shook his head and said death released her from that vow.

She loved him and mourned him. Now in Reabridge, she could fulfill another promise to one of her husband's comrades-in-arms and then her own duty would be fully discharged.

Sounds from the kitchen announced that the farmhouse was fully awake and Veronica found herself famished. She returned her letters and purse to her room and ventured to the kitchen and saw Rose standing over a table groaning with food—breads, cheeses, cured meat, pork pies, apples—far too much for the small household.

The woman saw her and grinned.

“Two meals a day and wages for anyone who joins us for the harvest,” she said in answer to Veronica's curious gaze.

“What can I help with?”

Rose's smile faltered. “You don't have to, Mrs. Petersham. Not if you're still feeling poorly.”

Veronica shook her head.

“I spent five years on the Continent as a nurse. I'm used to hard work.”

She spied a spare apron hanging on a peg and put it on.

“Tell me what needs doing,” Veronica asked.

The other kitchen maid looked at her with relief.

“Keep an eye on the batch of pies and bread in the oven,” answered Rose. “I can help Lucy with the breakfasts.”

With a nod of her head, Veronica went over to the pans of bread that had already been removed from the oven. She used the edge of her apron on the still warm pans and turned them out to fully cool on the racks.

“Mrs. Templin,” she called out. “I need to go to Reabridge this morning.”

“Oh, you can’t possibly walk there—not so soon after being ill. I’ll ask Martin to drive you in.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly put him to so much trouble.”

“No trouble. I can give you a list to give to the mercantiler and you’ve saved me a trip.”

Rose gave her a direct look that she had come to learn was a Bromelton trait. There was unabashed curiosity there, but the young woman held her tongue.

Very soon there would be no more secrets.

## CHAPTER 8



“*P*lease, call me Veronica.”

Martin paused and searched her lovely face a moment. He was not unfamiliar with the ways of women, those who were diffident and those who were forward. Despite the intimacy of the moment, he knew Mrs. Petersham... Veronica... wasn't trying to flirt with him or hinting that she'd be willing to repay his kindness in other ways, it was just...

No. Best this moment stay in the half-light shadows.

He gave her a smile and a small nod of acknowledgement before exiting the study. He didn't look back at her. Not because he didn't want to but rather, he knew that if he did, the moment between them would be lost in the warm light of day and the intrusion of work.

He shrugged on a coat against the dawn chill and sharply whistled. Bennett came bounding up with two of his pups running to keep up with him. They would grow up to be good dogs, just like their sire.

One pup Martin had earmarked for Rose and Stanley. He had considered keeping the second for himself, but after seeing that young lad, Trevor, play with Bennett, it brought back so many memories of his own childhood.

It had been happy, even if it had been hard work. His mother and father taught Martin and Rose that it didn't take a lot to feel content—family, laughter, love.

When had he lost sight of that?

As soon as he had the thought he had the answer to it—when first his father and then his mother died. He was eighteen when Father was kicked in the chest by a tetchy bull. They were hard years, where Martin discovered there was so much he hadn't learned about running the farm. Over ten years they fought their way out of hardship and as soon as things were beginning to look better, Mother died from the ague one very harsh winter—that was three years ago.

That's when the music died.

Martin found his fingers curling, forming the shape needed to press down on the strings of his fiddle. It had been five years since he'd even looked at it. Would probably have not given it any thought until last night when Veronica played.

He realized then how little music there had been and how much he missed it.

Perhaps that ought to change.

The thought lingered until the demands of the day occupied his full attention. Mid-morning he returned to the house.

“Martin will you drive Mrs. Petersham into town?” Rose asked. “Stanley and a couple of men have gone to George's farm to work out some details for the Harvest Festival and I can't be spared. And Mrs. Petersham, in particular, needs to go.”

The last sentence was delivered with a heavy emphasis that he would not respond to.

Veronica's business was her own. Nothing to do with him. Despite the fact his interest in her had ventured beyond common decent chivalry, but that was his burden to carry, no one else's.

He said nothing but heaved a sigh and grabbed a pork pie from the pile sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. He finished it in three bites and headed outside.

While he settled the horse into the shafts and fastened the strapping, he watched Rose and Veronica emerge from the

house. Rose was chatting gaily, as was her wont, while the woman alongside her listened.

*Something wasn't right.*

The thought emerged out of the blue. As he worked on the harness, he continued to observe Veronica. Her movements seemed stiff and, if he wasn't much mistaken, she was clenching her jaw.

*The reason that brought her to Reabridge in the first place.*

Somehow, he knew that as a certainty.

The object of his notice returned his gaze. It seemed to him that the expression softened and that tension eased from her shoulders a little.

He held out her hand to aid her onto the cart. She accepted it readily, squeezing it as she placed her foot on the mounting step and pulled herself up onto the seat.

Mrs. Petersham... Veronica... trusted him. That was good enough for now.

Martin climbed up onto the cart himself and set the horse on its way.

When they were clear of the farm, Veronica spoke.

"I have a confession to make Mr. Bromelton," she said.

Disappointment washed over him at her use of his correct title.

"I'm the wrong person to be confessing to, Mrs. Petersham. The vicar in town is a better man for the task," he answered, not daring to look at her, keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

The woman beside him made a sound that he couldn't decide was a huff of disappointment or a suppressed laugh.

"No. My confession is to you and not a priest... I lack courage."

He chanced a glance in her direction. She looked straight ahead.

“You followed soldiers into battle,” he said. “Nursed the sick and wounded, crossed the country on your own. If you’ll forgive me for saying so, you’re the bravest woman I’ve met.”

They continued towards Reabridge in silence until they came to the approach of the northern bridge of the river Rea.

“It is to the vicar I have to go.” Veronica’s voice trailed off. When it returned it was stronger.

“Do you know the Carr family?” she asked.

Martin nodded, then realized if Veronica’s attention was fixed ahead, she couldn’t see his answer.

“Yes,” he spoke. That’s all he would say. He had a lot of respect for Edith. It was not easy for a woman to raise a family on her own. As for Edward’s parents... well, it was not for him to speak ill of anyone, so he wouldn’t open his mouth about it now.

Veronica shifted in her seat.

“I nursed their Edward on the battlefield. He lost a leg. For a while we thought that he had come through the worst of it. Then the fever hit,” she continued. “In his delirium he spoke, rambled, really, about his family.

“We came to realize his family, apart from his life with Edith, was not a happy one. Soon... before the end... the fever broke and he was lucid, and had convinced himself that he was soon to die. He was too weak to write, so he asked me to write while he dictated a letter to his family—first his wife and then to his parents.”

Martin observed his passenger out of the corner of his eye. Veronica fidgeted with the fringing on her shawl.

“It took three days before he completely exhausted himself,” she whispered “When he had concluded, he sealed the letters and insisted that they only be delivered to his family, in person, after his death. Two days later he died. I thought to bring it back to England when the regiment returned. But two months later my husband was killed and for months, I was so deep in my grief that I completely forgot the

letter. It was only after I was already on my way to England that I remembered my obligation.”

*What a burden to carry.*

“You remembered and now you are here,” he said softly.

“I’m afraid of opening up old wounds.”

“Theirs or your own?”

Silence descended between them once more and the question went unanswered.

Martin knew the family, but not well, they belonged on the south side of Reabridge. It was all kinds of foolishness, this rivalry between two parts of the same town.

He was unclear how it all started and was fairly certain that no one else was either. One rumor had enmity going back to the Middle Age where a rough and tumble football game descended into a brawl in which several men were killed.

In fact, no one knew the truth.

A short time later, they crossed the bridge and entered the town itself, a strange type of neutral ground where the upper and lower side of Reabridge met in an odd kind of détente—the church in the center of the community, the beacon of hope that one day all men might be reconciled.

Martin brought the horse to a stop at the lychgate.

Veronica seemed nervous.

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. She did not seem to mind the liberty. Indeed, he thought he caught a glimpse of a glistening, unshed tear before she took a deep breath and found a brave smile.

Something shifted in him at that moment, a fissure that opened up in his heart to reveal he felt something more than attraction and admiration towards Veronica Petersham.

He might actually be falling in love with her.

“Would you like me to stand with you?” he asked softly.

Veronica searched his face a moment, then nodded.



## CHAPTER 9



Veronica was conscious of the presence of the man who walked alongside her as they followed the path across the front of the church leading to the charming vicarage that lay across the far side of the church grounds.

Whether he knew it or not, Martin Bromelton had become her anchor, a steadying presence who gave her the courage to take the next step and the next. She'd been dreading this moment for such a long time and it had become so entangled with her own mourning that the Carr's family story had become part of her own.

For too long she had kept her story bottled up inside, afraid that, if the dam broke, she would be swept along in its flood and drown in someone else's pity. That she could not do.

The fact that she could pour her heart out to another and receive no judgement or well-meaning expressions of sympathy was a relief. Now the words had been spoken and her tale told without interruption, she found the things she feared most were out in the open and dispersed by the wind.

They reached the vicarage. Martin rapped loudly on the door which was soon answered by a woman she presumed to be the housekeeper.

Veronica's mouth dried. After so long, she was so close to the end of her journey but suddenly the words wouldn't come. She found Martin looking at her. He seemed to understand her silent distress because he turned to the woman at the door who regarded them with great curiosity.

“Is the vicar in, Mrs. Ainsworth?” he said. “We wish to see him.”

Veronica let out a silent sigh as they were admitted.

Martin Bromelton truly was an unexpected answer to a prayer.

How was it that he wasn't wed as his younger sister was? He would make some woman a fine husband to be sure. He was strong, kind, and reliable...

The housekeeper announced them and she and Martin were ushered into a generously sized study. A large casement window let plenty of light stream in.

A man, aged in his fifties, Veronica guessed, rose from his desk and came forward to greet him. He looked from Martin, then to her but said nothing, his curiosity better disguised than his housekeeper's.

“It's always a pleasure to see you, Bromelton,” he said. “All's well at the farm I trust.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

Martin nodded his head and half turned to her.

“I'd like to present Mrs. Veronica Petersham,” he said. “She asked me to accompany her to see you.”

The man held out his hand. “Joshua Owens at your service, Mrs. Petersham.”

Veronica accepted a seat and glanced up at Martin who remained standing. She was nervous and he seemed to know it. He said nothing but there was a kindness and directness in his eyes and in his expression that gave her courage.

*You're the bravest woman I've met.*

She heard the words again, as though he'd said them aloud once again, but he had not.

Veronica turned her attention to her bag and pulled out the travel-stained letters. She fished out the soapstone amulet and slid it across the desk, took a deep breath and told her story and that of Edward Carr.

The vicar listened mostly in silence, only gently interrupting to get some detail or another clear.

“It distresses me still that Edward went to his grave with anger and recrimination in his heart,” Veronica concluded. “That’s why I hesitate to pass this letter on to his family, despite his request. It cannot do anything other than open old wounds.”

Veronica looked down dismayed to see her hands shaking, she raised her eyes to see how the vicar was reacting to her story.

His expression was sympathetic.

“You have been carrying this burden alone for a long time,” he said softly. “Many other people would have simply written a covering letter and forward on Edward’s letter by post. Why didn’t you?”

She took a juddering breath. It was not an unreasonable question to ask. She’d pondered that herself after she rediscovered the letters as she emerged from her own bereavement. Veronica never had the answer—until now.

“The words in his letter are harsh. I can hear them in my head as he dictated them, I can still see them as I wrote them down and recall them as he obliged me to read back what I had written,” she said.

“That’s why I sought your counsel first. I thought if you could approach the family on my behalf so I can explain that their son was in so much pain and answer any questions they might have.”

Mr. Owen nodded thoughtfully.

“I understand your reasoning,” he said before appearing to pick his words carefully. “I don’t think I’m talking out of turn to let you know that the Carr family are not the easiest to get to know—anyone in Reabridge might have stronger words to describe them, but I shall do my best.”

The man leaned forward and directed his next remarks to her.

“There a time for every season under Heaven. There is a time to mourn and I think you have mourned a very long time, not only for yourself but also the men you tenderly nursed.”

Veronica lowered her head to fight the tears that threatened to spill over.

“You’ve discharged your duty, Nurse Petersham, fought as well as any soldier has fought,” Mr. Owen continued. “But there is a time to heal, to dance, to laugh—and that should be your future.”

The floodgates of tears opened. For the first time since the initial shock of Reginald’s death. Veronica wept unabashed.

She clutched the kerchief suddenly pressed in her hand—she did not know whose—and after a moment or two, the tide of emotion ebbed. To Veronica’s surprise, she felt calm as though, in truth, a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

When she raised her face, it was the housekeeper she saw. Martin and the vicar were no longer in the room.

The middle-aged woman put a comforting hand on her shoulder and offered her a cup of tea.

Veronica accepted it gratefully. The first mouthful was utterly restorative and she drained the cup quickly.

“Thank you,” she said, setting the cup down. “You’ve been very kind, Mrs. Ainsworth.”

The woman offered a gentle smile. “Mr. Bromelton and the vicar are waiting for you in the garden, whenever you’re ready.”

She got to her feet and caught a glimpse of herself in the small mirror—she looked pale, but in truth felt much better, especially when she stepped out into the midday sunshine.

At first, she noticed a young woman seated on a blanket on the grass encouraging an unsteady toddler to walk towards her. Veronica smiled at the scene. Perhaps, one day, she might be that woman.

The two men walked side by side examining the rose garden, drawing her attention. Martin’s dark hair and broader

shoulders marked him out instantly and she found her heart skip a beat.

*Whoever married him would be most fortunate indeed.*

The idle direction of her thought surprised her. It had not been the first time she had acknowledged to herself how attractive Martin Bromelton was, but given the heavy state of her own heart, she never let it get much further than that.

She had mourned her husband and now completed the last of the tasks that bound her to her past.

There had been a time to mourn, but was she ready for a time to dance? Or a time to love?

## CHAPTER 10



The days continued with the same ebb and flow of time as they had always done. The sheep, the cattle, the field of wheat all required tending and the people who worked at Bromelton Farm required managing as well.

But as one day became two, then a week and then more, Martin found himself noticing little changes in his household that he knew were the work of Veronica.

His sister Rose seemed less harried with the household, and was spending time with her husband curing the cheeses. They even had time to begin restoring the cottage on the edge of the farm that would be their family home.

The mealtimes were different too. Once he knew which day of the week it was by what was on the menu, but lately there was a different dish or two served up which Martin knew hadn't come from any family cookbook they possessed.

The evenings passed pleasantly as well, with more music in the evenings and a lot more conversation. He was never much of a conversationalist, but he did enjoy hearing Veronica and Rose talk.

All-in-all, if he was to describe his present situation, he would say that he was content. It couldn't last though, he knew that. Of Edward Carr's family, Martin held out little hope of a positive response to the vicar's entreaty but as soon as Edith gave her consent to meet with Veronica and she could return Edward's personal effects, she would be on her way—back to her own family.

Veronica had spoken a little of it in the evenings; apparently they hailed from Suffolk. It might be an entire world away for what he knew of it.

He would miss her when she was gone. The thought came with an accompanying pang which he ruthlessly tamped down.

*She's not for the likes of you, Martin Bromelton. She's not for the likes of you.*

Bennett appeared to understand his mood; the faithful dog remained at his heel constantly. When they were out in the fields, he would sometimes talk to Bennett and in truth would feel a whole lot better in speaking aloud his troubles. Not that he would admit it to another living soul.

*It is not good for man to be alone.*

He'd heard the vicar speak the scripture during one of his sermons extoling the virtues of the married state and, in truth, he'd not given the words the weight that he might have done. But now with Veronica here, they'd taken on more and more importance.

Now he didn't mind admitting he was lonely, even though he was surrounded by people. How would one pay court to a lady? He was no poet. He was not eloquent with words, or artistic by nature—he couldn't paint her a picture or write her a symphony. But there had to be some way to show her that she had increased in his regard and hoped that she might feel the same.

Each night listening to Veronica play the spinet, which he'd since had tuned, reminded him of the fiddle in its case stored under his bed. It had gone unplayed since before his mother's passing but the sound of music and company at the farm reminded him of the other words Reverend Owens spoke to Veronica—there is a time to mourn and a time to dance.

The vicar addressed those word to her but they'd touched him also. He had channeled his grief into working every hour possible at the farm and as a result he'd lost sight of himself.

Soon, another day drew to a close. He whistled for Bennett who finished rounding up the sheep and trotted up to him. He

scratched the dog behind the ear and turned towards home.

He'd only got as far as taking off one boot before Rose waylaid him. "Martin. George has had an accident."

"How bad?"

"A broken leg."

Martin wasted no time saddling his horse and being on his way, promising that he'd be back before twilight ended.

He got to his friend's door as the sun was just dipping below the tree line. George's wife, Mary looked at him with tired exasperation. Her husband, it seemed, was being a difficult patient.

"I've been tellin' him to rest but he won't, not until you got here and I'm sure I won't get a minute's peace, till then, so you'd better go up and see him."

She had at least managed to confine him to his bed which in itself was a worry. They were very much alike—stubborn and unyielding—Martin confessed to himself, so for George to allow himself to be invalided meant that he had to be in a great deal of pain.

"I won't be able to lead the Morris dance," he said.

Martin offered him an expression of sympathy.

"You've been working hard on it," he said.

"That's why you've got to do it."

Martin squared his shoulders. He knew better than to ask what he meant by *it*.

*Dance?*

*Me?*

He'd never done a step of it in his life. While he'd accompanied his sister and brother-in-law in the dances during the years, he never participated himself. He was a big man, used to clomping through fields and pastures. He didn't dance, didn't dare risk crushing the feet of some poor girl.

"No."



“I’m beggin’ you, Martin. The Harvest Festival won’t be the same without six Morris dancers. There’s no one else who can do it.”

“I’ll see if I can find someone,” said Martin.

George looked downcast, but reluctantly nodded.

Dancing should have been the least of the man’s worries. Martin turned them to more pressing matters. “How will ye fare on the farm?” he asked.

“We’re short-handed,” George confessed. “Mary’s taken on a lot of responsibility as it is, but that’s before I injured my leg.”

“I’ll see what I can do to spare ye some of my men. We’re all right here at Reabridge,” Martin leaned in with a teasing grin. “Well, we are on this side of it any way. We’ll all work together.”

George nodded.

“I’m grateful to ye. Yer’s a good friend and neighbor.”

Martin nodded and went back downstairs where Mary met him at the foot of the stairs. The poor woman looked exhausted running the household and farm at its busiest time of year. He reiterated his offer of sending some men to help around the farm as well as his sister’s offer to call when needed.

It was well after dark when Martin returned home. As expected, Rose and Stanley had gone into Reabridge for a dance and hadn’t waited dinner for him.

Yet there was a place set for him at the table. To his surprise it was Veronica who emerged bearing a tray of food.

As though she could read his mind, Veronica shook her head.

“I cannot stay here and do nothing while everyone works so hard,” she said. “I’m just pleased that your sister allows me into her kitchen.”

That made him smile.

“How’s your friend?”

Martin invited Veronica to take a seat while he ate and told her about George. As an afterthought, he even told her about his request to take his place in the Morris Dancing.

To his surprise, she didn’t laugh as he expected her to. Instead, he found himself being sized up.

“Do you not dance?”

He looked at her askance.

“I think you’d be good at it.”

“I never dance.”

She didn’t seem to be put off by his three-word answer.

“Would you like me to teach you?”

## CHAPTER 11



She had no idea why she made such a forward offer to Martin. And, by the look on his face, he was of the same mind, but once the invitation had been issued, it seemed to make sense in her mind.

She watched him search her face. Did he think she was teasing him? Something long dormant stirred within her. A frisson of desire and yearning for the touch of a man that she thought was long past following her husband's death.

But now it had returned.

Martin Bromelton was a good man and his family were lovely. It would be very easy to fall in love with a man like him—solid, dependable, a good man.

But it wasn't just her own self-interest that caused her thoughts in that direction.

She could see that he was in need of a wife. His sister did a wonderful job in running his house, but she was married now and would want a home of her own, especially when she had a child of her own.

Who would look after him then? Who would run his household to make sure that when he returned exhausted from the fields that all he need do was rest?

Veronica got up from the table, suddenly embarrassed by the direction of her thoughts. She removed the dishes and placed them in a tub of water to soak.

Oh, she was making a fool of herself. She should leave before her heart became too entangled. She felt a presence behind her. She put the dishes on a rack to drain and turned. It was Martin, regarding her thoughtfully; more than thoughtfully. There was an intensity to the look that she wasn't quite sure what to make of.

She took a step toward him and, before she knew it he had bent his head down to hers and kissed her softly on the lips. A steady thrum went through her, a breathless expectation that left her wanting more.

He moved forward and she stepped back and rocked forward. His hand spanned her waist and they began to move together in a dance without music. Simple steps in four-four time.

Martin Bromelton could dance after all, if he had a mind to. Just as he could do anything if he had a mind to. But what she wanted most of all from him was another kiss.

And as though he read her mind, his lips met hers again. They softly parted and his strong arms enfolded her completely. And their kiss deepened.

The sound of an expectant tail thumping on the stone floor was enough to cause her to break from their embrace.

Martin's searching expression caused her cheek to heat once more. She looked away and found herself the subject of an expectant look from Bennett. Now having attained her attention, the dog's mouth opened into what seemed to be a grin.

Did he approve of her?

The idea gave her the giggles, then she became aware of Martin's arms still around her. She faced him and touched his cheek.

"It's been such a long while since I've felt so content," she said. "Thank you for giving me sanctuary here."

Martin's expression barely changed and he made no move to speak. If she were a younger woman, less experienced in the world... if she'd not had the opportunity to watch Martin as he

worked and interacted with his family, she might have felt disappointed by his lack of words.

But she knew him. And now she had felt him—not just his physical touch but also his heart. What lay there could be found in his eyes if one had discernment to look.

Her heart pounded in response.



“Why are you whistling?”

Martin stopped and glanced at his sister who gave him a knowing grin.

He’d been whistling? He hadn’t realized. As far as he was concerned, it was an early autumn day, just like any other.

“Do you object to my whistling?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she said glancing back to Veronica who had accompanied them this day into Reabridge. “If Veronica doesn’t object to your tunelessness, then I wouldn’t dream of doing so either.”

His sister’s good-natured teasing lightened his spirit even more. For some reason it was as though summer had lingered. The dark clouds that seemed to last for years had now blown away and he could see everything with a greater clarity than before—certainly with a much greater purpose.

Martin glanced down to see Bennett trotting at his side. Keeping up, as was his pup, now twelve weeks old and ready to be given to his new owner.

Outside the Book and Bell, he spotted Trevor in the same place he had been a month earlier but this time he was not alone. He was in the company of Captain Worthington and Hannah Powneall.

“Ah ha,” Rose said softly. “It would seem that time hasn’t dimmed *that* romance.”

Martin watched his sister touch a hand on Veronica's arm and the two women slowed their pace. No doubt so Rose could fill Veronica in on the history of that particular couple.

He shook his head and increased his stride to approach the trio.

"I have something for you," he said.

The boy's brows furrowed in recollection. Bennett barked once and the lad seemed to notice the pup who barked brightly.

Trevor's eyes widened and he took a half a step forward before halting and looking swiftly back to Worthington. The young lord nodded the once. The boy whooped and swooped down to pick up the collie pup.

Martin smiled his satisfaction as the pup lapped up the attention, stumpy tail wagging wildly.

Worthington rose to his feet in that stiff manner of someone who had badly injured his leg. Martin raised his hand in readiness to doff his cap as was expected given their uneven social status. But to his surprise, Worthington looked him directly in the eye and held out his hand.

Martin took it, noting that the press was firm and genuine as was the expression on the man's face. There was a story behind those eyes. But he knew, in that way that men know, that it was to be acknowledged in a look but not spoken of. There was no need for words, it would only serve to embarrass the both of them.

Instead, he turned his attention to Trevor.

"He's yours to care for and train," he said.

"What do you say to Mr. Bromelton, Trevor?" Worthington prompted.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you so much! I promise to take such good care of him."

Martin dropped to his haunches to put himself at eye level with the boy. He scratched behind Bennett's ear and then reached out to pat the pup on the head.

“He is also yours to name,” he told the youngster gravely. “This fellow is young and he will look to you for guidance in the same way you look at the Captain here. Make sure you train him well.”

Trevor nodded readily; his face thoughtful.

Martin got to his feet, satisfied that the lad appreciated the gravity of his gift. He nodded to Worthington who nodded back. Beside him, Hannah Pownall turned her head away and, if he wasn't much mistaken, the normally prickly bar maid was surreptitiously wiping away a tear.

## CHAPTER 12



Veronica only half listened to Rose.

As she watched the tender scene unfold, the swell of emotions that arose caught her by surprise. She swallowed against a lump in her throat in the full realization that one thing was true.

She was in love with Martin Bromelton.

*A good man. A kind man.*

It was one thing to know it in her head, quite another to feel it stir the depths of her soul.

“He has a soft heart that one,” said Rose, looking at her brother with affection. “It may not seem like it, and others may not see it, but it’s there for those who have eyes to see.”

Rose turned to look at her. Veronica felt the full weight of the woman’s attention.

“You see it too, don’t you?”

Tears sprang into Veronica’s eyes. She did see it, but the lump in her throat prevented her from saying so. Her voice gone once more, not out of grief, but out of love.

A nod, it seemed, was enough to satisfy Martin’s sister.

“He feels the same way about you. You cannot know how glad I am to see his regard returned.”

Veronica let out a breath and hope filled her being. For the first time she became conscious of the fact that the pleasant



sun on this early autumn day had warmed her within. The fear and the sadness that had been so long a part of her evaporated.

“It is certainly returned,” she answered.

The woman’s expression softened. She took Veronica’s hand and squeezed it.

Rose might have said something more, but Reverend Owen approached them with purpose in his footsteps.

“I’m glad to have met you, Mrs. Petersham,” he said before greeting Rose.

Apparently sensing a private conversation in the offing, Martin’s sister backed away. Veronica stopped her with a hand on the elbow.

“Do stay, Rose,” she said before addressing the vicar. “Mrs. Templin is in my confidence.”

The vicar’s eyebrows rose in momentary surprise.

“Does this mean you’ll be staying in Reabridge, Mrs. Petersham?”

Veronica blushed.

“I believe I am.”

“Good. That’s very good. I hope to see Bromelton pay me a visit soon,” he said, then his expression sobered. “But I’ve sought you out to let you know that I’ve spoken to Edith Carr. She very much wants to meet you. I thought it best that such a meeting be held at the vicarage.”

Veronica took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

“When?”

“As soon as convenient.”

“And Edward’s parents?”

A curt shake of the head was all the answer she needed.

“Tell Mrs. Carr, if it’s convenient, we could meet this afternoon,” she said. “I need to go back and get the letters, I don’t have them with me.”

The vicar offered her a kindly smile.

“I’ll have Mrs. Ainsworth prepare a little afternoon tea.”

The conversation caught the attention of Martin. Veronica watched him bid farewell to the family he was speaking with and return to her side.

Rose, who had taken a discreet step away during the private conversation also stepped forward.

“Shall I attend with you?” said Martin, his words soft so they wouldn’t carry.

Veronica shook her head.

This was had been her burden to carry. Only she could lay it to rest.

The drive back to Bromelton farm seemed quicker than usual. The horse proceeded at a trot and Martin’s focus was on the road ahead.

Veronica took in a deep breath and raised her face to the sun. How odd. She expected to feel nervous but she didn’t. Instead, there was an anticipation. While nothing could console a wife on the loss of a husband, hopefully Edward Carr’s words would give Edith comfort. And as for his parents? If they had no interest in hearing from their son once more, then there was nothing she could do about it.

Before long, she and Martin were on their way back to Reabridge. He had said nothing to her, simply opening the strongbox where she had decided to keep the letters and pulling out the sealed letters and the amulet and handing them to her. Their silence was companionable. As he aided her up into the cart, she smiled, letting him know in her own way that all would be well. Her gesture was acknowledged with a nod of his head and a twitch to his lip that hinted at a smile.

On the journey back to Reabridge, Veronica took in the scenery around her. How familiar it had become in just a short space of time. There was the weathered stone mile marker canted over at a slight angle. A little further on a small copse of trees in a field under which cows sheltered from the sun. Then she followed the line of stone wall that made its way

across the undulating field until it ran parallel long the road then ended at a gated entrance to another farm.

The wheat-colored grass became shorter and greener as they approached the River Rea, the trees alongside it providing a cool respite from the sun. Then came the sound of stone under the horse's hooves as they crossed the bridge.

*This feels like home.*

Veronica kept her eye on the church spire as they approached, clutching the parcel of documents in her hand. She let out a steadying breath. Martin's hand covered hers and squeezed.

"I'm here for you," he said. The tenderness in his expression almost undid her. Veronica turned her hand and squeezed it back.

"I know. Thank you. It means more than you could ever know."

It wasn't until she entered the vicar's parlor that Veronica realized that she knew the woman who awaited within. She had seen her and her three children at Martin's farm. She was one of the milkmaids.

Edith Carr was about her age but care-worn. Brown hair was pulled back in a simple bun. Her dress was simple and showed signs of being frequently mended and altered, but cleverly, to hide the true age of the garment.

It was only after the vicar had made the introductions and Mrs. Ainsworth had returned with tea that the woman's eyes fell away from hers and down to the letters in her hand.

"I hadn't realized I knew you," Veronica began hesitantly. "If I had..."

"There's no need for apologies," the woman said. "It's been too long since I been looked at in any other way than as an object of pity."

Edith Carr had her pride.

Veronica nodded and handed over the amulet. Tears immediately sprang into the other woman's eyes but she

mastered her emotions quickly and regarded the token tenderly.

“Edward forbade me to say that he had left to take the King’s shilling. He thought it was too much affront to his pride. He knew his parents would make much of his failure to turn our land to profit,” she said. “I gave him my Harvest Moon amulet as a keepsake. We were united under the same moon, no matter how far apart we were.

“When six months became twelve with no word, I could no longer hide how desperate our plight had become. Town gossip had it that Edward had deserted me and the children. How could I claim otherwise when the pity accompanying it came with the opportunity to make a little money taking in mending or working out in the field?”

“He spoke of you and the children,” said Veronica. “He never forgot you.”

“He never wrote, never sent funds after the advance of his wages,” countered Edith.

“It was hard out on the battlefield. Letters often went astray,” Veronica replied. “That’s why he was so insistent when he came to me wounded that I personally give you this.”

A fat collection of paper, a little travel-worn, was placed in Edith’s hands. She slipped a nail under the wax seal and broke it. Inside was scrip—about a hundred pounds’ worth—the majority of Edward’s wages. And along with it, a watch.

“He didn’t trust the mail to make it back to you,” explained Veronica. “He was so sure, right to the end that he would return and purchase the farm outright.”

This time Edith didn’t hide her tears.

“He was always such a hopeless romantic,” she said.

Edith set the money aside and read the letter that accompanied it.

Veronica recalled writing it down and remembered every word full of love and regret. Tears of her own emerged as Edith wept.

After long moments, the two women composed themselves and Edith noted the other packet of letters.

“These were written to his parents,” Veronica explained.

Edith looked into her eyes directly.

“Edward’s family turned their back on me when I went seeking help,” she said. “It’s been years since we’ve seen them and I have no wish to do so now. Is there anything in those letters I should know about?”

Veronica shook her head.

Those letters were full of recrimination and hate, venomous and designed to wound. If people were unmoved by the need and want of family on their doorstep, then a voice from beyond the grave was hardly likely to bring repentance.

“Burn them,” said Edith firmly.

At seeing Veronica’s hesitation, she continued. “They have been a burden that you and I should no longer be forced to carry. Burn them.”

## CHAPTER 13



“*W*hat are you doing up?” Martin yelled across the field. He grinned as George’s head shot up from his task grading apples. The man looked around swiftly then also grinned.

“You don’t have to yell!” George answered back “I might have a bung leg but I don’t have cloth ears!”

Martin laughed. Behind him trailed a dozen men and women from Bromelton Farm there to help George and his laborers with their harvest.

Veronica and Rose led the way, joining George’s wife Mary in the apple orchards with the other women, while the rest of the men went out into the fields to scythe the hay which would be needed as fodder for the animals for the long winter to come.

He watched Veronica and Edith Carr in deep conversation as they entered the orchard before being hidden from view.

Martin sat down beside George.

“How goes the leg?” he asked nodding at the limb propped up on a chair.

“The doctor said I could try walking on it next week,” said George. “I couldn’t wait, so I’m using a cane and walking on it now. I won’t be dancing, but I can let you know that you’re off the hook.”

At Martin’s frown, George laughed.

“The Morris dancing. I spoke to young Rueben about it.”

He knew the young man; he seemed as likely a dancer as Martin himself.

“How did you get him to agree?”

“Well, it turned out there was a young lady he is keen on impressing.”

There was an unasked question in the air. Martin looked across the orchard and spotted Veronica continuing her animated conversation with Edith.

Yes, he was getting ready to ask Veronica to marry him.

He knew his heart and he wished he knew hers as well. With the matter of the Carrs now drawn to a close, he didn't wish to rush things. Had Veronica fully mourned her husband? She didn't speak of him.

And yet when they were all together—he, Veronica, Rose and Stanley—it felt like they were a family.

*Family.*

Rose was now in the family way. She and Stanley were now spending more time fixing up the cottage down the road. It made him yearn for a family of his own and the only woman he could ever imagine being with was Veronica.

Did she feel the same way about him? He thought so—at least he *hoped* so—which was why he wanted to have a word with George alone.

“Well, you know I cannot dance,” Martin began. “But I can play.”

George shifted in his seat to better face him.

“Your violin?”

Martin nodded once.

“But you haven't played since...”

He interrupted. “It's time I began again.”

“Does that mean...?”

A nod was his answer.

George grinned once more. “And then you shall play—just before the presentation of the Harvest Moon amulets. It will be a surprise for everyone. I’ll ensure it’s done.”

George held his hand out. Martin shook it warmly.

Life was good.

Life was very good indeed.



There was something going on and Veronica wished she knew what it was.

At first she’d put it down to the business of harvest season and then preparation for the Harvest Moon Festival that seemed to consume everyone’s attention.

And, of course, there was the excitement of Rose and Stanley creating their own home and the delighted look of love they shared. Veronica owned a small pang of envy when they shared the news that they were expecting a baby of their own.

*A child of her own?*

She recalled the kiss she shared with Martin. That was two weeks ago and there had not been a repeat. There was disappointment—and yet, she felt aware of Martin watching her, and every time their eyes met there was a look of desire there.

Why didn’t he make the first move? Was there something about her manner that made him exercise caution?

The meeting with Edith Carr had been heartbreaking and its resolution had left her feeling both free, but also uncertain.

Once, so filled with regret and grief, she’d had no thought of a life after completing her task in Reabridge, but now... she was ready to begin her life anew.

Was Martin?

Veronica wasn’t prepared for what she saw as soon as she crossed the bridge. Surely this wasn’t the town she’d visited



only a week ago.

Ordinary, but pretty streets, were festooned with bunting hand-dyed in reds, oranges, yellows and deep greens—all the colors of the autumn, all leading to the green in the center of the town. It had sprouted a veritable carnival with brightly decorated tents housing stands and stalls.

She followed Rose to the one she had been allotted and soon it was filled with the cheeses, the delicious creamy Cheshire variety they had been spending weeks perfecting. Next to them, Rose and one of her workers were putting finishing touches on a display of polished red apples.

Just before noon, another group of girls from the farm came to relieve them, allowing her and Rose to explore the rest of the fair.

From one end of the green to the other, there were games and entertainments, including a giant swing. Four young women sat in the boat-shaped gondola and squealed with delight as their beaux heaved on heavy ropes to make it swing back and forth.

It seemed like everyone was here today.

There was Gwen Hughes, the farrier, making nail puzzles at her portable forge. She was welcoming a stream of customers looking for something to amuse the children. The man who hovered near, Rose had told Veronica, was Gwen's new betrothed, a retired soldier with the unlikely name of Jack Wrath.

Everyone was here, it seemed except Martin.

At first Veronica thought that, with the size of this fête, it would be natural that she should lose him in a crowd. Or perhaps he was too busy with George and the others organizing the event. Still, she enjoyed herself very much in Rose and Mary's company. So much so that she hadn't realized the time passing until shadows had grown longer and the sky began to blaze orange, soon followed by the blaze of torches.

The music grew louder at first, followed by the sound of jangling bells as colorfully dressed Morris dancers, their faces darkened with soot, jigged and danced their way through the crowds who greeted them with enthusiastic whoops and cheers.

A band with fiddles, fifes and drums played a merry dance leading the crowd pied-piper-like into a large tent, and some of the younger folk took the opportunity to dance. Stanley joined them at last and he entreated Rose to sit for a while. They joined Mary who sat alongside George, whose right leg stretched out to accommodate his injury.

“Stanley, I’ve not seen Martin all day,” said Rose. “He is here, isn’t he? He promised me he’d come this year.”

Veronica noticed that Stanley glanced at George before he answered his wife.

“Aye, Marty’s here, don’t you worry.”

“Then he should be here, with us,” she complained. “Sometimes my brother is just so infuriating.”

## CHAPTER 14



The musicians halted their playing and a man elaborately dressed in his chains of office raised his hands to draw attention. Standing on the sidelines, Martin drew himself up and took a deep breath.

He had deliberately avoided Veronica today.

She could so easily read his expression and his heart that she would guess aright his feelings for her. And at that he was sure he would not be able to contain himself. He would stumble over his words and his proposal of marriage would not come out as he planned it.

He wanted it to be perfect. He wanted the whole town to know who he was and what he felt for Veronica Petersham. Before All Saints Day, God willing, she would be his wife.

He glanced behind him to see the girls dressed in simple green kirtles as their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmother had done for hundreds of years. In their hair they wore circlets of marguerite daisies. Tonight, they would be presented with their amulets, the custom unique to their town.

Martin saw his prearranged cue. The bow of his violin struck the strings and played a verse of the old folk song, Sweet Nightingale, as he walked into the center of the tent.

He returned to the beginning of song and in full chorus the girls began singing as they processed to the center of the tent.

*'My sweetheart, come along!*

*Don't you hear the fond song,  
The sweet notes of the nightingale flow?  
Don't you hear the fond tale  
Of the sweet nightingale,  
As she sings in those valleys below?  
So be not afraid  
To walk in the shade,  
Nor yet in those valleys below,  
Nor yet in those valleys below.*

*'Pretty Betsy, don't fail,  
For I'll carry your pail,  
Safe home to your cot as we go;  
You shall hear the fond tale  
Of the sweet nightingale,  
As she sings in those valleys below.'*  
*But she was afraid  
To walk in the shade,  
To walk in those valleys below,  
To walk in those valleys below.*

*'Pray let me alone,  
I have hands of my own;  
Along with you I will not go,  
To hear the fond tale  
Of the sweet nightingale,  
As she sings in those valleys below;  
For I am afraid  
To walk in the shade,*

*To walk in those valleys below,  
To walk in those valleys below.'*

*'Pray sit yourself down*

*With me on the ground,  
On this bank where sweet primroses grow;  
You shall hear the fond tale  
Of the sweet nightingale,  
As she sings in those valleys below;  
So be not afraid  
To walk in the shade,  
Nor yet in those valleys below,  
Nor yet in those valleys below.'*

*This couple agreed;*

*They were married with speed,  
And soon to the church they did go.  
She was no more afraid  
For to walk in the shade,  
Nor yet in those valleys below:  
Nor to hear the fond tale  
Of the sweet nightingale,  
As she sung in those valleys below,  
As she sung in those valleys below*

He continued faultlessly, the tune he knew by heart. But this was the first time he'd ever played in public. He thought he'd be more nervous and was surprised to find that he wasn't. His eyes scanned the audience. The surprise on some faces amused him, he looked further and found where his family sat.

*Yes, family.*

Stanley gave him a nod of satisfied approval. George grinned and turned to his wife who whispered something to him. Rose's eyes were wide and, if he was not mistaken he spotted a tear running down her cheek.

And for Veronica? He could not read her expression, so he met her gaze and held it, pouring every emotion into each note he played.

At the end the assembly rose to their feet in thunderous applause and he lost sight of Veronica.



Veronica excused herself. Out from under the tent she felt the cool of the night air. Emerging over the trees was a perfect full moon—a harvest moon. She looked up at it, taking in shape and texture.

How had she never noticed the texture of the face of the moon? Tonight, it seemed larger than it ever had before. The spots and shadows made the surface imperfect, but somehow more infinitely beautiful.

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. When she opened them, she found herself looking into brown eyes set in a ruggedly handsome face. She raised a hand and stroked Martin's stubbled cheek.

He took her hand in both of his and raised it to his lips and planted a kiss to her palm.

"You helped me find the music again," he said. "You helped me realize what else was missing from my life."

"I'd given up on life," she whispered. "I felt dead inside, afraid I'd never be able to feel again. But now, I've heard the call of the sweet nightingale. I'm no longer afraid of the valley below."

Martin stepped closer, taking her other hand and drawing both of them together.

“Will you marry me, Veronica? I’ll walk every step by your side as my life’s pledge.”

Love for this man coursed through her veins and emerged with a smile and the words, “Yes, Martin Bromelton. I will be your wife.”

He grinned, gathered her up in his arms and spun her around and around until they were both dizzy and laughing with it.

“I love you; I think I did the first moment I laid eyes on you,” he said.

“And I love you. You’re a good man who needs someone to look after you as you look after others.”

They both turned to look at the moon which had now cleared the trees and was beginning to make its way heavenward.

Martin kissed her softly on the cheek, she turned so she could receive the next one on the lips, then another and another.

Some people swear by the stars. They vowed by the moon instead.

THE END

# ABOUT ELIZABETH ELLEN CARTER



Elizabeth Ellen Carter is an USA Today bestselling author and award-winning historical romance writer who pens richly detailed historical romantic adventures. A former newspaper journalist, Carter ran an award-winning PR agency for 12 years. She lives in Australia with her husband and two cats.

Learn more about Elizabeth Ellen at:

**Website:** <https://www.eecarter.com>





# A LOVE BEYOND TIME



A FAMILY OF WORTH: BOOK THREE

SHERRY EWING

A LOVE BEYOND TIME: A  
FAMILY OF WORTH, BOOK  
THREE

SHERRY EWING

**Can love at first sight be reborn after heartbreak, proving  
a second chance is all you need?**

Miss Hannah Pownall fell for a young lord years ago, only to see him leave. After no word from him in eight years, he returns to their small town, wounded and broken. Now, Hannah must reconcile her old feelings with the heartbreak he caused, knowing he plans to stay.

Captain Brandon Worthington returns to the town of Reabridge to recover from the war. He never expected to find the girl he once loved still unwed. Now, he must prove to her that he never forgot her.

Hannah and Brandon's journey is complicated by their respective pasts, but ultimately, they must decide whether second chances are worth taking a risk. Will they be able to navigate the obstacles thrown their way to find the happily ever after they both deserve?

# PROLOGUE



*Autumn, 1808*

*Reabridge Village, Cheshire England*

Miss Hannah Pownall wiped her hands on her apron and placed a cloth over the bread to allow the dough to rise. She looked upon the neat row of bowls in front of her. She hoped her mother would think this was a good morning's labor. Once the bread was out of the oven, Hannah knew the customers at her parent's inn would be enjoying the loaves with their breakfast. One chore down... several more to go in a long list of items to tick off before she could enjoy a few hours to herself.

She reached for her cup of tea while her mind drifted to Brandon, the boy she had spent the better part of the summer with. He had sworn he wouldn't allow the fact that his parent's manor was on the wrong side of the river to get in the way of the budding romance that seemed to consume them. The young couple first met at the church on the island surrounded by the River Rea after his parents bought the property last spring. The island was considered neutral ground where the families who had been feuding for over two hundred years could meet without causing a fuss. Hannah smiled, remembering stolen kisses with Brandon and looked forward to the afternoon with him again.

Her sister Mary entered the kitchen, a smug look plastered on her otherwise pretty face. She skirted around Hannah and went to the stove to pour her herself a cup of coffee. The inn kept a pot of the brew for travelers, and Mary preferred the

beverage over tea. She made her way to the counter and leaned back upon it. She then took a sip from her cup while her eyes danced with whatever news she was just waiting to impart.

Hannah sighed. She and her sister barely tolerated one another. Older by two years, Mary boasted time and time again that she would leave this cursed inn one day and never look back. Until then, Hannah sometimes felt as if it was Mary's lot in life to make Hannah's life as miserable as she possibly could until she left Reabridge. She never understood why her sister seemed to dislike her so much. Maybe it had to do with Hannah being the younger daughter.

There was no point in putting off the inevitable. Hannah turned back to the table and began wiping the counter she had been working on until it was clean. "You may as well tell me your news, Mary, before you burst a seam in your dress," Hannah said in a huff.

Hannah heard the snarl of outrage leaving her sister's lips. "You won't be so uppity once I tell you what I heard," Mary hissed coming to stand next to the counter.

"I am *not* uppity," Hannah retorted.

"You think just because you caught the attention of one of the Worthingtons that you'll be living in some grand palace one day. You're such a fool! You should have set your eyes on the elder boy, who will one day be a duke, instead of the younger son!" Mary replied, setting down her cup and crossing her arms over her ample bosom.

Hannah looked down at her own chest wondering if she'd ever become as well endowed. She always felt that all the good physical traits had gone to Mary and Hannah had found herself lacking... that is until she met Brandon. He made her feel special and like she was the only girl in the world for him. "Are you more upset with yourself because Edmond refused your advances?"

A snort escaped her sister's lips. "I could have him with a snap of my fingers," she huffed.

“You never stood a chance, and you know it. Now, just tell me your news, Mary, and get it over with so I can go about the rest of my work,” Hannah said, setting down the cloth and turning to face her sibling.

The grin that swept across her sister’s face caused Hannah to inwardly squirm. Whatever she was about to tell her wasn’t going to be good.

“I just learned the Worthingtons are packing up their things and leaving town. Headed north to their castle called Berwyck. Rather a sudden departure, don’t you think? I wonder what has caused such a fast decision.”

Hannah gasped. “Leaving?”

“Yes, and from what I could find out, they’ll be gone before the noon meal,” Mary said with another awful grin. “I told you that boy would break your heart, but you never listen to my advice.”

“Brandon,” Hannah whispered in shock from her sister’s words. She quickly untied her apron, tossed it on the counter, and ran toward the back kitchen door. “Watch the loaves and get them in the oven.”

“Do it yourself,” Mary called out, but Hannah was already out the door and fleeing down the wooden steps leading into the backyard. Chickens clucked in annoyance when she fled past them causing them to scurry.

Hannah ran as fast as she could. She knew where she’d find him... that young man who had stolen her heart months ago. Deep inside she understood from their instant connection just where he’d be and she had no doubt in her mind Brandon would never leave without saying goodbye. This had been one of her biggest fears, knowing Brandon was born into Society and all it entailed. Hannah was only a serving girl in her parent’s inn with hardly a farthing to her name. But her dire situation had never come between her and the boy she had come to love. What would she do once he was gone?

Her shoes clattered on the planks of the old wooden bridge when she crossed over the rushing river and made her way into

the forest. Her steps faltered when she saw Brandon standing near the edge of a pond; a flowery meadow as a backdrop to every romantic notion Hannah had ever felt in her short life. He could have been in a painting; the setting was that perfect. His back was to her, and his black hair tumbled about in the morning breeze. Gone were his casual clothes she was used to seeing him wear. Today he was dressed as the young lord he was and always would be. A reminder that they were born into two different classes and as different as night was to day.

He must have felt her presence because he turned suddenly and those hypnotic amber eyes all but melted Hannah's heart like they had the very first moment she had seen him entering the church with his family. His smile widened on those lips she had kissed a hundred times and he stretched his arms out to welcome her.

"Hannah," he whispered, reaching out for her hands and pulling her close.

"Brandon," she murmured in reply. "Tell me the story of your family leaving isn't true."

A fleeting look of pain flashed in his eyes before he looked off into the distance. "I shouldn't be surprised you've already heard the gossip, but I'm afraid it's all true. I honestly thought we would have more time together."

"But you'll be back soon, won't you?" she asked, trying to keep the tears from cascading down her cheeks.

He took her face in the palm of his hands. "I wish I could tell you the exact date I might return. It's all my father's doing. He somehow learned of us meeting here all summer, much to my dismay. The set down I received that I remember I must marry for wealth and title was almost my undoing. As if I could ever forget my responsibilities."

"Oh no! I was afraid this might happen. I told you—"

"—and I said your birth made no difference to how I felt about you," he finished pulling her into his arms. She was about to reply when he continued, and his words began to break her heart. "But my father seems to think we are too



young to be declaring ourselves in love and some measure of time apart will do us both good. I suppose he feels that at the age of ten and nine I do not know my own feelings.”

She scrunched her eyes shut thinking of what her own parents would say if she told them she was in love at only ten and six. Hannah tightened her arms around his waist while she held him close, knowing this might be the last time she ever saw Lord Brandon Worthington. “You will always have a place in my heart, Brandon,” she said softly, and she heard him grumble an obscenity.

He took hold of her arms and held her at arm’s length so he could look down into her blue eyes. “Don’t you dare say your goodbyes, Hannah Pownall. I will return to Reabridge and to you.”

“You sound so confident. Your parents will never agree to our union,” she warned, while her cheeks became wet from her tears.

Brandon wiped them away with his thumbs. “Let me worry about my parents. Just remember that our love goes beyond time itself. I *will* return for you,” he vowed before leaning down to claim her lips in a kiss she might need to remember for months to come.

His hands cupped her face, and he tilted her head in order to deepen the sweetness of their kiss. She flung her arms around his neck as she held on for dear life, afraid of what his parting might do to their future relationship. A soft moan left her when she molded her body to his and she could tell for herself how much he wanted her. But what was one moment a passionate endeavor, abruptly halted when he reluctantly pulled his lips from hers. His leaving was going to break her heart!

Her hands shook when she placed her palms on his forearms. He kissed her cheek until he placed his forehead upon her own. “I love you, Hannah,” he said, while trying to catch his breath.

“And I love you, Brandon,” she proclaimed until she once more gazed into the face of the young man who meant all to

her.

“Wait for me...” he whispered, so softly she thought she might have imagined his words.

He placed a hasty kiss on her lips and quickly left. He never once looked back to see that Hannah had fallen onto the ground in a heap of despair. She wasn't sure how long she sat on the cold wet ground crying. But the reality of her situation finally caused her to sniffle and dry her eyes. There was nothing she could do but wait as he asked and when she returned to the inn, she made a vow that day. Somehow... some way... no matter how long it took, Hannah and Brandon would one day be together again!

# CHAPTER 1



*August 1815, Eight Years Later*

*London*

Captain Brandon Worthington grimaced while the family doctor prodded away at his wounded leg. Injured during the last battle of the war with Napoleon, Brandon had been lucky to have survived, even though the surgeon had wanted to amputate his left leg below the knee. The only thing that had saved him was the company's drummer boy who caused such a fuss while Brandon had been delirious with fever that the doctor had finally moved on to another patient. The boy, Trevor, had returned to England with him, having no other place else to call home or family to speak of. Now, Brandon was lying here in his townhouse that he hadn't lived in for years, waiting for the doctor's assessment of the injury he had sustained.

"Will I live, Dr. Thornberry?" Brandon drawled, his thoughts on the bottle that lay just out of reach so he could drown his sorrows.

"You better," his brother Edmond insisted as he came into the room. His brother had inherited their father's title of duke leaving Brandon wondering where he fit in life.

Brandon raised his brow as he watched his brother and sister-in-law Roselyn move closer to the bed. *A love match*, he thought, not that he would complain that Edmond had found a wife worthy of him. The lucky sod! Brandon had given up on such an emotion as love years ago. When their father had

dwindled away the family fortune and then passed away, it had been left to Edmond to take up the reins to restore their wealth and save their homes. Not wishing to further the burden on his brother, Brandon had hastily enlisted after finding a sponsor, making his way up in the ranks over the years to captain.

The doctor returned the covers over Brandon's leg, removed his spectacles, and at last stood. "From what I can see, you've still got a piece of metal in your leg. We could break the bone again to see if it will dislodge, otherwise I'm afraid you'll be limping about for the rest of your life," the doctor said gazing around the room.

"Better a limp than a bloody stump," Brandon growled.

The doctor harrumphed. "As long as an infection doesn't set in, you'll keep the leg, Lord Brandon."

"It's Captain now, doctor," Brandon reminded the man with a slight smile.

"You'll have to forgive an old man who doesn't like change," Dr. Thornberry said as he picked up his satchel. "Send word if he gets feverish or you notice any swelling."

Brandon didn't mention to the good doctor that the leg became irritated whenever he exercised too much or stood too long. No sense bothering the man further, not with his brother here. He began to sit higher in the bed and Roselyn quickly came over to fluff his pillows.

"There... much better. I'll have your cook bring you something to eat. We're so glad you are home, Brandon," she murmured before turning her attention to her husband. "I'll let the two of you talk. Dr. Thornberry, I'll see you to the door and thank you for coming."

"You are too kind, Your Grace," the doctor said to the duchess as she took his arm. They headed toward the door. "Now tell me about those twins of yours. Are they keeping you busy?"

Roselyn's laughter floated down the hallway leaving the two brothers alone. Edmond pulled a chair up next to the bed.

“It’s such a relief to have you home again,” he began. Worry etched its way across his brother’s brow.

“I’m lucky to be here, although I sometimes doubted I’d make it through the horrors of battle and then being in that God-awful hospital. Damn doctors kept insisting they take my leg. If it wasn’t for Trevor, I’d be worse off than I am. Did you see to the boy? I owe that lad my life,” Brandon said, knowing his brother’s answer.

“Yes, Roselyn saw him settled into a room next to the twins. He’s fine and waiting to see you. Lord Kenderick Bourne and Roselyn’s brother William are also downstairs waiting their turn to visit with you. We’ve all been worried, Brother,” Edmond said.

“Not sure how I’m supposed to get any rest to heal if I continue to be besieged with visitors,” Brandon grumbled.

“Their intentions are good.” Edmond reached over to pour two glasses of brandy. “Word has spread all over town that you’ve returned. Invitations began arriving yesterday morning. You’ll have your pick of the Season’s most eligible ladies to court.”

Brandon was in the process of raising the crystal glass to his lips. He lowered his arm. “Surely you must know I have no intention of courting anyone let alone some debutante who expects a man to whisk her around a dance floor. Look at me?” he yelled. “Who in their right mind wants a cripple for a husband?”

“You don’t know that your situation is permanent. Give it time, Brandon,” Edmond began.

“And you don’t know that it’s not,” he mumbled before taking his drink and downing the contents in one gulp. He gasped as the fiery liquid burned its way down his throat and to his empty stomach.

“What are you not telling me?” Edmond asked, setting down his glass.

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

“I disagree. You’ve never kept secrets from me before.” His brother leaned back in his chair and waited with a look of a commanding officer set upon his face.

“Maybe it’s none of your business,” Brandon retorted before holding out his glass to be refilled. Edmond instead took the crystal from him and set it by his own glass on the table.

“That leg is bothering you more than you’re letting on,” Edmond surmised. “Do I need to call Dr. Thornberry back?”

Brandon shrugged. “What’s the point? I knew the risks I took when those damn sawbones left me with my leg in one piece. Besides, you heard Thornberry. I only need to worry about the limb if it becomes irritated. This, of course, leaves me with nothing to do but recuperate in the privacy of my own home.”

Edmond frowned. “You’ll never find any peace here in London. Why, I’m surprised Gwendolyn hasn’t invaded to take over your care already.”

Brandon gave a slight smile. “Our sister would be a tyrant of a nurse. I have missed her and Neville. But I’m certain they have better things to do with the children than seeing to my needs.”

“And mother?”

“I don’t wish to burden her,” Brandon said with a heavy sigh. “Honestly, Edmond, I just want to be left alone to rest and heal.”

“As I said, you won’t find that here. All of Society will be pounding down your door to ensure you are invited to all the latest events,” Edmond replied rubbing the back of his neck. “Why not head up to Berwyck? You’d have the whole castle to yourself and can take in the sea air.”

Brandon grimaced. Wallowing around alone in a huge castle held no appeal. “I’d rather not. Besides, Berwyck belongs to you and Roselyn.”

“Berwyck Castle will always be your home, Brandon, much like this townhouse,” his brother answered.

Brandon shrugged again. "I'm not even sure this place feels like my home anymore. I've been gone for so long. You've done so much over the years to reestablish the wealth our father gambled away. I couldn't impose upon you further without feeling like I'm a burden."

A growl of outrage left Edmond. "Never think of yourself as a burden. We are family and family takes care of one another."

"Be that as it may, I will not become some invalid or entitled lord being waited on hand and foot. I have quite a nest egg of savings from my time in the calvary. I just may buy some property in the country somewhere and live the life of a hermit." A weak smile creased his lips and Edmond gave a light chuckle.

He stood and went to the door where a servant handed him a document. Edmond then made his way back to the bed and handed the vellum over to Brandon.

"What is this?" Brandon asked.

Edmond resumed his seat. "As you wish to remove yourself from Society, I thought now was a good a time as any to present you with this deed."

Brandon's brow creased. "The deed to what?"

Edmond's eyes sparkled in amusement. "Why the deed to Stonebrook Manor outside of Reabridge, of course."

Brandon's eyes widened. "You managed to save it?"

"Yes... for you," Edmond said, nodding. "I know how much the place meant to you all those years ago. You'll find a substantial bank account in your name from the profits from the land. I've had a steward looking after the place until your return. It's all very self-sustaining and more or less runs itself. Luckily the estate has been a very profitable enterprise."

Brandon closed his eyes. *Reabridge...* the memory of a blonde haired, blue-eyed beauty swept across his mind causing his heart to lurch inside his chest. She'd be long since married with children at her feet by now. A pity, but it would certainly be easier on him to take up residence knowing Hannah was out

of the picture and had moved on with her life. Stonebrook would be perfect.

The contentment that filled Brandon's soul at the thought of recovering in the country was shattered when he heard his name being called from down the hallway of his townhouse. Moments later, his sister Gwendolyn arrived and was followed closely by their mother. They burst into his inner sanctum with the force of a thunderstorm to take over his care.

Any thoughts he might have had of staying in London were quickly dispelled. He'd leave for Stonebrook as soon as he could pack his belongings and close this house until he chose to return to the city. Edmond was right. Brandon would never find any solace and peace here in London. He'd make a hasty retreat to the countryside and leave this part of his life behind.



## CHAPTER 2



### *The Book and Bell Inn*

Hannah arrived in the kitchen to the heavenly scent of freshly baked bread. Her mother pulled the last loaf out of the oven while her little sister Dorothy peeled a potato. She collected her apron from the hook on the back door. Quickly tying it about her waist, she went to the sink to wash her hands before taking up a knife to help her sister.

“Fried potatoes and onions to go with breakfast?” Hannah asked knowing her sister’s reply.

Blonde hair tied back in a ponytail with a kerchief over her hair, Dorothy gave a weary sigh. At only six and ten years, there were far better things for her to be doing than fixing breakfast for their guests. “What else would we make them?” she asked in reply. “I’m tired of all this work every single day. I just want to go be outside and be with my friends.”

Their mother Eliza tipped over the metal pan holding the bread and placed a towel over the loaf to keep it warm. “No sense in complaining, dear. You know the rules. Chores first. Friends later.”

“I never get to have any fun,” Dorothy fumed.

Hannah did her best not to laugh while she remembered herself at that age and the boy who once owned her heart. She drew her attention back to Dorothy. Her younger sister had been a complete surprise to their parents, but she still bore the Pownall blonde hair and blue eyes. Anyone who saw the family together would certainly know they were all related.

Sometimes Hannah felt like a second mother to Dorothy due to their eight-year age difference. Dorothy was a good girl for the most part and never reckless like her older sister Mary had once been.

*Mary...* Her sister had sworn she was going to see the world and had leapt at the chance to run away with David Buckley who was two years her junior. It had caused the rift between the two feuding families to widen once more. Even more so when they learned Mary had passed away two years ago. There were rumors floating around Reabridge that a child who had turned up mysteriously in the village might be theirs, although there was no proof of the boy's parentage. The vicar had taken the lad in, since there had been no word of David's return to confirm if the boy was his. Hannah could only wonder if the boy sported blonde hair since she hadn't yet seen the child.

The back door suddenly flung open, and the entryway was quickly filled with the sight of her father, Lloyd, her brother Martin, and Gilbert Barker who worked the bar for her parents. He had expressed some interest of late to court her, although she hadn't given him any kind of reply. She didn't want to work with the man only to become uncomfortable in his presence whether she agreed to see him in a romantic way or not.

Carrying armloads of split wood, her father made for the stove to drop his share into the nearby bucket while Martin and Gilbert made their way toward the tavern. Hannah went to close the door when Martin called out over his shoulder.

"Hold off, Hannah. There's another coming in right behind us."

Hannah continued to hold open the door until it was filled with another neighbor, Randall Clark who quickly took off his cap. His family owned the mercantile shop on the island.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, entering the kitchen. Dorothy giggled.

Hannah's cheeks flamed when Randall's eyes lingered on her face. "Mr. Clark," she said, still holding open the door.

“Here for an early breakfast?”

“If you’ll have enough after all your paying guests,” he said while his eyes turned toward the stove.

“You know my mother always cooks enough for the whole town,” Hannah stated with a smile.

Mother placed a cast iron skillet on the stove to heat. “Bacon or ham, Mr. Clark? What’s your preference?”

“Ham, please, Mrs. Pownall,” he replied politely.

Eliza nodded toward the dining area. “Go find yourself a seat before the rest of the crowd takes up the prime tables near the windows. Hannah... get the man a cup of tea, girl.”

Reprimanded as though she were Dorothy’s age, Hannah could only manage a nod before her gaze met Randall’s. He gave her a bright smile and appeared that he would take her mother’s words in stride.

“I’d be much obliged, Miss Hannah, when you have a free moment,” he confirmed before giving her a short bow and heading in the direction of the tavern. She watched him briefly when he left her side. Everyone knew that Randall Clark was searching for a wife now he was a man of means and stood to inherit his family’s mercantile store.

Hannah shook off her thoughts, went to one of the cupboards, and pulled down a mug. She was just about to reach for the kettle kept on the stove when her sister giggled in glee.

“He’s got it for you bad, sissy. Almost as bad as Gilbert. How will you ever choose between them? They’re both too handsome for words,” Dorothy said with a dreamy look.

Their mother came to stand between them, raising her cooking fork in Dorothy’s direction. “Get back to work and stop teasing your sister. We’re going to have a roomful of travelers, and I won’t allow anyone who’s stayed at the Book and Bell to leave here hungry.”

Hannah mouthed the words thank you to her mother who gave her a gentle smile. Mother could be fierce when she

needed to be, but she alone knew how much a certain someone had meant to Hannah eight years ago. She had given up on love, thinking it was a worthless emotion she could do without. Besides, she was too busy helping her parents run the inn. Still... she glanced toward the tavern and watched while two totally different men looked with longing upon her. She had no idea how to handle either of those who appeared to be interested in her. She wasn't used to the attention.

Her mother nodded toward the tavern. "Off with you now, Hannah. Go get that tea to your young man."

She went to retrieve the tin of tea leaves. Once the leaves were in the cup, she went to the stove to take hold of the kettle with a towel and poured water into the cup to allow the tea to steep. She muffled a snort. He was hardly *her* young man. But she had to admit that he certainly was handsome sitting by the window waiting for his meal. Tawny hair stood up on end from when he took his cap from his head but it was those deep green eyes he turned upon her that were almost her undoing. She hadn't felt that fluttering in her stomach since...

Shaking her head, she made her way into the room and set the cup in front of him. "No cream or sugar and steaming hot. Just the way you like it, Mr. Clark," she said before continuing. "Your breakfast will be right out."

"How long have we known each other, Miss Pownall?" he asked, reaching for her hand.

She jerked back and watched as he frowned. It wasn't her intention to hurt him nor to get him upset. "Sorry..." A flush raced up her cheeks again and she didn't know how to mend the silence.

"How long, Hannah?" he asked again and this time she allowed him to take her hand when he reached for her.

"All our lives. Why do you ask?"

His smile reached all the way to his eyes. "Don't you think it's way past time to stop all the formalities between us then?"

"My parents would never approve, especially with a paying customer."

“And what if I spoke to your father about my intentions?” he asked, running his thumb over the back of her hand in a soft caress. “With part ownership in my parent’s shop, I can see that you are well provided for... that is if you would agree to become my wife.”

Hannah widened her eyes. They had never spoken but a few brief words together and here Randall was proclaiming he was interested that they wed. “I don’t know...” Her words lingered in the air between them.

“This must come as a shock to you but surely you must know I care for you, Hannah,” Randall replied as he waited for her answer.

An answer that wouldn’t come, for the moment she opened her mouth, his plate of food was plopped down in front of him with enough force to rattle the table. They broke apart and Hannah turned to see Gilbert giving Randall a fierce scowl. The two men looked as if they were about to come to a brawl, which would never do.

“Let the man eat in peace, Hannah,” Gilbert replied, taking her elbow, and escorting her across the room toward the bar. She was about to say something when he turned her around so her back was to the room. “What was that display between the two of you?”

“We were just talking,” she said glancing back at Randall with a small smile.

“Didn’t look like much talking was going on,” Gilbert muttered. “You two were all cow-eyed at one another. Do you have an understanding between you that I don’t know about?”

“That’s none of your business Gilbert Barker!” she fumed, placing her hands on her hips.

“It is my business when I just spent the better part of the morning asking your father’s permission to court you,” he hissed. “Tell me now if I’ll be wasting my time pursuing you if your affections lie elsewhere.”

“No one, and I repeat *no one*, holds any place in my heart,” she stated and her glance went to her father who turned away

and busily cleaned the otherwise immaculate wooden bar area.

“Good!” Gilbert exclaimed happily before putting his arm around her shoulder and walking her back to the kitchen. His complete change in attitude was startling as if he now felt there was no competition from Randall. “I’ll look forward to your company, Miss Pownall, when we both have free time and certainly a dance or two at the Harvest Moon festival next month.”

Her head began to swim with the possibilities that lay before her. Either man would make her a respectable husband, but could she allow love to enter back into her heart after all these years? She wasn’t sure that the ice field she had erected around it would ever melt enough to let such an emotion back into her very soul again.

## CHAPTER 3



The carriage rattled over the well-worn dirt road while Brandon attempted to get comfortable. The ruts from recent rains had caused his conveyance to lurch from side to side while the occupants made every attempt to keep their seats. He stretched his left leg out as best he could and knew once he finally was able to get out of this contraption from hell he'd most likely fall flat on his face. To do so in front of others would leave an emotional scar he'd be hard to live down.

The other three occupants he journeyed with hardly appeared troubled with the road conditions or from the days they spent together as they traveled to Reabridge. Trevor, of course, had joined him and Brandon held no complaints since he felt responsible for the boy. But what did surprise him was that Roselyn's brother, William Winslow, Viscount Everleigh, and their friend Lord Kenderick Bourne, had decided to keep him company for however long Brandon would put up with them. Those were Kenderick's own words when he and William had made the suggestion. He supposed he could have worse companions for the trip to Stonebrook. At least he had reassured his mother and sister that there was a doctor nearby in the little town if he had need of one.

"Are we there yet?" Trevor asked for what seemed like the hundredth time.

William chuckled. "We arrive, young man, when the carriage stops and we see Stonebrook Manor."

"Typical child," Kenderick drawled with a bored look. "Can't stand to be left behind in the nursery yet also has no

patience for traveling long distances.”

Brandon pierced his friend with a glare and then nudged him in the ribs since Kendrick sat next to him while Trevor and Williams took the opposite seat. “Leave it be, Kenderick. Trevor’s just as anxious as we all are to arrive at our final destination.”

Kenderick sighed. “I suppose my sour mood is more from hunger than anything else. My apologies, Trevor.”

The boy nodded then returned his attention to the scenery out the window. “I’m hungry, too. I could eat a horse!”

The men all laughed.

“And there it is... the root of all our problems. We’re all famished,” William replied, slapping the boy gently on his shoulder. “Should we stop at one of the inns you told us about in this God-forsaken back country?”

Brandon’s brow rose. “If the idea of a stay in the country is so unappealing, why did you agree to come? I figured now that you, too, are back from the war that you would be eagerly pursuing Roselyn’s friend Abigail.”

William looked sheepish. “Well...”

Brandon leaned his head back on the cushion of his seat. Raising his hand, he pinched the bridge of his nose as though everything had just fallen into place. “It was Roselyn, wasn’t it? She made you come along just to ensure I wasn’t overdoing things.”

“She was very persuasive,” William replied and then cleared his throat until he continued, “but I assured her I wanted to come to see you settled into your new home.”

“More like making sure I’m not falling down ill and thereby killing myself,” Brandon grumbled then turned his attention to Kenderick. “What about you? Did the duchess hold something over your head, too?”

Kenderick scoffed. “Hardly. I am my own man and no woman will tell me what to do.”



Brandon's brow rose. "Right..." he said with his words drawn out. "I'm not certain how you can keep a straight face with such a declaration."

"I am my own—"

Brandon chuckled good naturedly. "Yes, yes... as you said. You are your own man, but I have the feeling it only took a pair of emerald-shaded eyes for you to more or less agree to anything she might suggest."

"Your sister-in-law, as William said, is very persuasive," Kenderick muttered with a guilty smile.

"And even after all these years, she still holds a place in your heart," Brandon replied knowing his friend was still smitten with his brother's duchess.

"She is hard to replace, and I have yet to meet someone who even stood a chance," Kenderick stated while a wistful look raced across his features.

The men grew silent, each lost in the memories of those women who they had left behind. Trevor's stomach growled causing each of the men to look upon one another.

"I did say I was hungry." Trevor rubbed his belly.

Brandon looked out the window as they approached Reabridge. The road would take them to the northern side of town, where the Book and Bell Inn was located. After leaving London, Kenderick asked to make a detour to his ancestral home located outside of Manchester. This took them further north instead of arriving at Stonebrook situated outside of Reabridge to the south. The deviation had cost them several more days of travel, causing Brandon's leg to throb from the extra confinement in the coach. His heart lurched in his chest thinking about being so close to the Book and Bell and a certain lady.

He shook his head and continued to remember his time in Reabridge years ago as if it was only yesterday that he was here. The surroundings were as familiar to him as any other home he had ever lived. After passing the Book and Bell, the road would continue onward over a bridge and an island

before crossing the river again to the south. The island contained the church, mercantile shop, market square, and several houses and shops, but most people lived on one or the other banks.

He could easily pass the Book and Bell by and instead head across the bridge on the opposite side of the island and grab a bit of something to eat at the Crown and Castle Inn or the Fife and Fiddle Tavern. Somehow going into the other inn felt like a betrayal, however, to the woman he once loved. He highly doubted that a feud lasting for well over two hundred years between the Pownalls and the Buckleys would have ceased after only eight. “We’ll stop just in case they’re not prepared to feed us at Stonebrook.”

“Hooray,” Trevor cheered happily.

Brandon rapped his cane on the roof of his carriage and a trap door opened above Trevor and William’s head. “Aye, yer lordship?” the driver called down.

“Stop at the Book and Bell. We’ll get out for a spell and get something to fill our empty stomachs,” Brandon announced, not correcting the man’s use of his former title. He supposed it was still his, although he wished he could leave that part of his life behind him. All he wanted was to be a normal man living quietly in the country, but if his servants wouldn’t let the title go, then how was he to accomplish such a monumental task? He deduced this was Edmond’s doing by reminding the staff that Brandon was still, no matter what rank he received in the calvary, the second son of a duke. The Worthington crest alone on his carriage would alert anyone who saw it that he was part of a noble house.

Brandon’s conveyance continued to sway on the uneven road before settling back into a smoother ride. He swallowed hard when the three-story Tudor-era inn came into view. Memories of the blonde beauty from his youth flooded his mind. From what he could see out of his window, it appeared as if the Pownalls had expanded their enterprise to include additional lodging. He heard his driver call out to the horses and they began to slow. Brandon could only ponder if *she*

would still be working inside. There was only one way to find out.

The door opened, the step was let down and Trevor eagerly bounced down to the ground followed by William and Kenderick in a more dignified manner. Taking his time, not from whatever awaited him inside but more from the stiffness of his leg, Brandon carefully alighted from the carriage. His leg almost buckled from hours of sitting and Trevor raced to his side. Brandon shooed him away.

“I’ll be fine, Trevor. The leg’s stiff from sitting too long and the pain will work itself out in no time,” Brandon told the concerned boy.

“Are you sure, Captain?” he asked, worry etched across his face.

He tried to give Trevor an encouraging smile and pointed with his cane to the entrance to the inn. “Of course. Get yourself inside and follow our friends,” he suggested. The lad leapt at the chance to fill his stomach and disappeared inside. He then turned to his driver. “See to the horses and then come eat your fill.”

With his carriage making its way out of sight, there was nothing left for Brandon to do other than enter the Book and Bell. Limping his way toward the door and leaning heavily on his cane, his hand hovered on the door until he could no longer delay the inevitable. The wooden door swung open on well-oiled hinges and Brandon’s eyes immediately sought out the occupants of the room. This place had always been warm and inviting with the Pownalls treating him as any other guest who came to their inn.

The registration area was to his left where a warm fire waited weary travelers. To the right was the dining and bar area and along one wall was the staircase leading up to the rooms for rent. Brandon hobbled his way to the right, making every attempt not to stumble. The unknown man behind the bar, who was pouring several tankards of ale, gave Brandon a brief nod before returning to his task.

The tables nearest the windows, where the afternoon sun shone in, giving natural light to the tavern and dining area, were taken by several large families. Others around the fireplace that warmed the place were also occupied. He finally saw Trevor, William, and Kenderick in a corner booth near the opening entryway to the kitchen.

The door to the kitchen suddenly was filled with Mr. Pownall just as Brandon managed to make his way across the room and to the table. The owner halted his steps rather abruptly causing Brandon to assume the man was shocked to see Brandon's party.

"Why bless my soul! Welcome home, Lord Brandon," Mr. Pownall said loud enough for the entire island to hear his words. A dish in the kitchen shattered, causing the man to look over his shoulder before returning his attention back toward his arriving guest. "Sit. Sit. I'll send someone out with fresh bread and get you some drinks. Gilbert! A pitcher of ale for his lordship! Hannah! We have new guests!"

It was as if fate were giving Brandon a nudge that he would find Hannah inside.

Brandon had just taken his seat when a platter of bread was placed on the table by a younger girl. This certainly wasn't Hannah, but she resembled her so much Brandon had to look twice. She scurried away just as quickly as she appeared, and her presence was quickly replaced by the man who had come from behind the bar. He placed mugs in front of the men along with a pitcher of ale. "Milk for the boy or tea?" he asked.

Brandon's gaze traveled to Trevor who had been eyeing the ale. "Milk will do. Thank you," Brandon replied. The man poked his head into the kitchen to give out the order. He went back to the bar and the customers seated there.

Brandon took a sip of ale waiting for the one woman his heart longed to see. As if he conjured her up from his dreams, she carried in a platter of food to the table near the window before heading over to his table with a cup of milk. She set it before Trevor before she finally turned to face Brandon. She was just as lovely as he remembered.

“Hello, Hannah. How have you been?” he murmured while taking in every single beautiful inch of her. She was so close he could reach for her if he had dared.

Her mouth fell open before she snapped her lips shut again. She turned to leave and then changed her mind. “How am I?” she asked in awe as though he would dare ask such a question of him. “Maybe you should have sent another letter six years ago to ask such a thing!” Quickly she took hold of his ale and dumped the contents over his head. She stormed back to the kitchen while her father began stammering his apologies for his misbehaving daughter.

Brandon sputtered as ale ran down his face before he chuckled. She still had that spunk he had fallen in love with. He took the towel handed to him by her father. She was glorious!

## CHAPTER 4



Hannah stared out across the pond and beyond to the field of dying flowers. She hugged her shawl around her shoulders for comfort. It had taken her four days to come to terms with Brandon Worthington's return to the area. Four days of crying. Four days of suppressed anger from all the hurt that rose to the surface at one glimpse of him. Four days of listening to bits and pieces of gossip of his war service and subsequent injury when the locals came to dine at the inn. She hadn't hung around long enough after she dumped his ale over his head to see him limping for herself, but someone always seemed to be talking about Captain Brandon Worthington's return.

Hannah sighed. Four days... Such a small amount of time considering he had kept her waiting six long years for him to come back to her. She could hardly say he had actually come back to *her*! She closed her eyes remembering how she had cherished the letters he had sent the first two years after he left. She had read them so many times, that she had memorized each and every word. And then...nothing. No word. No more letters. Just silence. After six additional years of waiting, she had given up hope. After all, how long was she supposed to wait for a man's return?

After she had dumped his drink over his head, she refused to apologize to the man despite her parent's anger that she had treated a guest in such a manner. He deserved it and more! She supposed her sudden actions had been immature and childish but at the time her behavior had seemed appropriate. But even when Brandon sent a note asking for her to meet with him, she

had refused to answer his message or give him the satisfaction of knowing she been pining away for him all these years.

So, what was she doing waiting for him to show up in *their* spot? He hadn't sent another message for her to meet him here, after all. She just assumed the man would show up and maybe this was the crux of her problem. She *had* missed him terribly and no other man, including Randall or Gilbert, had held even an ounce of her affection since the day Brandon Worthington left Reabridge. Her love had been wasted on a man who hadn't even given her any sort of an explanation as to his long absence. Yet here she was... waiting for him on the off chance he would know her well enough to realize she would be here... waiting... The anticipation was going to kill her!

Hannah was just about to forget this whole foolish idea when the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel road reached her ears. They came to a halt a few moments later and soon the sound of someone's uneven gait walking across the small wooden bridge announced his arrival. Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath to calm her already frayed nerves before she turned.

He had never looked so gorgeous despite an obvious injury to his leg that was causing him to limp and use a cane. Concern for what had happened to him began to further worry her since she had heard the rumors of his injuries. She might try to remain indifferent to this man, but her soul knew only too well how much he had meant to her. She may have also been angry with him since he'd been gone but she certainly would never wish him harm.

Years mysteriously disappeared while she watched him approach. Immaculately attired like the gentleman he always had been, his shoulder-length black hair was in need of a trim. He took off his hat causing those silken black tresses to blow back in the breeze. He bowed and then those amber eyes that had always been her downfall rose to meet hers. She remembered her manners and gave him a brief curtsy.

"Lord Brandon," she murmured when she rose back to her full height, which wasn't much standing next to him. He had

grown taller or maybe her situation was that she hadn't in the years since he left. "Or should I call you Captain?"

"Miss Pownall," he said, placing his hat back on and then leaned heavily on the cane. "You may address me however you wish. I wasn't sure if you'd be here, but I took a chance... as I have every day since my return."

She would have smiled at the romantic thought that he had been waiting for her, but she must remember he owed her an explanation for his absence.

"I suppose I must apologize for my behavior the other day. I don't know what came over me," she said not knowing what else to say.

"I can understand why you were upset at me. I hope your parents weren't too hard on you," Brandon replied with a slight smile.

"You were a guest in our inn. The reprimand was as you might expect," she answered softly.

He continued to stare upon her before he continued. "My own apology is long overdue for not staying in touch."

"By six years..."

"Yes... by six long years." He went over to a bench she had asked her brother to build and motioned towards it. "Do you have time to sit for a while and catch up? Or maybe you must return to the inn or your husband?"

Her eyes widened at his words but also from the memory of her etching their initials in the wooden seat. Heaven forbid if he saw the heart around it as a testimony of the love she had felt for him.

Of course, he thought she would have married by now since he had been gone for so long. "What makes you think I have a husband?" she asked, quickly walking over to sit on the bench to hide the carving. He sat next to her. Far too close for her comfort since their legs were side by side and she could feel the heat of him. Her cheeks flooded from the memories this man had left with her and she could never forget.



Brandon seemed to struggle with his answer while he studied her face again before turning his attention to the scenery before them. “Naturally I just assumed. A beautiful woman such as yourself would not remain unmarried for long. I am certain you had plenty of beaux vying for your hand.”

*And they still are...* she thought, remembering how attentive both Gilbert and Randall had been of late. Not that she had encouraged their apparent affection. She had almost resolved herself to the fact she would remain unwed... toiling away at her parents’ inn for the remainder of her dreary life. She became lost in thought at such a miserable idea and realized she hadn’t answered him when he boldly reached over and took her hand.

“Are you?” His husky tone went straight to her heart, chipping away a small piece of the ice surrounding it.

“Am I what?” she asked while he gently squeezed her fingers.

“Are you married?”

“Not that it should matter, since you are the one who never came back for me, but no, I am not.” Reluctantly, she pulled her hand away but not before she heard a huge sigh come from the man who had once stolen her heart.

“I am pleased to hear it,” Brandon said, relief crept its way across his handsome face.

But she had more questions that needed to be answered and she would not give in so easily. “Why do you care?” she snapped, far more sharply than she intended. She was beginning to sound like a shrew, heaven forbid!

He closed his eyes for a moment before he turned to face her, his hand resting on the back of the bench just inches from her shoulders. “I have always cared, Hannah,” he whispered, dropping all formalities between them. “I never stopped caring and your memory was the one thing that motivated me onward through the years that were hard to bear without you.”

She clasped her hands in her lap. “You had a funny way of showing it,” she cried out, while attempting to not let her tears

cascade down her cheeks. Hadn't she already shed a river of them for Brandon Worthington? She turned her head so he couldn't see her face.

He gave another heavy sigh and reached for her chin, tilting her face so she had no choice but to stare into those hypnotic amber eyes. Golden flecks reflected in the sunlight. "I never meant to hurt you," he began. He took her fingers and raised them up to kiss the back of her hand. "Life became... a hardship for myself and my family. First my father died, and it was only then that my brother Edmond realized how heavily into debt we truly were. I enlisted—"

"—but the war with Napoleon was so dangerous," she exclaimed, interrupting him.

Brandon gave her a weak smile. "I suppose that will explain much, including my injury. But I would not become an extra burden to my brother by not finding my own way in the world. I needed to find a way to support myself and enlisting seemed the most reasonable method. It's not uncommon for a second son to join up. I found a sponsor to fund my kit and received an officer's commission and then made my way up in rank to captain in the calvary. I might have made major if I hadn't been injured at Waterloo."

"You never wrote to tell me you enlisted," she said softly.

His brow furrowed. "I wrote a letter telling you of my plans. Knowing the dangers I was to face, I thought you would be better off without me and so it was best to break things off," he replied and then frowned. "You never received it?"

"No. I never did." She met his eyes. If she had received such a letter, all the anger she had been feeling over the years toward him might not have been so harsh. Heartbreaking, yes, but certainly understandable.

"No wonder you were so angry. How you must have hated me," he said, with disappointment, most likely in himself, etching its way across his face.

Hannah shook her head. There was no sense in continuing to dig up their past. "And now you've come back to Reabridge

and are settled in at Stonebrook Manor,” she assumed.

“Yes. Edmond was able to save it for me. I plan to make it my home now.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You plan to stay? Not just for a visit?”

“Yes... to heal and rest. I do not have any desire to return to London to resume the Season. I always did prefer the country.”

Hannah became silent, not knowing how to proceed in their conversation. Good heavens! He would be near, although how often would she truly bump into him? Stonebrook was located a mile or two south of town from the island and on what her family would consider the wrong side of the river Rea. Brandon would most likely eat many of his meals at the Crown and Castle instead of traveling onward to her parent’s inn on the other side of the river whenever he came into town for supplies. She realized Brandon had been speaking and she had missed most of what he said.

“...and I can only wish you the best life has to offer,” he was saying.

She frowned. “I’m sorry but I was lost in thought. What were you saying?”

“I was telling you that I had no intention of interrupting your life, and my presence here is not meant to cause you any hardship. I wanted to apologize for my absence. When I told you to wait for me, I was in the wrong. I shouldn’t have asked you to wait. I had no right to request such of you. Now, I am here to only recuperate from my injury and nothing more. I wish you the best, Hannah, in whatever life may bring your way,” he finished and then stood as though he was finished with what he had come to tell her. The gentleman lord dismissing a common woman.

Her heart crumbled once more as though all the old wounds were once again fresh from when he first told her goodbye. But she lifted her chin, also coming to a stand. If he wanted nothing to do with her, then so be it. Their relationship

ended years ago anyway. She should have never held onto the small measure of hope his return would become something meaningful.

“I, too, only wish you the very best, Brandon,” she said trying to keep the catch from her voice. “May your health return soon, and your recovery be swift.”

She left him standing there much as she had been left standing in the same place all alone years ago. It wasn't until she ran into the back kitchen door and raced up to her room on the third floor that she dropped down onto her bed and let the tears freely fall. No matter how much time had passed, Hannah quickly realized that Brandon Worthington still held her heart in the palm of his hands.



Brandon wasn't certain how long he stood there watching the woman he once loved rush from his side. Why had he told her he was only here to recuperate and nothing more? If his racing heart was any indication of his feelings towards Hannah, then he was wrong to not tell her he longed to pick up where they left off. That is, if she would only give him the chance to make things right between them and she could overlook the fact he was a cripple. He was such a fool... or was he? Hannah was a vibrant lady with her whole life ahead of her. Why would she ever want a man who would forever be a hindrance in her life and hold her back from her dreams?

Taking a step forward, he stumbled slightly and took hold of the back of the bench for support. He roamed his gaze to the seat where she had been sitting. Eyes widening at what was there, his knees buckled, and he immediately fell upon the bench. He took off his glove and ran his fingers over the smooth worn initials she had carved for them. A loving gesture done by a young girl who had been attempting to remember a boy she had spent the summer with. They had been so in love.

Brandon wondered how he would ever be able to make up the years since he left. He should leave her be and let her get

on with her life. He, in return, should retreat to Stonebrook and do his best to forget the woman who had always been at the forefront of his mind. He was torn and decided to let the matter rest for now. But as he made his way back to his waiting carriage, he had a gut-wrenching feeling if he waited too long, Hannah Pownall might be forever out of his reach.

## CHAPTER 5



Hannah handed a heavy tray laden with dishes over to Martin. “This is the last of them,” she told her brother. “I’ll get this table wiped down and then we can worry about the afternoon crowd.”

“Thanks, sis,” her brother said. “You’re a gem. Don’t know what the parents would do without your help.”

She sighed and took the cloth she had tucked into the waist of her apron and began cleaning off the leftover crumbs. *What would they do, indeed?* she thought to herself and it wasn’t the first time those words had crossed her mind. They would have to hire another person or two if she ever left since they would need the extra set of hands. Money for running the inn wasn’t a problem. They were doing very well financially, but Hannah wasn’t sure if that would be the case if she were to leave if she got married.

A quick glance around the room she had spent so much time in showed it gleaming with her efforts. The baluster leading up to the inn’s guest rooms had been dusted, the wooden floor beneath her feet swept. Only this table still required her attention before she would need to start all over again when the next group of guests entered the dining or bar area and required food and drink. It made for a long and tedious day, but she had little choice in the matter, especially when her parents were at a meeting for the Harvest Moon festival, since they were one of the families who would have a booth offering food.

The bell above the front door announced a guest had arrived while Hannah continued to finish cleaning the table. "Can I help you, sir. Breakfast, or just coffee or tea," Hannah called out over her shoulder.

"Neither, thank you," a masculine voice said quietly. But she recognized that voice and face when she turned to meet him after he came out of the shadows of the entryway. "Hello, Hannah.

She couldn't help flinching when she realized that David Buckley had finally come home. Her sister's supposed husband having the nerve to show his face here of all places made her shake in anger.

"La-di-da, Captain Hero. What are you doing here among the lesser mortals?" she snapped sharply. All the emotions of losing her sister reared its ugly head and this man was the cause of their loss.

He appeared worried and didn't say anything but put a worn bag on the nearest table. "I brought you this."

She swallowed hard, remembering the last words her sister said to her before she ran away with a man she considered their enemy. *Get out of here while you can before this place takes your youth, Hannah.* Mary had then thrown her arms around her, giving her a tight squeeze before she fled. It was maybe only one of a handful of times her older sister had willingly shown her any affection. The memory still pained Hannah, knowing she would never see Mary again.

"Well take it off there," she snapped. "I have just cleaned that table." He made no effort to take back the bag.

"It's Mary's."

"What did you bring it here for? To carry away the rest of her things?" Tears threatened to cascade down her cheeks, but she wouldn't give this man the satisfaction of seeing them. "Leave, David Buckley, before I get the men to throw you out."

She expected him to turn toward the door. Instead, he moved to the table and opened the bag to take out the contents.

She gulped as she saw a warm, woolen gown and two lighter ones. Two shawls, one of which Hannah recognized as one their mother had knitted for Mary before she left Reabridge with David. Her hairbrush and two combs followed, along with the carved amulet presented to young Reabridge girls during the Harvest Moon festival closest to their sixteenth birthday.

Her feet moved of her own accord and her fingers slowly ran over the amulet. A gasp followed by a sob of agony left her and she turned abruptly to stare at him. “What did you bury her in? Her chemise? Or don’t you know?”

He appeared so crestfallen that Hannah regretted her harsh words. “I know.” He turned from her as though to hide his grief and to look upon the items sprawled out on the table. “I’ve kept her wedding ring but it will pass on to you on my death.”

“So you *did* marry her? Or was that pretense, too?” she snarled. She just couldn’t help all her frustrations coming to the forefront of her mind and she knew she was taking it out on the man standing humbly before her.

“Of course, I married her!” he yelled out in anger. “What kind of man do you take me for? What do you take Mary for?”

“Dead!” Hannah yelled back. “I take her to be dead, which she would not be if you had not seduced her from her family and her home. Why did you even come back here? For the baby? Well, you can’t have him! He will be brought up a Pownall!”

David frowned in confusion. “What baby?”

“The orphan that the vicar has taken in! He has an amulet just like ...” Her words trailed away as she stared at the one piece of jewelry the village girls had in common. Now she was confused, too.

His eyes widened. “You thought he was Mary’s,” he said quietly and the grief rushing across his features were so real that Hannah was waiting for the man before her to break down and cry. “Hannah, Mary died of a fever. Not in childbed.”



“So, *you* say. I don’t believe any of your lies. You weren’t even there, were you?” Hannah bitterly laughed. It was as if the rude reality of what her life had become was crashing down all around her while she ignored the stricken look that rushed across David’s features. Was that guilt? Still... she couldn’t stop the words that continued to tumble from her lips. “So, someone took the child and you didn’t even know. Or pretend you—”

He gave a heavy sigh in apparent frustration. “Hannah, there was no child. Even if there had been, *there* is Mary’s amulet!”

“So you—” A movement on the stairway distracted her while David followed Hannah’s gaze. The inn’s guest, Miss Lorna Gaveston, hovered on the next step down. She was pale and her eyes appeared unfocused. Unbalanced, she began to pitch forward. “David, catch her!” she called out as they both raced to the stairs. He reached the woman just in time and held her close to his chest. His hand moved her hair back from her face and his eyes appear startled by whom he held.

“Who is she?” he asked in a breathy whisper.

“A guest,” Hannah replied. “Can you manage to carry her into the registration area around the corner? There’s a sofa there we can rest her on.”

“Yes... yes of course,” he murmured, lifting her up into his arms.

“Martin!” Hannah yelled out and saw her brother appear at the entrance to the kitchen. “Send for the doctor. Our guest is in need of his care.”

Hannah quickly led the way and motioned to a soft settee placed near a hearth to keep the chill from the room. She watched carefully as David gently laid the woman down upon the soft cushions. He hovered near her before he stood to compose himself and then turned to face Hannah.

“I know this is not the time to continue our conversation, but I hoped that, with me bringing Mary’s things here, this could be the beginning of mending the bad feelings between

our families,” he said quietly and then turned to look down upon the woman resting on the settee. “I hope the lady will be in good health soon.”

Hannah bit her lip in indecision. If he honestly wanted to mend things between their families, then perhaps she could also start to trust the man. Clearly her sister had done so, since she had married him.

“I know this is asking much but would you mind staying with her until she wakes? I’ll have a maid come and sit with her as well. With my parents at a meeting for the festival, I’ve got to see to the afternoon meal.”

“You’d trust me with her welfare?” he asked in disbelief.

Hannah nodded. “If Mary could trust you, then I should make the effort to try as well.”

He seemed relieved, as a small smile lit his face. “Thank you, Hannah. I’d be happy to stay with your guest until she wakes up or the doctor arrives.”

Hannah left him but stopped a maid before she made her way up the stairs. Asking her to sit with Miss Gaveston and David, Hannah went back into the dining area to finish what she had been doing prior to David’s arrival.

She went to the table and hesitated to touch her sister’s things. Obviously, with Mary’s amulet sitting on the table before her, the village orphan wasn’t her sister’s. Hannah would need to let her parents know they could at the very least put such gossip to rest.

She finally reached out a hand to lovingly touch what was left of Mary’s possessions. So little for a woman who wanted to see the world but never got much of a chance. Hannah supposed she owed David an apology for her harsh words and perhaps he was right about one thing... this feud between their families had gone on long enough and maybe it was time to put the past where it belonged.

## CHAPTER 6



Brandon squinted at the book he had been perusing and realized he had read the same damn paragraph for the fourth time. He snapped the cover shut and tossed it onto the table in front of him. Aggravated, he rose from his chair and winced when his leg all but buckled beneath him. Quickly he reached for support only to see his cane leaning against the nearby desk. He grumbled an obscenity as he limped over to retrieve it. A whistle sounded out in the library causing Brandon to see who intruded his solitude. William... of course... with Kenderick right behind him.

“You’re in a foul mood,” William announced entering the room. He went to retrieve the book Brandon had abandoned and chuckled. “I’m surprised you didn’t fall asleep reading about agriculture. Couldn’t you find something more appealing?”

Brandon began to pace the room in his attempt to loosen up his stiff leg. If he wasn’t careful, he’d have to call a surgeon despite his best effort to keep the limb attached! “Why haven’t you both returned to London? I’m sure you can report back now to Roselyn that I am settled in.”

Kenderick took a seat on the sofa. “Tired of us already, old man, after only a week?”

Before Brandon could answer, William stepped in. “I think it’s more about him pining away for a certain young lady he left behind years ago.”

Brandon stopped his pacing. “How did you learn about her?”

William shrugged. “You don’t think your brother and sister-in-law would have informed us of all that we might face upon our arrival?”

Kenderick chimed in. “We know all about Miss Pownall... as if her treatment of you at the inn wasn’t proof enough that she still holds a certain affection for you.”

A snort left Brandon. “I should think dumping my drink over my head was proof of the opposite.” He refused to think of their private conversation, only a few short days ago, nor the etchings on the bench that had haunted his dreams of late.

William went to a sideboard and poured three draughts of brandy. The glasses clinked together when he gathered them together before passing them to the other men. “You’ve been on the battlefield too long if you can’t recognize the signs a woman is still in love with you.”

Brandon took a sip of his drink. “I am hardly husband material. Besides, Hannah needs a man who can keep up with her, not some cripple whom she’d only have to look after,” he muttered sourly.

Kenderick put his drink down and went to Brandon. He placed his hand on his shoulder. “You are not a cripple and I wish you’d stop referring to yourself as one. You just need time to heal and—”

“—and Roselyn won’t be happy with you if you continue on this self-destructive path. It’s emotionally scarring,” William finished as he watched Brandon pick up his pace across the floor again.

“I have my demons to conquer... just as much as you have yours, William, so leave it be,” Brandon said.

“Can’t do it. I’m on specific orders from my sister to see that you either are completely well again or that I send for the family doctor,” William replied inspecting the amber liquor in his glass that he began swirling around.

“Feel free to head home then and report all is well. Besides, if I’m in need of a doctor there is one in Reabridge,” Brandon answered, going to the window and pulling back the curtain to stare outside.

“I’ve heard the servants say the man is a drunk,” Kenderick drawled. “Seen too much in the war to be of much good until he sobers up.”

Brandon nodded, knowing all too well the injuries to the mind from the years at war. “Haven’t we all...”

Kenderick continued. “I highly doubt the duchess will think the good doctor competent enough to see to your needs if he’s as bad off as rumor implies.”

William finished his drink. “Please don’t make this harder than it is, Brandon. Why don’t we order your carriage be brought around and drive up to the Book and Bell? Your lovely lady will turn your day around.”

“She is hardly mine and I told her I was only here to recuperate. Nothing more,” Brandon scoffed with a frown.

Kenderick chuckled. “A man can change his mind, can’t he? Why not take the chance? I heard there’s some Harvest Moon festival coming up soon. You could offer to escort her there.”

Brandon let go of the window fabric and turned to face his friends. “She must hate me,” he murmured. He ran his hand over the back of his neck. Could she ever forgive him for his absence? He had been so relieved to learn she was unwed. Maybe he could persuade her to give them a second chance.

“There’s only one way to find out,” William said, going to the bell cord and giving it a tug. A few moments later the housekeeper stood in the doorway. “See that his lordship’s carriage is brought around. We’re going for a ride.”

Brandon sputtered a curse, seeing that William had taken the initiative to make up Brandon’s own mind. God help him if Hannah wouldn’t speak to him. He wasn’t sure he could handle the disappointment knowing there was nothing left

between them and he would need to move on with his life without her.

## CHAPTER 7



*K*nowing the day was getting away from her, and with so many things to see to in the kitchen, Hannah put back her shoulders so she could get back to work. She was just about to head into the kitchen when the front bell rang again. Customers... and early for luncheon. They'd be hungry if they had been traveling far this morning.

From the shadows, she could tell three gentlemen had arrived. "Take any seat you wish, and I'll be with you shortly," she said, holding her sister's amulet tight in her hand and her other items close to her chest.

"Just coffee for now, Hannah, if you would be so kind," a deep husky voice said from the entryway. He came out of the doorway and looked so handsome her knees almost buckled. After one very emotional confrontation today, she wasn't sure how much more she could handle, but she was about to find out. Lord Brandon Worthington had come to call.

Mary's possessions began to slip through her hands and Hannah gasped, not wishing for them to fall to the floor. Brandon made a move toward her but the two other men with him were faster and reached out for the clothing and comb.

"Allow me, Miss Pownall," one said with a welcoming smile.

"And me," the other added as he handed Mary's comb into Hannah's outstretched hands.

Brandon limped forward. "Perhaps introductions are in order. Miss Hannah Pownall, may I present my brother-in-law

William Winslow, Viscount Everleigh and a family friend Lord Kenderick Bourne.” Brandon nodded politely toward both men.

“A pleasure,” the gentlemen said in unison with a small bow.

“Welcome to the Book and Bell Inn,” Hannah replied with a short curtsy. “Take any seat, and I’ll just see to finding a safe place for these things. I’ll send someone in with your coffee.” Before she could make a hasty exit, Brandon gently took hold of her elbow.

“May I have a moment of your time, Hannah?”

“I’m very busy with the noon rush about to swarm the place.” She couldn’t help herself from gazing up into those amber eyes and her heart once more betrayed her. She was still in love with this man even after all these years.

“I promise to be brief. Just a few minutes of privacy is all I require,” he stated, holding out his arm.

Today seemed as good a day as any for new beginnings, although she tried not to get her hopes up that this was what he intended. She couldn’t stand to have her heart broken all over again. She clutched Mary’s things closer and took his arm with her free hand. After entering the kitchen, she stepped away and went to place the items on an empty space on a shelf until she could take them upstairs to her room or give them to mother and grandmother.

She was just about to suggest going outside when the back kitchen door flew open, and her grandmother Theodosia slammed the door behind her.

“That damned uppity woman!” she ranted. “It will be a cold day in hell if I let a Buckley raise our Mary’s baby.”

Hannah went to her grandmother, knowing she would need to break the news gently that the orphaned child in Reabridge wasn’t her sister’s. “Gram... I have it on good authority that Sam doesn’t belong to Mary and David.”

Her grandmother stopped her cursing. “But the boy’s blond with blue eyes...”



She took her grandmother's hand. "Yes, I know but lots of children have such features." She looked tentatively at Brandon before she continued. "We can discuss it further later."

"Lydia Buckley can't be right! She just can't," Theodosia complained. "I'll never be able to live down the humiliation."

Theodosia took her leave, and Hannah bit her lip wondering if she should go after her. Brandon must have read her mind.

"If you need to see to her, our conversation can wait," he suggested.

Hannah shook her head. "She'll be fine and besides, it's a deeper conversation that needs to include my mother. We can go out to the back. There will be no one to bother us except the chickens."

He followed her outside and Hannah tried to keep calm while she waited for Brandon to say whatever he wished of her.

"I know I was a complete dullard the other day when we met at our spot," he began with a tentative smile. That he mentioned the place by the meadow and pond brought fond memories of the boy she had tried to forget.

"I suppose my words were a bit harsh and I will warn you that today has been already trying. I can't vouch that I shall remain... as polite as my mother would expect of me," she said honestly. She raised her eyes to him but there was nothing showing on his face other than compassion.

"Is there anything I could help you with?" he asked, leaning heavily on his cane.

She shook her head as an answer to his question. There was nothing he could help with, of course, but she was curious as to what happened to him. She bit her lip in indecision if she should voice her concerns and then threw caution to the wind. "I hope you won't think me rude to ask this, but how did you become injured?"

He winced and then began fingering the handle of his cane. “Shrapnel. Near the leg joint. The sawbones surgeon couldn’t reach it and was ready to take the leg. If it wasn’t for a faithful drummer boy, I’d only have a stump. He lives with me now. It was the least I could do since he had no family of his own.”

She gasped at the thought of him lying in some tent close to a battlefield. “Oh Brandon! I’m so sorry,” she murmured, reaching out for him before she checked herself. “Does it bother you often?”

A slight chuckle left him. “I’ve become used to it. If I sit too long, I need to walk to work out the stiffness and of course if I do that too long, I need to sit. It’s a constant reminder of what the war has cost me.” He hesitated before he continued. “And perhaps this is why I am reluctant to ask you if you would consider seeing me again. A second chance so to speak.”

She tilted her head to one side to stare at him while her heart leapt in joy. It would never do to give in so easily. “I thought you were only here to rest and recuperate... or so you told me just a few days ago.”

“Yes... well... that was my original intention but the overwhelming relief I felt knowing you were still unwed gave me the first bit of hope I’ve felt in years. And then there was that memento you left on the bench.”

Hannah blushed. “I was afraid you would see that.”

Brandon stepped forward and took her hand. “It was lovely, Hannah. But I will certainly understand if you don’t want to further our association. Not many women would want a cripple for a potential husband.”

“Don’t you dare call yourself that, Brandon Worthington!” she scolded, stamping her foot to get her message across. “I won’t stand for it.”

He laughed. “Ah! There she is. That little fireball of a young woman whom I so did love to tease in our youth. Maybe there is hope for us after all that we could make another go of it.”

She bit her lip in indecision before she spoke her worse fears. “What will your mother or brother think of you courting a woman who works in an inn?”

“My mother is just thankful that I came back alive from Waterloo intact... for the most part. My brother and sister couldn’t care less who I might marry as long as I am happy.” He raised her fingers to his lips. His breath was warm, and she did everything in her power not to heave a heavy sigh at his romantic gesture when his lips brushed her skin.

She had forgotten he had a sister. His father was someone she could never forget. “Your father minded greatly.”

A startled look passed over Brandon’s features before he composed himself once more. “My father is long gone from this world and, though I wish no ill will on the dead, he no longer has any say in the way I run my life.”

“I don’t want to be the cause of any family problems, Brandon, nor could I stand to watch you have to leave again,” she mused aloud.

“Give us a chance, Hannah. I will do all in my power to make up for the years we missed together. I promise.”

“I may just hold you to your vow, Brandon,” she stated while her heart melted away the last of the wall of ice she had erected so many years ago. She had another chance with him and she would grasp it willingly with both hands!

“Please do so and feel free to call me out if I ever start to break your heart again,” he said with a short bow. He began to lean forward and she waited breathlessly for him to kiss her.

His mouth inches from her own, she had closed her eyes in anticipation of what she had longed for all these years, but they now opened wide when all she could feel was his breath. His amber eyes twinkled in delight and a roguish grin turned up the corner of that mouth she had been wishing were upon her own.

“May I kiss you, Hannah?” he asked quietly.

She stepped even closer, and her fingertips smoothed the lapels of his coat before making their way around his neck.

She fingered the edges of his hair until she at last gave her answer. "I thought you'd never ask."

Home... his mouth upon her own was like coming home or a taste of heaven itself. She never thought she'd feel the emotions Brandon brought out in her again. His lips took possession of hers, claiming her like no other ever could. Brandon belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

Eight long years dissolved in an instant. He began to work his magic with his tongue and hers in a dance known to lovers throughout all time. Time... he had once told her that their love went beyond just their brief time together and would last for all eternity. And when his arms went around her waist and he pulled her into his body, she believed his words from all those years ago. Today they would begin anew, and the past could stay where it belonged.

The back door to the inn opened, a clearing of someone's throat was heard and then her father's voice filled the backyard causing them to break apart and the chickens to squawk.

"Hannah! We're back. Get in here, young lady, and help your mother with the noon meal," he ordered. When she turned to face her father, there was a look of concern on his features when he realized who's arms she was in. "Lord Brandon... here for luncheon?"

"Yes, sir. I just wanted to have a word with your daughter," Brandon said as they began to head toward the back door. "But if I could also have a moment of your time to discuss an important matter with you, sir, I'd be very appreciative."

"Yes... yes... of course, my lord. If you would give me a minute to take care of a few things, we can adjourn to my office to talk," her father declared as she watched Brandon with a concerned smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Pownall. I know how busy you must be with the festival looming near." Brandon turned again to face Hannah and gave her bow. "A pleasure, as always, Miss Pownall. I look forward to our next meeting."

“My lord,” she said quietly as she watched Brandon enter the kitchen and she followed him with her eyes until he took a seat in the dining area.

Her father came to stand beside her. “Should I ask what *that* was all about? Is there a problem that I need to call him out? Did you offer an apology for your behavior the last time he was here?”

She gave a small smile. “Everything is just fine with Lord Brandon, Father. There’s nothing to worry over.”

Her father’s silence caused her to raise her eyes toward him. He was staring at her with a fierce frown. “Is there something you need to tell me of what’s going on with the two of you?” he asked, taking her arm and gently guiding her out of the doorway and deeper into the kitchen so they wouldn’t be overheard. Her mother joined them, a concerned look upon her face.

Hannah’s joy could barely be contained. She smiled at her parents. “I think he’s going to ask your permission, Father, about allowing him to court me.”

Her father scowled. “But what about Gilbert? Or even Randall. They’re both local men who have no plans to wander far. Either would make you a good husband, Hannah.”

Her mother waved her finger at her husband. “She doesn’t love either of those men and you know it, Lloyd. When have you ever seen her take an interest in anyone other than Lord Brandon?”

“But she’ll leave. I don’t know if I can stand to lose another daughter,” Lloyd answered honestly before pulling Hannah into his embrace.

Eliza came and put her arms around them both. “Children leave, sweetheart. It’s the cycle of life. But the joy they bring when they return is something to look forward to. It’s way past time our Hannah begins her life out on her own and Lord Brandon is just the man for her.”

Hannah raised her head from her father’s chest. “You won’t lose me, Father,” she soothed while patting his arm.

“Lord Brandon plans to stay at Stonebrook. If things work out, I’d only be gone for short periods of time whenever we might visit his family.”

Lloyd cleared his throat. “I suppose we’ll need to let Gilbert know... and Randall.”

Hannah gave a heavy sigh hoping the two men wouldn’t be too disappointed. “Gilbert will eventually understand, Father. As for Randall, I’ve been pushing him in the direction of Meg Barlow. She’d make him an excellent wife.”

Her father peered down at her. “You have?” At her nod, he squared his shoulders. “Then, I best go see if all this speculation of what is on the young lord’s mind is in fact a truth. I only want your happiness, Hannah.”

“I know,” she said, smiling.

Hannah watched her father leave, and she peeked around the opening to the dining room to see Brandon stand to follow her father to his office. He gave her a wink when he walked by and, for that one little moment, Hannah had the distinct feeling that her world, as she knew it, had suddenly changed for the better.

## CHAPTER 8



Brandon limped along with an unsteady gait across the wooden bridge to the island that separated the north and south ends of Reabridge. He had requested an outing this afternoon with the Pownall ladies, and Hannah's brother, Martin, had joined them to keep an eye on his family... or so Brandon supposed. He could hardly blame the man. Brandon had left Hannah at a young impressionable age and broke her heart when he hadn't returned as promised. That her brother was leery of Brandon's motives were no surprise.

"You don't deserve her after all the heartbreak you caused her years ago," Martin said quietly as though he had listened to Brandon's thoughts.

Brandon continued to move forward although he slowed his already painful pace. This trip on foot was going to cost him. "My intentions toward your sister are honorable," Brandon replied praying his leg wouldn't buckle and he'd fall flat on his face in the dirt.

"You'll have to prove your words aren't just meaningless ramblings of someone used to getting what they want," Martin said with a scowl. "You weren't here to pick up the pieces when you left the first time. I highly doubt my sister would be up for a repeat performance."

"Her happiness is everything to me," Brandon said honestly. He stopped and turned to Hannah's brother. "I have spoken my intentions to your father. He has agreed to allow me to court her as I should have done eight years ago. You can trust me."

Martin continued to stare at him in silence as if assessing Brandon's worth. He finally gave a heavy sigh of resignation. "Mother and father both said you were a man of honor. I suppose, unless you prove to me otherwise, I will have to trust you with the care of my sister." Martin held out his hand and Brandon shook it with a firm grip.

The interrogation this family had been putting him through had finally been worth it if Brandon had gained her brother's approval. With Hannah's brother's acceptance, Brandon felt as if the day could now begin. He watched the lady of his dreams walking ahead with her mother and holding hands with her younger sister. The Pownall resemblance was remarkable, and Brandon could see a bit of Hannah's personality in the spirited younger girl at Hannah's side. He quickened his pace to catch up with them while Martin followed behind them.

"—and I'm so excited to at last be presented with my very own amulet this year," Dorothy was saying while her eyes beamed in delight. "It's proof that I'm all grown up and ready to find the man of my dreams."

Eliza Pownall took hold of her daughter's free hand. "There's no need to get overly excited, child. There's plenty of time for you to find a young man to love. Don't be in too much of a hurry to grow up."

Brandon came to walk next to Hannah who took hold of his elbow. She leaned forward and Brandon bent down so she could whisper in his ear. "She is hoping to find love since I had found it myself at the same age."

He chuckled and couldn't resist teasing her. "So, you love me..." His words lingered quietly in the air between them.

One delicate brow arched upward. "You have to ask?"

His lips twitched in amusement. "It was more of a statement than a question, I think."

"I should deny you an answer and let you stew on the matter," she scoffed even though he could see that her eyes sparkled in delight.



He leaned forward again. A light flowery scent rose from her hair and Brandon inhaled deeply. "I have your answer, my dear. No need to say the words aloud."

"You rogue, Brandon Worthington!" she declared while playfully slapping at his arm. "Don't think for one minute you will bend me to your will and always get your way."

"I hear a challenge, if I'm not mistaken. Shall we put your words to the test," he teased again.

A snort left her causing Hannah's eyes to widen from such an unladylike sound. Brandon laughed.

"I hardly think that was funny," she replied trying to appear put off.

"You continue to surprise me, Hannah. I have the feeling our life together will be a sweet adventure where we never want the days... or the nights... to ever end," he said as he took her hand. He gave it a kiss.

Her eyes became wide again at his words while she looked around to see if her family had overheard his words. "Do you wish to cause a scandal with such talk?"

"Certainly not. Besides, no one is paying the least bit of attention to us apart from your brother. He seems to be of the impression that I'm about to run off with the family jewels."

Hannah laughed. "I hardly think you're in need of whatever small fortune we may have." She grew serious for a moment as they continued to walk side by side. "You never said where you were taking us."

"To Clark's Mercantile. I thought to treat you ladies to a small shopping excursion to purchase whatever your heart's desire. Plus, Miss Dorothy will need some new ribbons for the Harvest Festival next week and I thought she could pick them out herself," he said until he saw the frown marring her brow. "Is that a problem? They're only ribbons."

She hesitated briefly. "It's not the ribbons that are the problem, only the location."

It was his turn to frown. “What’s wrong with the Mercantile store? I thought the island was neutral ground for your ongoing feud with the Buckley’s.”

She waved her hand in front of her. “Yes, of course, the island is neutral territory. It’s just that until recently, the younger Mr. Clark has had... a... certain idea he would like to court me. I have been nudging him in the direction of Meg Barlow who is cousin to the Earl, but I still think he is holding out that something may develop between us. I have not had the opportunity to set the matter right. Not with all the preparations going on for the festival. There just haven’t been enough hours in the day.”

“We could skip going there, and I could go by myself to get the ribbons for your sister and whatever else you and your mother might like,” Brandon offered.

“We might as well see it through. I’d hate to disappoint Dorothy when she has been looking forward to the outing. As long as you don’t mind that I have a short conversation with Mr. Clark, then I suppose I could let the man down gently with a private word or two. This way, there will be no further misunderstandings as to where my affection lies.”

“I don’t mind at all if that means one less man vying for your attention, Hannah, and I get you all to myself.”

“Your overconfidence is one day going to get you into trouble, my lord,” she whispered while caressing the sleeve of his coat.

“We’ll go down that road together then, Miss Pownall, and I shall willingly allow you to take me to task for any wrongdoing on my part,” he replied and as they reached the mercantile, he opened the door for the women of their group.

Once inside the store, Hannah excused herself and made her way to the counter where a young man’s eyes lit up when he saw Hannah making her way toward him. He offered his arm, and he escorted her to a table with two chairs at the window. Brandon moved further into the store to give her the small bit of privacy that could be allowed but he was still close enough to see the man’s disappointment register on his face

after a few minutes of conversation. His head fell forward until he looked up and met Brandon's eyes.

Mr. Clark stood, as did Hannah who made her way to her sister and mother. Mr. Clark, on the other hand, came to stand next to Brandon who waited for the next person who would take him to task. He was instead surprised.

"Take good care of her, Lord Brandon. Hannah is a true treasure any man would be lucky to call his wife," Randal said with a gaze toward the lady.

"I will," Brandon said as he watched the man resume his place behind the counter. Martin was already busy ordering items to have sent back to the inn.

The ladies of their party began to fuss over which ribbons might look best until Brandon scooped them all up and said he'd buy them all. Dorothy giggled. Eliza Pownall voiced her disapproval. Hannah smiled, and if he could continue to make this woman happy for the rest of their days together, then he would be content.

Hannah had become everything to him and even in his darkest moments of reliving what the war had done to him mentally and physically, love had somehow found a way back into his heart. He was one lucky man.

## CHAPTER 9



Hannah frowned. Her back to the guests waiting in the reception area of the inn, she stood with her father behind the registration counter. He held out the key to one of the rooms and shook his head.

“He just up and left without settling his accounts,” Lloyd announced in a hushed tone. “Mr. Winthorpe checked in late the night before last and then he just packed his bags and left in the dead of last night. He’s not the first to do so and reminds me that I should be asking for a deposit on the rooms we let out.”

“You couldn’t have known, Father,” Hannah replied, taking the key and putting it back into place for the room to be let out again once it had been cleaned. A low growl came from her father and Hannah prepared herself for what was to come next. “What are you not telling me?”

Lloyd nodded to Miss Gaveston, who was sitting quietly at a table sipping tea. “She has some jewelry missing. I was just about to send a lad for the constable, but could you sit with her and see what details you can get about the theft? You have a way with our guests that put them at ease.”

“Yes, of course, I can talk to her,” Hannah replied, picking up a pencil and paper to take any notes that might be beneficial.

“If word gets out about this theft, we’ll be ruined,” her father grumbled.

Hannah patted his hand. "It won't come to that, Father. Let me see what I can find out." She went to Miss Gaveston and motioned to the empty chair. "May I?"

The lady nodded and Hannah took a seat but before she could say anything, the lady began to give a detailed account of what was missing. Horror raced across Hannah's features as she listened to the lady. Stunned, Hannah found her voice. "None of my people would do such a thing! I've known them all my life! Besides, they know the inn and their jobs depend on our reputation for honesty. This is terrible! For all of us as well as for you. Who could have done such a thing?"

"That is what we have been wracking our brains over. What about your other guests or strangers in the taproom?" Miss Gaveston suggested before Hannah cut her off.

Hannah ran her hand over her eyes in frustration. Her father might be right... if word got out about the theft, the Buckley's would pounce on the opportunity to sling the Pownall name through the mud. "There are some unemployed soldiers around," she admitted. "Not all known to me. Some have come with comrades and friends, for the harvest festival... There was that gentleman who stayed last night. Mr. Winthorpe."

"We could ask him if he had seen anyone..." Miss Gaveston's words trailed off before she took a sip of her tea.

"You don't understand," Hannah answered with a frown. "He's gone. Didn't even pay his shot, but his room is cleared out. His servant's gone, too."

Miss Gaveston's mouth dropped open in shock. "He did not pay? Nor leave word where to send your invoice?"

Hannah shook her head, upset that had they lost the cost of a room but more importantly the lady's jewels had been taken while she stayed in their inn. Cool air swept across the room when the front door opened. Hannah grimaced with sudden anger considering who she now saw. "Or perhaps the culprit is closer to home. You could do worse than look at *him*."

Miss Gaveston turned, and a blush rushed across the woman's face when she noticed Captain Buckley almost upon them. "Oh, no," she said to Hannah. "That is quite wrong. Captain Buckley would not steal from me or anyone!"

Hannah couldn't help the grim expression that spread quickly to her face. "Not to hurt you, perhaps. But he certainly wouldn't mind ruining the Pownalls. None of the Buckley's would mind that."

"You're quite wrong, Hannah," the captain said mildly, bowing slightly and taking the third seat at the table uninvited. "What is it I am supposed to have done now?"

Hannah brow lifted as she met his challenging glare. "Probably, you stole Miss Gaveston's jewels."

"Most certainly I did not," he declared while clearly annoyed at the thought of being accused as a thief. "What even brings the idea to your mind?"

"The fact that they're gone," Hannah replied quickly.

His eyebrows flew up and he turned his attention to Miss Gaveston for clarification.

"They have vanished from my chamber," the lady began, "but I know Miss Pownall is surely joking in her accusation. If a so-called gentleman stole my rubies, I know precisely which one."

Captain Buckley locked his gaze with Hannah's and she had the decency to gulp. "Why, did he also seduce a Pownall, and abandon her with her child in a foreign land? If he didn't, I'm afraid I am the only possible culprit for theft or any other crime in the vicinity."

Hannah flushed but didn't drop her gaze. "If you are innocent, prove it."

"I have no need to," the captain said quietly. "And if you throw such accusations at me, you know perfectly well they will come flying back to you. The inn is yours."

"Trying to force us out of business?" Hannah retorted sharply.

Captain Buckley's eyes were steady, not angry. "I think you know that's not true. Let us not have yet another quarrel over a lie."

Unshed tears formed in Hannah's eyes before she sprang to her feet and muttered an apology to Miss Gaveston. She excused herself, not wishing to shed a river of tears in front of others. Wrong again where David Buckley was concerned and her overwhelming feeling of embarrassment at how she had been treating him caused the loss of her sister to rise to the forefront of her mind.

She was about to head up the stairs when her arm was caught, and she was folded into familiar arms. The scent of his cologne reminded her how long it had been since he had held her, and her tears started to flow down her cheeks.

"What's wrong, little one?" Brandon asked, brushing the wetness from her face.

"So much, I don't know where to start," she cried out as she clasped her arms around his waist and held tight. He gently placed her head against his chest and the steadiness of his heartbeat calmed her frayed nerves.

He led her to a quiet booth in the dining area, and she scooted next to him to keep him close. She didn't care what anyone thought of her bold behavior. She needed Brandon to make things right in her world, and she knew he'd do all in his power to help them find the man who stole Miss Gaveston's rubies from the inn.

## CHAPTER 10



The day of the harvest festival dawned bright with hardly a cloud in the sky. Brandon had risen early in order to be at the Book and Bell to help Hannah and her parents with any preparations they may need in order to ensure their booth of food was ready. William, Kenderick, and Trevor had taken the carriage once he was dropped off at the inn. A wagon brimming with goods stood ready to be driven to the island.

Hannah came out of the front door to greet him and he crossed the grassy area to lift her fingertips to his lips. “Good morning, my love,” he murmured softly, tucking her arm into the crook of his elbow. “What can I do to help you get ready?”

She hugged his arm close to her. “We’re all set. Mother and Father have actually hired several reliable women to run the booth so we can enjoy the festival for a change. It probably has more to do with keeping an eye on Dorothy since she’s been given her amulet, but whatever the reason, I’m happy to have the day off for my leisure.”

Brandon nodded. “And have you learned more about the thief Captain Buckley suspects stole his lady’s jewels?”

She raised her brow. “*His* lady? Do you think the situation has progressed that far?”

Brandon gave a small smile, having only seen the couple once. But clearly that brief encounter had told him much. “It’s hard to miss when love is in the air.”



She gave a light laugh. "I never knew you were such a romantic."

"Surely you're aware that you are the one who brings such an emotion out in me."

"Then I am a lucky woman," Hannah replied. "But in answer to your question, David and the lady hope to catch Winthorpe in the act of pawning the rubies off this afternoon if all goes according to their plan. If they can make that happen, the inn's reputation will remain intact. David has asked me to bear witness by being close by this afternoon. I was hoping you could accompany me."

"I am yours to command for the entire day and night, my dear," Brandon said pulling her close. "Besides, I wouldn't put you in harm's way or near a situation without reinforcement in case I can be of assistance."

"Always the gentleman," Hannah said quietly while removing a piece of lint from his sleeve.

"My mother would expect nothing less," he replied. "If you're ready to go, then I would be pleased to escort you and your sister to the festival."

Hannah agreed and called to Dorothy who rushed up to them.

"Lord Brandon," she beamed. "I'm so happy you're here to act as our escort for the day."

"It's my greatest pleasure, Miss Dorothy," he said. "Shall we, ladies?"

Their pace across the bridge to the island matched his uneven gait and Brandon realized how much his leg was already bothering him. He had been walking on it more of late with hardly any time to rest. God forbid the day turned into a nightmare if at some point he could no longer stand upon the troublesome limb. He would hate to ruin the day for the Pownall ladies nor deprive himself of Hannah's company.

They made their way to where their booth was to be set up. Brandon could do nothing more than sit on a chair that was provided for him while the rest of the servants and Pownall's

began decorating and ensuring everything was up to their high standards. An hour later and Hannah was ready to have the entire day to herself. Since the rendezvous wasn't until later, Brandon led Hannah and Dorothy to watch several events.

They stood on the side of the road to observe a parade of dancers as the women twirled around with their brightly colored dresses. Clapping their hands to the music as musicians passed by delighted Hannah and Dorothy and he was sorry to see the parade end since it had brought such joy to the two ladies. But there was more to keep them occupied for the day as they wandered from the merchant booths selling their wares, saw a baking contest before purchasing a treat or two, and even sat to watch as Dorothy participated in a corn doll contest. She was delighted to win a ribbon for third prize.

When the appointed time finally came for Hannah to hopefully witness Winthorpe's downfall, the evening sun had set, and a full harvest moon lit the sky. They escorted Dorothy back to her parents so they could hurry to another part on the island where they were told Winthorpe was to meet a pawnbroker. Standing nearby in the shadows of the night, Winthorpe finally appeared. The pawnbroker held out his hand and something reddish flashed in the light from the lanterns.

"I just know those are Miss Gaveston's rubies!" Hannah hissed while taking a firm hold on Brandon's arm.

"Let's just watch this play out, my dear. Remember we're here only as a witness to the exchange. We don't want to interfere."

"But we can't allow him to escape," Hannah insisted while the pawnbroker tossed payment for the jewels to Winthorpe who eagerly grabbed it.

It was at this moment when David and Miss Gaveston came out of the shadows and that was Hannah's signal to also step forward. But they weren't alone since there were also several soldiers along with the town vicar. Winthorpe wasn't going anywhere!

Winthorpe gasped before a gleam entered his eyes. "I've found your necklace! Look! That's the man that stole it!" he

accused pointing toward the pawnbroker.

“Why you lying ...” the pawnbroker choked out in fury. He dropped the rubies but Miss Gaveston caught them before they could fall to the ground. She clutched them to her chest.

Brandon held Hannah close to his side while David continued to berate Winthorpe for the theft. Luck had been on their side, and the fiasco of the stolen gems had a conclusion that was favorable for not only Miss Gaveston but also Hannah and her family’s inn.

They watched as the soldiers led Winthorpe away and Lady Gaveston headed back toward the music and evening dancing. David appeared to be waiting for a private word with Hannah. Brandon leaned down to kiss the top of her head.

“Go talk to him. I’ll be but a short distance away,” he said as he went to sit on a bench, close enough if she should have need of him but far enough away to give them the privacy they required.



Hannah followed David but a small distance to sit on a step near a merchant booth. She wasn’t sure what he wanted to say but she was certain that the feud between their families was at an end.

“Thank you for helping,” he said. “I thought you’d want to be a witness, though I don’t fancy your chances of his ever paying your bill.”

“Or yours.”

“True.”

“I never thought you took the jewels, David. I knew you hadn’t.”

“I know.”

They sat there quietly for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts as the past merged with the present and a sad sort of silence stretched between them.

David finally voiced his thoughts, and they were as troubling as Hannah's own. "She didn't die alone, Hannah. I was with her."

"I know," she whispered thinking of her sister. She rubbed the back of her hand along her eyes. "And I know you didn't seduce her. Wild horses couldn't stop Mary doing what she'd set her heart on. I always knew that. I just forgot it for a bit."

"Grief," he said nodding. "It clouds thoughts and makes for odd behavior. I speak from experience."

"I'm sorry," Hannah replied. Tears glinted on her cheek. This time, she didn't bother to wipe them. Regret filled her heart and she wished she could turn back the hands of time and be closer to her sister. She would never get that opportunity now that Mary was gone. "Sorry you lost her. Sorry I did."

He put his arm around her shoulder giving her a hug. "So am I, Hannah."

She sat there in the moment accepting the comfort David was willing to offer her and more of the hatred she had been holding inside melted away. It was as though they were starting anew... a fresh beginning and the final end to the Buckley/Pownall feud.

"I loved her," he said and Hannah could in no way doubt his words.

"She loved you."

He nodded.

Hannah raised her head from his shoulder and looked at him. "*She* loves you, too, you know."

He blinked as if he had no idea who Hannah was speaking about. "Who?"

Hannah nudged him. "Miss Gaveston, you idiot. And I've seen the way you look at her. Don't hold back for Mary. She would want you to be happy again."

He swallowed hard. "It isn't for Mary. She is an earl's daughter with a dowry to match. I'm...well you know who

and what I am.”

Hannah had heard the rumors buzzing around town today. So, they were true. Miss Gaveston was truly Lady Lorna Gaveston, but if Hannah could love a lord, why couldn't David love a lady?

“I know what you *were*. Never afraid to go after what you wanted, or to do what you knew was right.” She held his gaze realizing how wrong she'd been about the man next to her. “Isn't Lady Lorna right for you.”

His breath caught. “Oh, God, yes. So right...”

“Then why are you sitting here with me, slow-top?”

David laughed, hugged her again and sprang up to run down the lane to find his lady.

Hannah made her way to Brandon who held out his arm. She took it as they began to head toward the bonfire and evening entertainments. His gait slowed while they maneuvered through the crowd, and they continued onward in the darkness of the night with only the moon above them.

“I think I could manage a slow dance if you don't mind shorter steps,” Brandon said when they found their way to the village square.

“I would like nothing more than to dance the evening away with you, dearest Brandon,” she said with a soft sigh of contentment, “but first... kiss me.”

She clearly didn't have to ask twice and when his arms wrapped themselves around her, her whole world tilted on the brink of something wonderful. His mouth hovered near her lips. Their breath mingling together as though two lost souls had finally found one another again. Brandon lowered his head, she closed her eyes, and when his lips touched hers in a kiss that held a promise, a joy she had never felt before consumed her entire being. They had just needed time... time to heal... time to forgive... and time to learn to love again.

For the rest of the evening, Brandon was never far from her side and whenever a slower tune was played, he readily took her into his arms, and they danced the night away. The

Harvest Moon Festival was a success. If this was what having Brandon Worthington in her life would be like, she would be the happiest woman in all of Reabridge!

## CHAPTER 11



**B**randon, William, and Kenderick sat at one of the booths at the Book and Bell and drank the cold ale that had been brought to their table. It had been several days since the Harvest Moon Festival had ended and Brandon had done his best to spend most of his time here where he could be close to Hannah. She was busy serving tables but just being this close to her was enough, at least for now. He continued to wonder how he would be able to take her away from her family's inn without causing her parents a hardship. Not that he wanted to dictate how Hannah spent her days once he proposed and they were one day married, but he wanted to show her the world if she would but allow him the luxury.

William gave him a nudge. "You really didn't hear a word I just said, did you?" he asked with a chuckle.

Kenderick set down his tankard after taking a taste of the cool brew. "Nary a word. He's too far gone, William. Love has struck our dear friend and he will never be the same again."

Brandon raised his brow in an attempt to look indifferent which only caused the two men sitting across from him to laugh even harder. "Maybe you should try it for yourselves, gentleman. I highly recommend the love of a good woman to set your life in order," Brandon said with a smirk. "It will do wonders for you."

Kenderick leaned forward. "Show me a woman worthy enough to love and I just might take you up on it. My prospects have been debutantes or widows who only see me

for my title and the riches that line my purse. Hardly wife material,” he scoffed.

William nodded. “I should probably make an attempt to make amends with Lady Abigail Sinclair if she’ll forgive me for being gone so long. When I joined the cause against Napoleon, I obviously didn’t think through what this would do to a young woman back home waiting for my return.”

Brandon’s gaze traveled to Hannah while she carried a heavy tray to a nearby table. “She’ll forgive you... once you’ve groveled enough at her feet,” Brandon declared. “If Hannah can forgive me, I’m sure your fair lady will do the same. I’ve always known Lady Abigail to be very reasonable.”

William took another sip of his drink. “Do you really think so?” he asked after he placed the tankard on the table.

Brandon nodded while he continued to watch his lady go about her duties. “Perhaps you should send Lady Abigail a letter when we return to Stonebrook Manor. Explain everything. I’m certain she’ll come around.”

Hannah finally handed off the large tray she had been carrying to another server and came over to their table. Brandon scooted over on the seat to allow her to sit with him.

“I only have a moment to spare but wanted to say hello. Did you need anything? More food or ale?” she asked as she took hold of his hand beneath the table.

“We’ve eaten more than we should have,” William answered. “I haven’t eaten such good food in a very long while.”

Hannah smiled. “My mother will be pleased to hear it, my lord. She prides herself on ensuring that no one leaves the Book and Bell hungry.”

Brandon bent forward and kissed her cheek and then whispered in her ear. “I wish I could whisk you away to some far corner of this world so we could spend some time alone together.”

She raised those remarkable blue eyes to him, and a blush rushed across her features. “Soon. Maybe in another hour I can



sneak away.”

He raised her hand to his lips but before he could say anything more, a snarl of outrage followed by a glass shattering on the floor rang out in the room. All eyes turned toward the bar where a man was far into his cups. He swayed when he stood, knocking over the stool he had been sitting on, and began to weave his way across the floor.

Hannah squeezed Brandon’s hand.

“Who is he?” he inquired quietly.

Hannah gave a weary sigh. “Gilbert Barker. He works for my father tending the bar but tonight is his night off.”

Brandon frowned while watching the man’s progress as he stumbled into a table. “Perhaps I should rephrase that question,” he murmured. “Who is he to you?”

“There’s no reason to be jealous, Brandon,” she stated, patting his arm.

“I’m not jealous. It’s only your Mr. Barker is dead set on having a conversation if he can manage one and he appears to be heading this way,” Brandon said with a frown. “Come change places with me, my dear. I don’t want you in harm’s way if he’s hell bent on making a scene.”

With Hannah safely placed near the wall in their booth, Brandon remained standing to confront the drunk, angry man.

Gilbert came up to Brandon and proceeded to poke him in the chest. He rocked back and forth on his feet in his attempts to keep his balance. “You think yer so smart coming back here and stealing my woman,” he slurred. He blinked several times obviously trying to correct his double vision.

William leaned an arm on the table. “Do yourself a favor, mate, and go sleep it off. There are families here and we’re certain you don’t wish to cause a scene.”

An overly loud snarl of outrage escaped Gilbert. “I d-don’t give a d-damn who hears me! I want ret- retro- bution for m-my...” he stuttered while swaying again on his feet before belching. “You stole her from me!”

Hannah tried to reach herself around Brandon who only held out his hand to keep her safe. “He stole nothing from you, Gilbert. You’re making a spectacle of yourself. Go home, before someone gets hurt.”

Gilbert made another poke at Brandon. “You owe me!” he bellowed.

Brandon took hold of Gilbert’s arm. “You heard the lady. Go home before Mr. Pownall decides he no longer wishes to employ a drunk.”

Brandon had thought his words had finally registered on the younger man’s drunken brain for he turned as though he was about to leave. Brandon had just taken a step to sit back down in the booth when Gilbert’s arm swung at Brandon catching him off guard. Although his aim was most likely intended to inflict harm to Brandon’s face, Gilbert’s fist made contact lower hitting Brandon in the shoulder.

A scuffle between the two men broke out with Brandon doing everything to keep his feet beneath him. But the unsteadiness of the drunken man only added to Brandon’s inability to remain upright. Brandon took hold of Gilbert’s shirt trying to keep them both from tumbling to the floor.

“Enough of this!” Brandon yelled out but Gilbert was on a mission to prove he had been unjustly treated.

“She was mine!” Gilbert cried out while his fist once more swung forward making contact with Brandon’s eye.

Brandon swore as he stumbled backwards, and it was his misfortune that his boots slipped on the wet floor where Gilbert had shattered his glass. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, but it was no use. Brandon began to fall and as he landed on his left knee, a cry of pain was wrenched from his lips.

Hannah was suddenly next to him, placing his head in her lap while her father and brother subdued Gilbert by removing him from the room.

“Fetch the doctor,” Hannah called out while she soothed the hair from his brow. “You’ll be alright, my darling.”

Brandon could only clench his teeth. “Get me home,” he urged before the world spun around him and he passed out cold.

## CHAPTER 12



Hannah rode to the entrance gate of Stonebrook Manor and pulled on the horse's reins. She had never been inside the house or grounds before. She wouldn't have been welcomed in those early days when she first met the young lord who had taken up residence here.

Trees lined the road leading up to the main residence. The house was impressive, making Hannah feel completely inadequate. She counted at least four stories of windows rising from the bottom floor. The grounds were immaculate, even though it was autumn and most of the trees were beginning to lose their leaves. She could imagine the beautiful garden in the back filled with springtime flowers Brandon used to tell her about. Still... she was so far out of her element sitting here staring up at the impressive home, that she could only wonder how in the world she would ever fit in with Society that made up a different part of Brandon's life. She couldn't believe for an instant she would be able to avoid it forever and live in a little cocoon of their own making.

She shook her head and flicked the reins causing her horse to trot up the drive. It had been a week since she had seen Brandon. A week of waiting for him to call upon her. A week of no answer other than him sending a note saying he was indisposed. *Indisposed!* The man fell on his injured leg, and she could only ponder what kind of condition he was in. With no word from Brandon or anyone else from his household, she was done waiting.

Espying a hitching post, she slowed her horse to a halt, swung her leg over the pommel to drop down to the ground, and proceeded to loop the leather reins in the metal hook. She took off her gloves and walked up to the door with her chin held high not knowing what to expect once the door opened and they saw she was a woman without a chaperone. A moment of surprise flitted across the butler's face, but he quickly masked his emotions by stating Lord Brandon wasn't receiving callers.

"Let him know that Miss Hannah Pownall is here to see him," she ordered while her gaze scanned the foyer of the house. She tried not to gulp or show any signs of weakness in front of this snooty servant. Why, the wealth in this entryway alone could fund the inn for months on end! She squeezed past the man and made her way inside.

White marble graced the floor while a curved stairway with a mahogany banister led to the upper floors. A vase of some wealth held a bouquet of dried flowers on a table next to the stairs. Everywhere she looked, in what little she could see, told her that Brandon was a very wealthy man.

She saw a room to her left with a comfortable looking chair and made her way toward what she assumed was the parlor. "I'll just wait here."

She expected the man to protest such an intrusion into a bachelor's home. But apparently his manners had taught him to not argue with a lady for he only briefly looked at her over his bushy eyebrows and left her alone to disappear up the stairs. She didn't wait long before Lord William and Lord Kenderick came rushing into the room.

"You shouldn't be here, Miss Pownall," William said, concern flashing in his eyes.

"Why not?" she asked.

Kenderick stepped forward. "He's unreasonable. Won't listen to anything we say—"

"—and we'd hate for you to be on the receiving end of his temper," William finished.

She tapped her foot beneath her gown then folded her arms over her chest. “Brandon Worthington has never raised his voice to me in all the time I have known him. Why do you think he would do so now?”

The two men exchanged silent glances before William heaved a heavy sigh and spoke first. “It’s his leg. We’ve never seen it this bad before. He wouldn’t let us call for the local doctor so instead we sent for his family physician. We’re hoping he’ll arrive soon to talk some sense into him.”

“That’s ridiculous to send for a doctor when the one here could see to whatever is causing Brandon’s leg to bother him.” Her mind made up, she began to leave the room and head toward the stairs. “Where is he?”

Kenderick’s eyes widened as he followed her. “Miss Pownall, you can’t just go waltzing into a man’s bedroom. It just isn’t proper!”

“Just watch me.” She gave them a look that dared them to try to stop her. When they snapped their mouths shut, Hannah took hold of the hem of her dress and began to take the stairs up to the second floor. She stood on the landing wondering which way was Brandon’s room when she heard his uneven steps coming from the left.

She wasted no time making her way down the corridor until she stood before what she assumed was his bedroom. She hesitated only momentarily before making her decision. There was no turning back now.

Swinging open Brandon’s door, she came to an abrupt stop almost causing William and Kenderick to run her over in their haste to stop her progress into the room. Her hand flew to her mouth in shock at what she saw. A week’s worth of growth had formed on his face and his eyes were bloodshot either from lack of sleep or from the amount of spirits she assumed he had drunk. But it was the dark red robe falling open to his waist exposing his bare chest that had left her speechless. Her eyes trailed down the lightly furred muscled torso where it disappeared at the cotton drawers riding low on his lean hips. He had cut the linen at one of the edges and torn the fabric

halfway up his thigh to accommodate his swollen leg. She couldn't imagine the amount of pain he was in as he paced his room.

He saw who had entered and grabbed at the edges of his robe. "Get her the hell out of here!" he bellowed to William and Kenderick.

They both moved simultaneously to each take an elbow, but she jerked her arms out of the way and continued her progress toward Brandon. "Just what do you think you're doing, Brandon? Trying to lose that leg?" she asked with her hands on her hips.

"Just the opposite, madam, and if you would take your leave, I will continue to pace this infernal room until the pain subsides," Brandon growled out.

"You refused to see the doctor I'm told. Are you mad?" she inquired looking around at the mess in the room. Several decanters were empty. The bedding crumbled into a ball as though he hadn't gotten much rest. "When was the last time you slept?"

"Who knows?" he fumed before turning hostile eyes to William and Kenderick. "What the blazes were you thinking allowing her to see me like this?"

Hannah stepped forward. "Don't you dare berate them. They are only trying to help you."

"Nothing will help me except for leaving me alone. Now all of you get out!"

She turned to face the two men who stood silently behind her. "Find out if there is word if his doctor is close by and if so get him here without further delay. If he's not near, then send for Dr. Wagner, he's the village physician," she began to order when William spoke out.

"But I heard he's nothing but a drunk, Miss Pownall, and Brandon wouldn't—"

"—Brandon is in no position to make any decisions for himself," Hannah declared interrupting him. "Besides, I have been told that Dr. Wagner has been sober for some time now."

He was an army surgeon and would be a better choice to examine Brandon's leg and injury than a general family physician."

William scowled in indecision. "If you think that's the wisest choice..." his words trailed off, but he still didn't move to adhere to Hannah's request. She stared them both down until Kenderick went to a bell pull. When a servant appeared, he gave Hannah's instructions to the man.

Hannah continued to issue orders. "I also want the coldest water we can get... ice if he has it... and plenty of towels or linen that can be torn into strips so we can try to get the swelling down."

Brandon cursed again. "Get out!"

Hannah wagged her finger at him. "You, sir, shall get into bed."

"Absolutely not," Brandon thundered but Hannah would not back down from her mission to see the love of her life well again.

"Very well. If you won't go there on your own, then Lord William and Lord Kenderick will see the matter done," she insisted, nodding to the two men who looked at one another as though she was asking the impossible. She began rolling up the sleeves of her dress. "Gentlemen... if you please..."

They shrugged before advancing. Brandon held out his cane as if he held the deadliest of weapons. But this wouldn't deter them from their progress to see her will done. She almost withdrew her words when Brandon began to put up a fight. Chairs crashed, his desk teetered when they all ran into it, Kenderick lost his grip on Brandon's arm and fell backwards but when William made another attempt at getting a hold of Brandon, he swung his fist while William ducked. Off balance, the world moved as though in slow motion and Hannah watched in horror as Brandon fell forward just as he had done a week ago at the inn. He fell onto his injured leg and a sickening snap echoed in the room along with a wail of anguish that was torn from his lips.



“Brandon!” she cried out running to him while he reached for his leg before passing out from the pain. “Get him into bed but gently. And please... find out about the doctor.”

William and Kenderick left her alone with Brandon and by the look of his leg, the bone had broken. Good heavens! What had she done?

## CHAPTER 13



Brandon's head ached. His mouth was dry. Slowly opening his eyes, he came to the realization that he was in his own bed but he remembered little of how he had gotten there. His gaze was drawn to the silhouette of a woman sleeping uncomfortably in a chair near the hearth. A book she had been reading had fallen to the floor and Brandon could only ponder how long she had been here looking over him. He reached underneath the linen coverings and let out a huge sigh of relief, thankful to feel his bandaged leg still in one piece. Thank God he hadn't lost it.

The door to the room opened and Dr. Thornberry waltzed in with a wide grin set upon his face. He was closely followed with Dr. Wagner. Coming over to Brandon's bedside, Thornberry reached over to feel his forehead like the doctor had done a thousand times in his youth.

"No fever. That's a very good sign," Dr. Thornberry said happily. "You're one lucky young man considering the hell you put these poor people through."

"I remember little of what happened," Brandon said struggling to sit up.

His doctor fluffed his pillows and took a seat in a chair next to the bed. "Yes... well... the amount of brandy you consumed probably has a lot to do with your lack of memory. Didn't your brother ever teach you such a liquor was to be savored?"

"I might have missed his instructions," Brandon chuckled.

“I can imagine. I hear you were quite vocal in your desires to remain by yourself. If you didn’t scare that young lady off with your temper, then I’m certain you’ve found yourself a woman worthy of you.”

His eyes traveled to Hannah still sleeping in the chair. “She’s been here the whole time?”

Dr. Wagner stood next to Dr. Thornberry’s chair and nodded. “Refused to leave you and I must applaud her efforts to get the swelling down before I arrived. It’s probably what saved your leg. Your attempt to walk all the way back to France only made the problem worse I’m afraid,” the doctor declared before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a piece of linen. He opened it up and held something out for Brandon to take. A piece of shrapnel fell into his hands.

“But how?” Brandon asked with a frown.

“Since we had to set your broken leg, I took the liberty of making a small incision after Miss Pownall informed me of your injury at Waterloo. The break just happened to be in the right place allowing me to rid you of that unwanted piece of lead. Your leg will mend and you’ll be dancing the quadrille and other merry tunes with that young lady in no time.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, doctor,” Brandon replied feeling relieved that with time he would no longer feel like a cripple. Their conversation had woken Hannah and she pulled herself from the chair and made her way over to the bed.

“No need to thank me but you might wish to thank her,” Dr. Wagner replied with a smile, nodding toward Hannah. “I was only too happy to step in when your own doctor was still some distance.”

Brandon turned his gaze toward the man who had known him all his life. “Seems to me you’ve come a long way for nothing,” he said reaching for the man’s hand to shake.

“It was no trouble,” Dr. Thornberry said. “Besides... your brother, the duke, will see that my bill is paid. It won’t be the first time he’s had to settle my accounts from me having to travel a long way to see my patient.”

“I am in your debt... both of you,” Brandon declared also reaching for Dr. Wagner’s hand.

“We’ll leave you in this lady’s good care. There’s laudanum for the pain if he’s in need of it. Not too much mind you,” Dr. Wagner said. “You know where to send word, Miss Pownall, if you have need of me.”

“Thank you for everything, Dr. Wagner... Dr. Thornberry,” Hannah replied taking the seat the good doctor vacated. She folded her hands in her lap and appeared embarrassed to be alone in his room together.

“How can I thank you for all you’ve done?” Brandon murmured reaching over to take one of her hands.

She scooted her chair closer and took her free hand to move a lock of his hair from his forehead. “You were injured and I love you. How could I not be here when you needed me?”

“Your parents must be beside themselves knowing you’re here without a woman as a chaperone,” he said while worrying about her reputation.

She gave a light laugh. “Yes... well... I did have some explaining to do and then the next thing I knew my grandmother showed up and started taking control over your household. I think your staff are half afraid of her.”

His eyes widened before he, too, chuckled at the thought of a little grey-haired woman taking control of Stonebrook. “This place will never be the same but I’m glad for it. You belong here. You always did.”

She cocked her head to one side and smirked. “Are you trying to tell me you’re going to make an honest woman of me, Lord Brandon?” she teased him.

“It is my fondest wish for you to take me as your husband if you’ll have me, my love,” he whispered raising her fingertips to his lips. He pulled on her arm, and she had little choice but to move onto the edge of the bed.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she murmured before she bent forward and placed her lips on his own.

It was a sweet kiss holding a promise of all the years they had waited to be together. Years melted away and for an instant, Brandon remember the girl from his youth he had fallen hopelessly in love with. He had never forgotten her, and his heart soared that at last they could be together. He wound his hand around her neck and deepened their kiss and her soft moan was like music to his ears.

“Enough of that now!” Theodosia’s voice called as she entered the room. “Hannah, go get yourself changed for dinner. You look a rumped mess. What will his lordship think? I’ve asked for a table to be brought here so we can all dine together. Lord Brandon, you had best keep your lips to yourself or you’ll answer to me.”

“Yes, madam,” he said with a chuckle as Hannah placed a kiss on his cheek.

“I love you,” she murmured.

“As I love you,” he replied softly.

He watched her grandmother shoo her from the room. Brandon sighed in relief that all he had thought he had lost had been returned to him tenfold. Hannah would become his wife and they could look forward to a lifetime of happiness together. He was one lucky man!

## EPILOGUE



*One Year Later*

*Berwyck Castle*

**B**randon came down the turret stairs to the sound of children's laughter echoing in the great hall. Their families had descended upon Berwyck in a time-long tradition of welcoming a new member to the fold. The celebration was a little late, since his wedding to Hannah had occurred four months earlier, but she had no complaints when he had told her he was tired of waiting to make her his in every way. They were married in a small ceremony in Reabridge's church. Their families were in attendance along with the entire town, the Buckleys included.

Now entering his ancestral home that had been in his family for generations, his wife sat in a chair near the massive stone fireplace with Roselyn and their mothers. The scene was so domestic that Brandon wondered how he had ever lived all those years without Hannah in his life. He was beyond thankful that their lives together would be something to look forward to. He came over to her and leaned forward to kiss her cheek while resting a hand on her stomach. She wasn't showing yet, but he could feel the hardness beneath his palm and knew his child grew stronger each day.

She excused herself from the ladies and took his arm as they casually strolled the room looking at the portraits of ancestors long since gone from this world. They stopped before one and Hannah pointed to the figures of a medieval knight and his lady. The fact this painting still existed and

hung on the walls in Berwyck was a miracle that only Edmond knew for sure. Brandon had sworn the portrait had been lost years ago.

“This one is my favorite despite being so old. Tell me again of their story,” Hannah begged with a smile.

“Again? I’m certain I’ve told you the tale at least a hundred times,” he said brightly.

“Amuse me,” she cooed, looking at him with a hopeful glance from those blue eyes he could hardly resist.

“Anything for you, my sweet,” Brandon replied bringing her into his embrace, her back to his chest while he wrapped his arms around her waist. “It’s a painting of Dristan and Amiria of Berwyck. He was a champion knight for King Henry II with a fierce reputation and was originally known as the Devil’s Dragon of Blackmore. He laid siege to this very castle while the lady disguised herself as her twin brother to keep her identity a secret. She was quite the swordswoman, or so the records proclaimed, and eventually they made a love match.”

“An enemy to lover’s story. How exciting! Why that sounds like it could be a fabulous book to read,” she replied looking around the room as they began to stroll while she inspected other paintings and tapestries. “And is it true Berwyck is haunted by ghosts?”

Brandon nodded. “The place has been standing since before the twelfth century, my love. With all the souls who have walked these halls, there’s bound to be a ghost or two continuing to watch over the place. If you wish to learn more, you should ask Gwendolyn’s husband Neville about his brief glimpse of Sir Rolf Norwood. Neville actually saw him once.”

“I might do just that, but later. Right now, I just want to enjoy our time together by ourselves while we have it. I never realized how intimidating this castle can be or that I’m even staying in one. I could get lost with all these passageways and you might never find me.”

“I will always find you,” Brandon vowed bringing her into his arms again and kissing her lips. “If I had had my way, I would have wed you long ago when we were both still young, my dearest love.”

She gave a heavy sigh. “If only it had been that easy,” she murmured. “How different our lives together might have turned out if only our relationship could have been accepted by our parents.”

A low rumble rattled his chest. “You mean my father...”

“Well... yes... but I didn’t want to seem unkind or speak ill of the dead. I suppose my own parents might have voiced their objections since I was barely ten and six at the time,” she stated, hugging him tightly.

His hand caressed her cheek while she stared up at him with her incredible blue eyes. “The past is where it belongs... in the past. You are mine now and that’s all that matters.”

She placed her head on his chest, her fingers running over the edge of his waistcoat. “I never thought I could be so happy, Brandon, especially with our child growing inside me. What more could a woman wish for?”

“Twins?” he teased.

She raised her head to stare at him with wide eyes. “Good heavens! That would be a handful but hopefully that part of the family remained with your brother and Roselyn,” she said laughing. “I shall be happy with a boy or a girl as long as the baby is healthy.”

His gaze travelled to Trevor playing with the other Worthington children. “You don’t mind that we have a ready-made family when you agreed we should adopt Trevor?”

Hannah slapped him playfully. “That young boy saved your life, Brandon. He is just as much a part of this family as our child inside me. Never doubt I love Trevor as much as any child I give birth to.”

Brandon kissed the top of her head, holding her close. Gazing around the room, the hall was filled with family and the joyous sounds of the happiness of being all together. A



wisp of air distorted his vision, and Brandon swore he saw a medieval knight give him a jaunty salute before disappearing once more. It was as though the past acknowledged that Brandon and Hannah's future was secure. He couldn't agree more.

Brandon smiled knowing life with Hannah would be all he could hope for and more. As with his brother and sister, his life was complete with his wife by his side. He had finally found his home and now had a love to last beyond time.

THE END



Brandon Worthington made appearances both in *Nothing But Time* and *One Moment In Time*. He is the third sibling from my *Family of Worth* series. I knew after he returned from the war, he would need to live a quiet life in the country. What better place than Reabridge? He never expected to find Hannah still unwed. I hope you enjoyed their story to finding love. You can learn more about this series along with my other medieval, time travel, and Regency era stories on my website at <https://www.sherryewing.com/books>.

# ABOUT SHERRY EWING



Sherry Ewing picked up her first historical romance when she was a teenager and has been hooked ever since. An award-winning and bestselling author, she writes historical and time travel romances to awaken the soul one heart at a time. When not writing, she can be found in the San Francisco area at her day job as an Information Technology Specialist.

*Learn more about Sherry at:*

**Website:** [www.SherryEwing.com](http://www.SherryEwing.com)

**Email:** [Sherry@SherryEwing.com](mailto:Sherry@SherryEwing.com)



THE WIDOW'S HARVEST  
HOPE



CERISE DELAND

THE WIDOW'S HARVEST  
HOPE

CERISE DELAND

The new Earl Barlow returns home from Waterloo, intending to live by his own rules. The woman he loved and lost years ago visits for the Harvest festival—and he plans to offer Vicky Wright what they both want.

Can a lady who has lived by the rules, throw them all away to seize her last chance for happiness?

# CHAPTER 1



*September 17, 1815*

*Reabridge, Cheshire*

*Barlow Hall*

Victorine Wright allowed herself a slow sweep of the twenty-two guests at her host and hostess's dining room table in the medieval great hall of this three centuries old mansion. Vicky smiled, happy to see so many of them once more.

*Did people ever change?*

Not her gregarious Aunt Celeste who sat across from her at this banquet table. Not her aunt's friend, Countess Barlow, who commanded the far end and smiled her approval often at the newest young lady among them whom she'd invited especially to meet her son. Not Gwen Hughes who sat politely quiet for a woman who possessed the courage to do a man's job every day of her life. Certainly not the Reverend Owen, the vicar who had opposed the union of Gwen's brother Evan with Vicky's young sister Yvette.

But Lady Barlow's son who headed the other end of the table had changed. So much had he changed that it hurt to look at him. *Six years ago at another harvest time, he had gazed only at me.* Tonight he had eyes for every young woman here.

*But not me.*

Vicky didn't fault him. She was thirty, a widow who was not in weeds, thanks to her foresighted husband's generous

yearly stipend. But she was not the carefree girl whom Ford had met and kissed and swept off her feet. No, she hadn't expected to see him here. She'd planned a short visit. One day to examine the baby whose parentage all fretted over. A second to decide about the child's future—and on the third to leave.

*And I definitely will not give Stafford James Houghton Barlow, sixth Earl Barlow, most recently Colonel Lord Barlow, any reason to believe I came here to see him.*

So she wouldn't look. Not at him. Not again.

He could be sitting there bloody well stark naked, and she wouldn't look at him again. She'd already done so much of that since Aunt Celeste and she arrived here hours ago that he was emblazoned on her mind. In his maturity, at thirty-one years old, he was more man than she had remembered. More man than any she'd ever met. Devastatingly handsome. Dark-haired, silver eyed, silver-tongued, big, broad and undeniably dashing as a sharp-shooter who could kill a man in high winds nine hundred feet away.

Or seduce a lady by flashing her a bright white smile.

*But not me.*

Vicky shifted in the ancient filigreed Tudor dining chair.

She picked up her soup spoon and dipped it once more into the very good fish chowder. After all, why would she look at him? She knew how Ford looked clothed—and naked. Rather, she had. Six years ago when he was younger, thinner, his hair blacker, his grey eyes clearer. Before he went off to Spain to take up his commission and join his regiment. After he and she had met and kissed and parted. Never to meet again.

Or so she had thought.

Until five days ago when her aunt Celeste told her she'd received an invitation from her friend, Countess Barlow, on an urgent matter. A baby had been brought to Reabridge in Cheshire a few weeks ago. A child who toddled and babbled some words in French and others in Occitan, and whom many believed belonged to a British soldier and his camp follower.



A baby whom English travelers wandering near Toulouse brought to England because they had speculated the child should belong with his family. If they could identify them. If they could find them.

Vicky took a drink of her white wine and pondered how outlandish that possibility was. The child could be anyone's, belong to any family, any country. Yet Aunt Celeste had insisted she and Vicky had to visit her friend, Countess Barlow.

"We must see for ourselves," she'd said, drawing herself up into her dignity and brooking no argument. "Plus, it's time for the Harvest Festival in Reabridge. You like parties."

"And dancing?" Vicky had teased her aunt.

"Oui, ma petite." The woman had leveled the family's famous Fortin sapphire eyes on her. No one refused ma chère tante anything when she trained her sights on a particular goal. She was the incomparable Comtesse d'Vaux, widowed, childless, rich as Rothschild and a ruthless dragon of London society. One did not deny d'Vaux anything. "We will go to look at this baby. But also, for you to remember once when you were there and had fun. To renew yourself, which you have forgotten how to do."

But Vicky had known the real reason her aunt pressed her. "I doubt this baby is Yvette's, *Tante*."

"We owe it to your sister to look at the boy. It is possible he is Yvette's and Evan Hughes's." The lady had removed her tiny reading glasses to fix Vicky with her resolve. "Coincidences do occur."

*But not to me.*

To avoid arguing, Vicky had ordered her maid to pack a few useful gowns and written to her butler in Bath not to expect her home until the twenty-first of September. She'd accompanied her aunt from London to Reabridge in her aunt's decadently plush traveling coach. But Vicky had not anticipated she'd be looking at Ford Barlow. Looking and regretting...so much.

*Foolish.*

She took another sip of her wine, then drained her goblet. It was rather good. Where had they acquired this? From Champagne? Or from the Loire? How could the French produce good wine in the midst of ridding themselves of Napoleon?

*Ah. Mais, oui.* Vicky picked up her soup spoon again, as a footman topped up her crystal. The French had not rid themselves of the Usurper. The Allies had done it.

Quite a few men here had helped to make that happen. The vicar's son, Captain Thomas Owen, was a childhood friend of Ford's. A man who had struck out on his own to join the military and make a fine reputation for himself in diplomatic pursuits. Across from him sat Captain Jack Wrath who seemed to know Ford well and, from what Vicky gathered during introductions, had come up in the ranks in the 25<sup>th</sup> Lancers. Jack had come to town recently and formed *une tendresse* for gutsy Gwen Hughes. Vicky could see how they regarded each other with a fondness that spoke of a happy future for both.

She hoisted her glass in a silent brava. She would drink to that happiness. To any couple who were so fortunate as to find love and use it as a basis for marriage. Far too many men and women were forced to wed for all those other seeming necessities like title and land and that perennial requirement, money.

Ford's mother, Countess Barlow, gave a fluttered-eyelash signal to her footmen to do the soup remove and bring the entrees. "I say, Vicar, how is the boy faring in your care?"

"Ah, my lady, he does well, poor little fellow." The man adjusted his old-fashioned wig and smiled at all at table, lingering on the other French émigré here tonight, a petite young lady with dark eyes and hair. "That is due to Miss Charité du Pessac who has come to us in the vicarage and cares for him."

The young woman perked up at the compliment. "Sam is a charming child. He is so easy to care for."

The girl's aunt, Lady Afton, sat across from the girl and beamed at her niece. "That is because you are so good with him, my dear."

"You've not seen him yet, have you, Victorine?" This pointed question came to Vicky from Ford's mother, Countess Barlow.

"No." She met the lady's bright silver gaze and held. "Miss Hughes and I plan to go tomorrow morning." Gwen and she had decided that in a private moment as the dinner guests gathered for introductions. They'd not met in years and had not corresponded, but their camaraderie had survived their mutual tragedy of seeing their only siblings marry and run off to the wars together. "It is our first opportunity."

"You will come to see him together?" Charité du Pessac sounded alarmed.

"We will," Gwen added. "We thought it best."

"Why?" the girl asked.

Gwen hardened as if she were the iron she forged each day in her farrier's shop. "Because we each knew our siblings best. My brother had a certain look in his eye for peppermint drops."

"And my sister Yvette," Vicky added, "laughed at nineteen as she had when a child of five. Like the ting-a-ling of chimes blowing in the wind."

Gwen nodded at Vicky in approval. "Vicky and I can see things no one may notice...or wish to."

"But Sam is sensitive. He may not like so many poking at him."

Vicky smiled at Charité. The du Pessacs were emigres like her own Fortin family. Charité's had been devastated by Napoleon while the Fortins suffered from the Paris mobs of The Terror. Vicky had sympathy for the girl. She hung on to those she loved. "Gwen and I promise not to poke."

"Can you not come one at a time?" She sounded sad.

“I, for one,” said Vicky, “cannot. I am here only for three days. Then I return home to Bath.”

“Why do you leave so soon?”

Her insides warmed.

There were the first words Ford had addressed to her since their initial greeting hours ago on the steps of Barlow Hall.

Her fingers pinched the finely blown stem of her crystal wine glass. “I am head of a sponsored event for a girls’ school in Bath. I must return for the autumn meeting.” *Seeing few, bidding my time until I bore myself to death writing my memoirs and teaching the fine art of painting to young ladies who have no sense of hue or contrast or character.*

“That is a shame. Mother and I had hoped you would stay for a few weeks. You and your aunt.”

How long did she sit there allowing his baritone to flow through her veins like hot honey? She stirred. “That is kind of you. I know Aunt Celeste would like that very much, wouldn’t you?”

Her aunt, the cat, eyed her like a queen of felines. “Most definitely. If you stay, *ma petite*, I would be happy to go south to Bath with you before returning to London.”

“Good of you.” And once more to avoid argument, especially in front of these dinner guests, Vicky added, “I will consider it.”

And then, she downed the bubbly remaining in her flute.

Ford stared at her. The Tempter. Studied her and let his wide-set sculpted lips curl in a smile.

She tipped her head and fixed her gaze on his. He would not charm her. But then...his electric eyes should not sear hers. That jagged scar from temple to throat should not intrigue her...or make her yearn to trace it with kisses. The broader width of his shoulders should not make her wish to measure them. Nor should she ache at the cause of numerous grey strands in his lustrous midnight hair.

They should not interest her.

The topic did.

She forced her mind to it.

The baby. Again. The baby everyone was here to examine. Coo over. Cuddle, claim and carry away as their own.

She licked her lips and sought the nearest footman. These Barlow servants knew their jobs. She was not alone in drinking more than her proper lady's share. Her Aunt Celeste had drained hers four times. Never lost a beat of the conversation either. A jewel of the highest order, Aunt Celeste could drink the British Navy under the table.

Just then, Ford stood up, his goblet raised. Mr. Owen did as well, then made his way around the long table to Lady Afton. Guests took their cue to cease their conversations.

"Dear friends," Ford said. "Mr. Owen has asked the favor of a few moments of your attention."

Lady Afton stood at Mr. Owen's side looking up at him as if she were a young girl gazing at her first love. The vicar regarded her in much the same way. It wasn't hard to see where this was going.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends, both old and new. I am very happy to tell you all that Lady Faith Angelica Afton, formerly of Faversham, has consented to be my wife, making me the happiest man on earth."

All the guests spoke at once. Across the expanse of white linen, Vicky fastened her gaze on Ford.

Always courteous, the man recently home from six years fighting on the Continent, took to his duties as the new earl with the same charm he'd had when she met him. He grinned at his guests and raised his glass. "A toast, to a man whose generosity of heart is unmatched and the woman he loves." Ford moved his glass in the happy couple's direction, but his gaze remained on Vicky.

She shifted in her chair. The vicar's and the lady's love was new and promised a happy future. *Your love and mine, Ford, is old and never promised any tomorrows.*

Ford drained his glass, his regard of her silent and pensive. Vicky wished she could make him smile, but could not find it in herself.

The young lady his mother had invited to meet him, Clementine Wingfield, noted the looks between him and Vicky with a sharp lift of her chin. At once, she was praising the vicar and his announcement.

Others offered the engaged couple their felicitations. Even Meg, Ford's young cousin who lived here now and who had sat silent as a ghost throughout the meal, offered up her congratulations. Vicky also chimed in and was relieved when the vicar, his lady and Ford resumed their seats.

The topic of discussion wended back to the Harvest Festival that culminated tomorrow and of course, the mystery of who might be the mother of the eighteen-month-old child.

"How many girls from this town ran off to the wars?" asked the vicar's fiancé, Lady Afton.

That was a very pertinent question. The town was at most one thousand people strong. How many young women would leave their homes and embrace a vagabond life amid the turmoil of war? How many were lovely, wealthy young women with good prospects before them? How many had fallen for a man so different from them that all it took was just one look, one night, one bold assignation beneath the stars and the girl would run off into the unknown? To Spain. To a life of hardship and fright. With a man she adored and would never once complain of the dust or the deprivation until she was with child and feared the birth might come in the midst of battle and she might not survive.

Who did that?

Her own sister.

The sweet girl who chose love and ran off into the wide world embracing the one she adored...and who never came home.

Vicky pushed her glass away. Surveyed those at table.

How many people in this room had changed their lives with one bold decision?

Her Aunt Celeste had fled France with all her money transferred to an English bank in the City at first sign the French mobs would guillotine poor fat Louis.

Gwen Hughes had taken up her brother Evan's trade and shop when he ran away with Yvette to the army and the wars. Gwen now ran the shop, the only female farrier for miles around.—and from what she gathered from their earlier conversation, Gwen was good at it, too.

Ford Barlow had joined the sharpshooter 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles because he was the third youngest son and would inherit nothing here. But he had one skill. He was a fine shot with a rifle or a pistol, and he had joined the day after Vicky had refused his proposal of marriage.

Yvette was not here, only in spirit tonight. But her young sister had been brave, too. Falling in love with a man whom many saw as less than she. Yet her little sister declared she loved him and ran off with him to Spain and war and hardship. Then somewhere in southern France in February of last year, heavy with child and alone, she had feared the birth of her baby. "I will deliver soon. Promise me you will take care of him or her," her sister had written in the last of only four letters Vicky had received from Yvette in five lonely years.

Now Yvette was gone, buried who knows where, and there was this child whom Vicky had come to see and decide if he was her sister's. Her family. Her blood. Her flesh to claim and rear and love.

Did Vicky resemble any of them? Years ago, she would have said she was proud of what she had done with her life. Followed the rules. Been an obedient child. A proper young lady. An honorable wife. A respected widow.

But had she ever been brave?

*No. Not me.*

## CHAPTER 2



Dinner conversations had unraveled her.

Ford was too focused on her. The young heiress, Clementine, made no secret of her wishes that he'd train his attentions instead on her. Vicky had tried to summon the hope that he would, but she was too selfish, too needy. She remembered so much about the house party six years ago when they had fallen in love. His kindness, his wit, his words of praise and his kisses were indelible impressions on her mind. That he might now bestow such blessings on this beautiful girl with money and pedigree and sunshine in her smile, made Vicky sick to her stomach. During dinner she had tried to recover.

But her confidence waned. Oh, the company was superb. Yet it was a rare thing for her to be unsettled by others. But as the guests bid good night and headed for their homes or assigned chambers, she had not taken the turn for the stairs and her bedroom in the far east wing. Instead, she stood in the hall, a hand to the old sculpted oak newel, transported to a moment when she felt strong arms around her and fierce lips upon her own. The charms of Ford in love with her and the sadness of her own introspection had her turning and remembering the way to the garden.

The Tudor-era garden parterre was what the English termed a maze. With tall evergreen box hedges that rose to six feet and discreetly hid children at games and lovers at play, the pebbled paths were dotted with stone statues and urns. For those who wished an assignation, benches and even a chaise



longue or two were available. Famous and infamous, the Barlows' knot garden was known throughout the land as a remnant of old Henry Tudor's time when romance reigned supreme, and the king had lain with more women than he could marry or kill.

Vicky found one lane she had preferred six years ago when she visited last during the Harvest Festival. While the garden was studded with rosemary and sage, basil and fennel, the paths had flowers too. This particular lane held rose bushes. As years ago, during autumn, the roses were gone. The hips remained, and still, within these green corridors, the fragrance of roses sat upon the breeze. The essence of it seeped into her and offered her a fresh taste of peace.

"I hoped to find you here. You love roses."

Ford stood behind her. He had intuited she'd be here. He remembered such facts about her, while her husband had never given her a rose. Only daisies. She hated daisies.

"Will you talk with me?"

Could she simply just walk into his arms and never say a word?

She turned to face him. And oh, in the moonlight, he was an even finer vision than he had been in the dining room in the flickering candlelight. He loomed above her, her handsome passion, her one madness, the swain she had never forgotten and never wished to. "Of course. I long to hear about you. How you are. Why you are home so quickly since the peace. Did you not want to stay for the Occupation?"

He swept out a hand to the white stone chaise longue. "No. I had to come home to assume control. With David and Thomas gone, I am here to command the wheat to grow and the animals to carry their load and reproduce. I am here to become a proper earl."

*To marry. And have sons.* She sat beside him, so close by necessity of the size of the chaise, that their hips touched. And hers burned. "You will excel."

He took in a sharp breath, leaned his elbows on his knees and shook his head. “You have great faith in me.”

“I do. And why not? You were the earl in all but name your whole life. You ran the estate. You knew how to lead.”

“How do you know this?”

“Your mother and my aunt are fond correspondents. I’ve learned of each of your successes, all your exploits. Famous Colonel Lord Barlow of the 95<sup>th</sup> sharpshooters who treats his men so well.”

“You will give me a swelled head.”

“And justly so. You know how to lead by principle and example. No wonder that when you went into the army with your commission, you rose steadily in rank. You commanded your men with honor and discipline, and they respected you. Here, with those men and women who respect your name and your past leadership of them, you will once more impress your tenants with the same fairness you gave those in your regiment.”

He tipped his head toward her and chuckled. The smile on his lips was the glorious prize she won for her compliment. “You were always kind.”

“It is easy to be kind to one who is thus.” She pressed her lips together, looked straight ahead and considered the blunt brown ends of dead roses.

“Was your husband kind to you?”

She sucked in air. *In many ways, yes.* “He was.”

A moment ticked by in which silence said more than she had.

Ford took her hand from her lap to bring it to his thigh. “Look at me. Tell me the truth. I always wondered. It tortured me that I did not know. Please tell me that he was good to you.”

She nodded but could not look at him as she recounted the nature of her marriage. “Charlie was kind, yes. Considerate. He gave me an allowance to run the houses, the staff, and for

my own use. We entertained often. He attended Parliament, and he liked to have people in for tea and dinner and garden parties. I arranged it all and enjoyed the work. When he became ill, he amended my widow's allowance and I have five thousand a year and the townhouse in Bath until I die."

"I see." He pulled at her hand. "But, my dearest, you say nothing of him."

She yanked away. His endearment shot ripples of yearning through her blood. She would not reprimand him for it. God knew, she needed someone to call her dear words. Someone. This one.

She grabbed her courage to blurt out the truth. "He had affairs. He told me the night before our wedding." *After I had given you up. After I had lashed myself to my duty to marry him as Papa's agreements demanded.* "He informed me that he would not change his life for me. In fact, if I wished to jilt him, I could."

"But you didn't." He put a hand with his rough calloused fingertips to turn her face toward him, and smiled in sorrow at her. "Why not?"

"You know the prices a woman pays if she is a spinster. You know my father wanted this marriage to make me truly English and keep me safe. Far from any French who might want to take my life for the lives my father destroyed by his slavish use of his peasants. The family name of Fortin is still spoken of in France with damning words."

He nodded. "After we fought and won at Toulouse, we marched to Paris through your family's domain."

That surprised her. "And?"

"The town is sparsely inhabited. The lands are fallow. Gone to weeds and grasses."

"I am shocked. I always envisioned them as prospering. Happy to be rid of us. My father and his before him were greedy managers."

"You do not wish to return?"

She shook her head. “Never. There is nothing and no one there I wish to see. This is my home. Safe. Serene. Quiet.”

“And what of love?”

She flinched. “What do you mean?”

“Do you love anyone here?”

*You. Only you.* “My Aunt Celeste. All the others in my family are gone. I am interested in seeing this baby tomorrow. If he is Yvette’s...” Her heart pounded at the prospect she might have a child to love, and she pressed her free hand to her chest. “If he might be hers, I will take him. I have money. I have time to nurture him and...”

She shot to her feet. “I should go in.”

He stood and ran his big warm hands from her back down her shoulders and arms. He nestled her backward against him and put his lips to her ear. “You have not told me if you loved him.”

She’d had no one who’d held her with affection in so many years. Since last he had—and she could not forbid herself the pleasure of his embrace.

“Victorine.” He burrowed his lips into the hollow behind her ear and kissed her there. “Darling. Tell me. I have thought of only you for six long years. Where you are, how you are. What you do. Who you love. Did you learn to love him? If you did, I cannot be jealous. Not now. Not any longer. He is gone. Tell me.”

She tried—she really did—to suppress her sob. But she rushed toward all the truths about her husband that few knew. Few understood. Fewer still accepted. “He always treated me with kindness and honor. I had no quarrels with how he presented me, but—”

Ford hugged her around her waist and sent kisses down her throat.

She was lost to him, his never-ending tenderness. But from a place where prudence lived inside her, she undid his fingers wrapped round her waist and whirled to face him.

In the moonlight, he gazed at her with a need that threatened to send her to her knees. His twinkling eyes, his silver-streaked hair drew her compassion and her fingertips to touch him. “My husband was a man any woman could respect. I accepted him as he was. He cared for me as much as he could. I lived with that. I had to. You see, he loved only men.”

## CHAPTER 3



Ford huffed and strode away from the house across the river down to the island. This morning he needed to see the Beeson brothers who ran the apothecary shop.

He'd bathed and dressed early, going down for breakfast in hopes of finding Vicky at the table. She'd left him abruptly last night in the garden. Yet there was so much more he wanted to say to her. This morning, she arrived in the breakfast room with her aunt. As a result, conversation turned on the details of today's festival activities.

The frustration only added to the banging of twelve-pounders in his ears. The incessant sounds of pounding cannon had often driven him to alcohol or opium tinctures. But to be at par in battle, he'd learned to avoid both drink and drugs if he wished to remain awake, aware, and logical. Since he'd been home, the Beeson brothers had created a powder that lessened the noises. Yesterday, the tension of trying to revive his relationship with Vicky was exacerbated by his mother's attempt to foist that Wingfield girl on him. Add to that, Vicky wished to leave tomorrow. He had little time to talk with her.

He hadn't slept well after Vicky had left him last night. He'd walked the floor in frustration watching the moon fade as light claimed the garden where he'd held her once more. There he'd traced his fingertips along her delicate chin. Kissed beneath her ear and along her elegant throat.

But not her lips. She'd left before he had the chance.

He'd rushed her.

*Dammit.* He clenched his fists. The war had done that to him. Made him quick to act, fast to grab the chance, the shot, the opportunity before all was lost.

He cursed his failure. She visited for two more precious days, which gave him little time to claim her lips and her heart before she left him. Again.

He could not let that happen. He had to get her alone again, but he doubted she'd allow it. She never wanted scandal...and avoided the possibility at all cost. But by God, he had to talk to her, make her laugh again, make her melt again, show her that he still wanted her and had never wanted another.

This time, he had advantages. Now that the war was over, and Napoleon headed for some more permanent obscurity than an island too near France, Ford's life and Vicky's were changed dramatically. He was home, healthy, save for the roaring headaches that could bring tears to his eyes. But now he was the earl. He had a future. Had it here. Knew how to make Barlow lands more fruitful, more profitable. And now Vicky was free. A widow who melted in his embrace as she had when she was twenty-four.

A widow. With a need for love. His love. His affection. Because her husband Charles Edmund Alton Wright, Baron Wright of Hampton, had been unable to give her what she deserved.

That he had died—poor bugger—was a tragic thing. All deaths, no matter the cause, brought tears and sorrows for acts and words and thoughts done and not.

The Good Lord knew Ford had killed a lot of people. Brought them to their knees, their last breaths soundless, their eyes wide open, their shock so visible upon their faces. He wished to kill no more.

He was so tired of war and the perversities of what it had done to people. Millions dead in nameless places. Millions of others, wounded, alive but not, yearning for home, hating it when they got there, trying to reconcile the art of killing others with the finer art of becoming tender and empathetic and

loving. If ever there had been love in many soldiers' lives, they needed it now in peace.

He'd had plenty of love in his. A doting father. An affectionate if domineering mother. Two older brothers who made him laugh, and yet made sure he realized as the third son, he should expect nothing from them. Not a house, not a penny, not a hope.

He'd tried to find another way to support himself. Trade was not for him. He knew nothing of products or shipping. The church was not for him, either. Being friends with Mr. Owen's son Thomas had taught him that counseling others about the triumphs and tragedies of life was not a role at which he could excel.

But he had always been friends and had playmates among the tenants' sons. As a result, he knew at a young age how to reach into a cow's womb and turn a calf in breech position. He knew when and why to let a field lie fallow. He knew when to pick apples. And how to dress a pig for the smokehouse. But he also was a crack shot with a pistol. That too he had learned from his pals with whom he went hunting for rabbit and deer.

His choice to join the army was obvious. His decision to join the famous 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles was natural. All he had to do was demonstrate to the recruiter in Chester how he could hit a bottle in the air every time the sergeant threw it, and he was enrolled.

He had considered the army long before his mother announced she and his father would give a house party to which his mother's oldest friend, Countess d'Vaux, and her two lovely nieces were invited. Little had he known when he met her that Vicky was betrothed. If he had, he might have had the good sense to stay away from her. But she could not ignore the attraction either. Their affair was quick, their kisses torrid and their one clandestine night together, unforgettable. Before he left her bedroom that morning, he had proposed. She had told him of her engagement. He was shocked. And in his naiveté, in his love for her, he had asked her to break her engagement.



She refused.

Two weeks afterward, he sailed off to his regiment in Portugal, a bitter man. He had not returned home until three weeks ago. His commission sold, his inheritance new and pressing, he had returned home to take up his duty.

When his mother told him that Vicky was a widow, he had asked her to invite Vicky and her aunt to the house for the festival. If his mother surmised that he intended to ask Vicky to marry him, the lady had countered by inviting a sweet young thing with connections, money and looks. But the chick held no candle to his first love.

No one did.

He stopped at the sight of Vicky crossing the bridge beyond the market square and approaching Gwen Hughes' house. *Ah yes, identifying the baby was this morning's agenda.*

*See him. Decide.*

*Then I will make my own case.*



Vicky swung around, the prickle on her neck alerting her to Ford's eyes upon her. His attentions always did warm her skin and make her look for him. This morning, he stood in front of the apothecary shop, hands on his hips, staring at her. Rolling her eyes at him for his obvious perusal, she caught the delight in his silent chuckle and duplicated it.

His black brows darted higher, and his eyes with all those new crinkles at the corners widened in the sunlight. He silently asked her if she was angry with him.

*Never.*

How could she be?

He'd graced her with the tenderness she craved, the affection only he had bestowed on her.

She gave him a little wave of *adieu*, while passing townsfolk would think her silly for waving to her host. The farrier's workshop was attached to the stone cottage where Gwen Hughes lived with her father on the outskirts of the town. Last night, Gwen had mentioned she would be out all day, since she planned to take her portable forge to the market square to serve whatever walk-by customers had horses or small smithing jobs that needed her attention.

A cart stood before the open doors of the workshop, a horse between its shafts. A man was working in the workshop. No. Not a man. As Vicky approached, she realized it was Gwen herself.

“Good morning, Lady Wright. You're up early.”

Vicky had been to the farrier's workshop six years ago and the smell of hot metal and dying ashes was just as warming now as then. “I thought I'd catch you before you left, rather than try to talk to you while other people are around. If you are busy, you go do as you must, I can wait.”

Gwen wiped her hands on a frayed white towel and hooked it into the huge pocket of a brown leather apron that covered her tall frame neck to ankles. “I'm finishing an order of nails for the Vicar's new chicken coop before I take my portable forge to the market square. Come in. Sit down. I have a chair against that wall which is safe from falling sparks from the fire. I promise to be ready in a few minutes.”

Vicky took the wooden chair and the opportunity to admire once more the industry of Gwen Hughes to run this business by herself. Gwen bustled about using tongs to pick up long black nails and let them cool on the ledge far from the forge.

“Gwennie! Gwennie!” An older man thrust wide the connecting door to Gwen's cottage. His grey hair was wild and sparse, his pale face contorted in pain. “I've lost your mother. She's not in the bedroom. She told me she'd not come home again! Gwennie, we must find her, you and me.”

“Da!” She rushed to the man's side. “She'll be home again. She's just gone to the church for the festival meeting.”

Jack Wrath, Gwen's suitor appeared in the doorway, and shook his head at Gwen in apology. "I took my eye off him for one second..." He stepped forward to take Mr Hughes's arm. "Come, now, Griffith. Your tea is ready, man."

Gwen shot a wild-eyed look at Vicky and shook her head in apology. "I'll take you in and you can have your tea."

"I'd like my tea, yes, I would." He glanced at Vicky and pointed a palsied finger at her. "Ah, that's that French girl. Hello! Celeste, yes?"

"Victorine, Da." Gwen said as Mr. Wrath coaxed him backward to the cottage. "Celeste is her aunt."

And the two of them disappeared behind the door.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said, wiping her hands on her towel. "He is...My father has spells when he is not aware of himself."

Vicky put up a hand. "Please don't apologize to me. He is aging. It happens to a few. My father was one it affected."

"It's...he's getting worse." She stared at the closed door and worked at that towel in a furious fret. "Please don't say anything to others. I try to contain him, and Jack is wonderful with him. He's harmless but others do not understand and—"

"I do. I won't say a word. But for now, I have a request. May I call you 'Gwen' and you please call me 'Vicky'?"

Relief ran over Gwen's tense features. "I would like that very much."

"Makes this next bit easy. Doesn't it?" She knitted her brows. "I hope so. I worry so about this child. Do you? You haven't seen him yet, have you?"

"No. I haven't had time. But I am glad we go together."

"You miss Evan," Vicky said because she saw the sorrow linger in Gwen's eyes.

"Yes. But I console myself with his loss knowing that he and Yvette were happy together. I never had any letters from

him, but I remember how he looked at her and she at him. That was love.”

“It was. I will be honest with you, Gwen. I didn’t think Yvette did the right thing to marry Evan. For both their sakes, I thought society would shun them for their choice. But Yvette did not care for what others thought. Though she had never seen a French mob attack her, she’d heard stories from Papa and Aunt Celeste and me of how brutal people could be to each other. She did not care that others might think Evan and she were not equals. She loved him and he, her. That was all she needed.”

Gwen hung up her apron on a large iron hook on the far stone wall and sent Vicky a shy smile. “I always swore that if I ever found a man who looks at me like Evan did at your sister, I would keep him if I can. Jack is that man.”

*Brave Gwen. A woman who takes what she wants.*

## CHAPTER 4



Gwen and Vicky were escorted to the Vicar's parlor by Charité du Pessac. The young woman's overly courteous greeting displayed her careful regard of those who might be interested in the little boy's future. She had cared for eighteen-month-old Sam with a devotion few would give to an orphan, a child not their own. Charité had done it with grace and charm, so said many in the town.

"I'll get Sam and tell Mr. Owen you are both here," she said, hands clasped before her, trying to be bright and cheerful.

"Thank you, Charité," Gwen said to her. "Vicky and I are grateful we can both see him together."

"She is very protective of him," Vicky said to her when Charité had left the room. "She has come to care for him."

Gwen leaned toward Vicky. "And may want him for herself."

"All well and good to say," Vicky said on a sigh, casting about to feel comfortable in the cozy well-appointed little sitting room. She was testy herself, eager to have this meeting done and the question of the child's future settled for her own mind. "If the boy is yours and mine, what do you say to rearing him? You and I have not discussed it."

"If he is Evan's and Yvette's, I want to know. If you and I ever really can declare he belongs to us... If there is any way to verify that this child discovered near Toulouse could possibly be my brother's and your sister's...."

“So yes. If he seems to be ours, Vicky, I could not abandon him to be reared by strangers. He would be family... all I have left of Evan’s. But to be quite frank—God forgive me for saying this—I cannot see how I could give him the care he needs. Jack says he will support whatever decision I make, and that he can afford to keep us all, while I build up the business to the success it used to be. It has not been doing well, with my father as he is. To be newly wed, caring for my father, and raising a child who already has a year and half... I reel at the thought. I will do it if I must, but between the two of us, I will make a better aunt to the boy than a mother.”

She met Gwen’s darkened gaze with her own grim fears. “I have thought long and hard about the possibility the boy is ours. I have a house, money, time and friends who would accept him even though he has no formal birth record. I know some would shun him because he was born in France and perhaps, even a few would question his parentage though we have proof Evan and Yvette were married in Portsmouth before he sailed for Portugal.”

Yvette had written Vicky a letter with the name of the clergyman and the church with the date of their wedding. Vicky had told this to a very relieved Gwen as they walked over to the parsonage this morning.

“But if he is ours, Gwen,”—she could not help but wring her hands over this—“you would want to see him and enjoy his company from time to time. Wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t deny I would. I loved my brother and I miss him. You cannot know how often I think of him every day.” Gwen fished in her well-tooled little leather pocket that she’d hung over her shoulder. Out came a handkerchief, and she dabbed at her eyes. “I hate this mystery. I do.”

Vicky licked her lips. “So if he’s ours, we must decide how we raise him so that he knows both of us and benefits from our love and remembrances of his parents. I don’t want to divide him, Gwen. Evan and Yvette would not approve. After all, their love, their marriage was in defiance of the social rules that said they could not love or marry. You and I must not act like King Solomon and divide the baby in half.”

Gwen reached over and squeezed her hand. “No, we won’t. If he is ours, he is Evan’s and Yvette’s gift to us that proves that love is the most precious bond of all. We will not deny it, you or I, ever again.”

Vicky stared at her and tears filled her own eyes. “I will remember that.”

“For more than just the sake of this child.”

*Oh, yes.* Vicky swiped at her own tears with her fingertips. “For our own lives.”

Childish burble sounded on the stairs. Close behind were the instructions of Charité urging the boy toward the parlor. “Two ladies want to meet you, Pip. Come along now. In here! No, Sam, not the kitchen. This way!”

Charité appeared on the threshold of the parlor, one hand shepherding along a little blond boy with the biggest smile on his pink round face.

“Let’s say hello to these ladies, Sam.” She herded him over to Gwen who seemed suddenly frozen to her chair.

“He’s charming,” she said more to herself than others. “Good afternoon, Sam. I am Gwen.”

“Gerem,” he tried to copy her, but grinned his way through the attempt.

Gwen held out her hand.

He took it, seemingly well-versed in the art of meeting a great number of strangers lately.

Gwen could not take her eyes from him. “You say, those who found him came here because he wore an amulet from our town?” she asked Charité.

“That’s true.”

Gwen held out her hand. “I’d like to see it, if I may.”

Charité studied her for a long minute, then reluctantly took it from a small leather pouch she held in one hand.

Out came the carved stone amulet dangling from a long chain. Charité held it, the amulet swinging.

The child giggled. “Mmmm,” he said and grabbed the sandstone in his chubby little fingers.

Gwen blanched. One hand to her throat, she gave a little cry. “Oh, my. Oh, my. That’s the chain I made for my amulet—the one I gave to Evan to give to Yvette.”

Vicky shot to her feet and watched the baby laugh. This child with big blond curls like Yvette’s. The round face of Yvette. The sapphire blue eyes of Yvette. The delicate chuckle of Yvette. This baby, this boy, this treasure was her sister’s child. A child of love.

She would take him home with her. Educate him. Teach him. Love him.

And then, she fainted straight away.



## CHAPTER 5



Gwen held tightly to Vicky's arm as they left the vicar's and crossed the bustling market square.

"You do not have to walk me back to Barlow Hall, Gwen. You have to tend your stall." Vicky would not be pampered. "I faint now and then when I get excited or overwhelmed. It's past."

Gwen patted her hand. "Still, I will walk with you for a bit. You look pale, Vicky."

"Oh, fiddle, Gwen! I don't want you to suffer lack of customers because of me."

"I won't. Now stop barking at me and walk."

Vicky gave in, allowing the delight of their discovery to overtake her. "Sam is charming, isn't he?" She could not get over how personable he was for such a little fellow.

"He is. I was shocked at his looks myself. He does resemble Yvette. No denying it. But I am glad this is done and we know he's ours."

"We'll need to tell everyone. Charité was so agreeable to talking about how to transfer Sam to our care. She was happy for Sam, I think, and a bit sad to part with him. But first you and I must talk about what we do now. Is tomorrow best for that?"

"Yes. I am so busy today with the festival. Oh, look! Lord Barlow comes out of Beeson's."

He had a pouch in his hand. A purchase from the apothecary, Vicky supposed.

“Good afternoon, ladies!” He met them on the path and fell in with them. “Going back to Barlow Hall, are you, Vicky?”

“She is,” Gwen piped up. “And she could use a strong hand, too, Ford. Apologies, Lord Barlow.”

“Ford is the name you are used to. Gwen is the name I use. And as for why Vicky needs a strong hand,” he said as he examined Vicky with narrowed eyes, “tell me.”

Vicky opened her mouth to answer.

But Gwen was quicker. “She fainted in the vicarage, Ford.”

“What?” He stopped in his tracks.

“It’s nothing.” She kept walking. The other two hung back.

But then Ford was at her side, one hand to her arm, the other around her waist. “Come sit down.”

She dug her heels in and would not allow him to lead her to one of the benches on the green. “I will not. I am fine. Really. I had a moment in the vicarage.”

Ford’s silver gaze pierced hers. “What happened?”

She took a breath.

Gwen clicked her tongue. “Sam, the little boy, is ours, Ford. He belongs to Vicky and me.”

Vicky smiled at him. “It’s true, Ford. Gwen recognizes the amulet and the chain it’s on—and I see Yvette in him. He looks exactly like her. The hair, the eyes, the laugh. This child is my sister’s and Evan’s. I will take him home with me.”

Ford smiled at them, even if behind the joy Vicky detected fear. “I am happy for you both. Happy for the child, too. He’ll have a good life.”

“He will and there’s so much more to discuss,” Vicky said to both, “but Gwen must go back to her stall.”

“That’s fine, Gwen,” Ford said. “Do go. We are in fine fettle. I have Vicky in hand.”

Gwen bid them goodbye and trotted off.

Vicky rolled her eyes at Ford. “In hand? I am not some flibbertigibbet who needs a fainting couch at every turn.”

He tucked an errant auburn curl behind her ear. “Have you done it before?”

She considered his artfully tied stock. “Only when I get excited or overwhelmed and I was that today.”

“When did you do it last?”

“Why?” She grew perturbed.

“It’s a good thing for those who care for you to know. When did you do it last?”

“I am not ill, “she insisted with a stomp to her foot. But he arched dark brows at her, and she sputtered, then swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “Very well. When Charlie died. The moment after... The moment after he took his last breath. I just could not bear it. He was kind. And I missed him already.”

“I see,” he said.

They walked on. Past other people going to the fair, they wended their way arm-in-arm. Ford said nothing as if he were trying to make sense of her care of the husband who had not loved her as a husband could.

“I am glad you told me,” he said at last when the crowd had thinned. “Fainting can be dangerous. Falling, you could hit your head or break a limb. When it happens often to a person it could mean your humors are not in balance. There was a fellow in our regiment who’d get so excited before a battle, that he would faint at the first cannon barrage. Just melt to the ground, he would. We could not have him in the first line, but had to send him back of the charge where he could sit and faint at his leisure, recover, then come forward after an hour into the siege. Crack shot, that boy. Had to have him doing his best. But it took him awhile to recover, even after

that. So, you,” Ford said with a little hug to his side, “will march with me at your arm and I will sit you in a comfortable chaise in your room and tuck up your feet for the afternoon.”

They walked in companionable silence for a while.

Then she said, “I want to dance tonight. I haven’t in years. Will you dance with me?”

He met her gaze and beamed at her invitation. “I live to make you happy.”



Vicky went to her aunt’s room just before a light supper was served to the Barlow household to announce that the child Sam was Yvette’s. Overjoyed that she had this little boy, a bit of her sister, Vicky regarded this as her opportunity to make up to herself, if not to Yvette, for her rejection of Yvette’s choice of Evan Hughes. Her sister was gone. But this child deserved the best she could give him.

Her aunt stared at Vicky in the reflection of her dressing table mirror. “You are certain that he is Yvette’s?”

“You need only look at him, Aunt, to see the resemblance. He has the Fortin sapphire eyes. But more than that, he looks like Yvette. He is the image of her when she was young. And then, there is the amulet. Gwen identifies it as one she gave to Evan to give to my sister. It has the chain Gwen made for it. I hope you will accept my decision and bring to him the same love and affection you have given me these many years.”

“I will indeed. If you say he is ours, he is. We will make him so.” She pivoted on her little bench and dismissed the house maid who’d been assigned to her for the visit. When the girl was gone, the door closed, her aunt caught her eye again. “Who else have you told?”

“Ford.”

“Why?”

Vicky met her aunt's cool demanding gaze. *Why did she push her on this?* "I want him to be proud of me."

"Did you tell Ford not to say anything to his mother about this decision of yours?"

"No." She tipped her head at her aunt's skepticism. "It's not a secret."

"The countess may have a few things to say about your desire to adopt Sam."

"She can say what she likes. Her views are irrelevant. The countess is not my family."

Celeste bit her lip. "Why do you need Ford to be proud of you? Don't you think he is already?"

She rubbed her forearms and admitted the truth aloud. "No. I have not been proud of myself. Now that I do this, and it is the right choice, I simply want Ford's approval."

"You base this on what happened in the past. Six years is a long time to consider yourself a failure. Especially when you are not."

"Perhaps not a failure. But one who chooses the well-trodden path. One who does what she's told. One who is..."

Her aunt cut the air with a hand. "Stop that. You did what you had to do years ago. You could not marry Ford. He was third in line for this estate. He had nothing."

"Yet Ford gave his all to this family, this land. He was his oldest brother's estate manager! Ford knew how many chickens they had and when the hams would cure in the smokehouse. He knew every rock, every blade of grass while his two brothers gambled and whored. Ford worked here because he loved the land and all in it. For all his devotion, they regarded him as a servant, and to reward him, they paid him as if he were their chimneysweep."

"True!" Her Aunt grew red in her anger. "What his oldest brother gave him was no better than a girl's pin money. Who could live on twenty pounds a month? No one. *Mon Dieu*,

*cherie*, that is half what the Reverend Owen earns in a week from his living!”

“And for it all, I loved Ford. Who wouldn’t? You see it now among those here. How well they regard him. How well they love him. For his earnestness, his kindness, his regard for the land and tenants and his family.”

“I know you loved him at first sight, *ma petite*. Why not, eh?” Celeste took her in her arms. “But you were already affianced—and you had your own honor to uphold. You would not break your promise.”

*I had no choice.* “Papa was determined to get for me an English name and title. He’d planned that for years for me. Then, after Yvette had run off with Evan and you and I left here six years ago, Ford left home and joined the army because his older brother would not support him in his quest to marry me or anyone, for that matter. For that alone, Ford is bolder than I ever was. I am proud of him.”

Aunt Celeste shook her gently by her shoulders. “Now you must be proud of yourself, Victorine Fortin!”

Tears burned her eyes. “I have done nothing to merit it.”

“But you have. You take this child. But there is other proof of your character.”

She strode away. “Do not praise me, Aunt.”

“I will. You married, as you were told. You lived with Charles Wright, as you were bidden. You never let on to the world how hollow your marriage was or what the emptiness cost you.”

Vicky sucked in air. She could not be surprised that her very perceptive aunt knew the reality of her fruitless marriage. She hoped few others did. Nothing would be so hard to bear as the pity others would bestow on her. She would rebel at that. Reject it. Few would understand that all she’d ever wished for was Charlie’s thanks for her acceptance of his preference. He’d taken it as his due. Living free as he pleased, he’d never considered the toll to her feminine pride or to her desire for a

loving spouse and children. “That’s done. Over. I will not discuss it now.”

“But you must recognize now in your own heart and mind that you were honorable to do your duty by your husband. That you were respectful of him and of yourself to stand by him. For all that, for those years you held to your principles, you must now praise yourself. You must call yourself brave.”

“I will promise you that when I leave here with Sam Hughes, I will live a different life. I will live for him. But I will live rewarding myself for my fortitude and my devotion to those principles I consider beneficial to a life, filled with respect for myself, filled with love.”

Her aunt chuckled. “Good for you, *ma petite*. About time, I say!”



The news that Vicky and Gwen had identified Sam as their own was met with silence at the supper table in the Great Hall that evening. Everyone in the house was dressed in comfortable attire for dancing round the bonfire and on the sawdust dance floor of the town gazebo. The fare tonight laid upon the sideboard was light because there would be so many specialties offered for sale by brewers and bakers and the butchers in town.

Ford, who once more sat at the far end of the long table, lifted his goblet. “I say, let us raise a round of good wishes to Baroness Wright who in her grace takes in this child who was discovered by chance, brought to us by devoted travelers, and who will have his place in the family God granted him.”

“Here! Here! Huzzah!” resounded round the old oaken walls of the hall.

Except for Ford’s mother, the table resumed their hearty conversation.

The older woman checked her son’s gaze, then that of her friend and guest, Celeste, and finally that of her other guest,

Vicky. “You are brave to do this, Victorine.”

*Brave. The word she had craved.* Yet Vicky’s actions were done out of love and respect for her sister Yvette’s decisions and for her orphaned child.

“Thank you, my lady. I am pleased we have such a certain resolution to this question of his parentage and his future.”

The woman only stared back at her—and Vicky wondered why.



## CHAPTER 6



“*I* will stay only an hour, Barlow.” Ford’s mother, the Countess, had hold of his arm as they walked along the path to town. The two led the way for the guests and servants, too.

Directly behind Ford and his mother came Vicky and Aunt Celeste. “I will return with the countess,” Celeste said. “There is only so much of this revelry I can take.”

At sixty, Vicky’s mother’s younger sister was getting on in years and needed to sit to avoid the pains in her aching bones. “Tell me when you wish to leave, Aunt, and I will accompany you.”

“No, you will not,” Celeste said with pointed look in her blue eyes. “You will stay to dance. It’s what you came for.”

“Initially,” Vicky added with the satisfactory glow she’d felt all day.

“And why not. You are young, *ma cherie*. You should.” Her aunt tilted her head toward Ford who walked before them. “So should he. Both of you need a lot of gaiety in your lives.”

“I’d say you’re right on that.”

“Have you talked with him about his years away?”

“No.

“You should. In fact, now that you plan on keeping this child, you should stay longer to ease the boy’s transition. That will give you time to reacquaint yourself with Ford.”

“A good point, but I don’t—”

“Don’t wish to overstay your welcome.” Her aunt squeezed her hand. “I understand, but your invitation from the Countess was a kind one. Think on extending your stay. The holiday would suit you, Vicky. Not only do you take on the rearing of a young child, but as a rule, you don’t do good things for yourself. It’s time you freed yourself.”

Vicky eyed the broad shoulders and lean hips of the handsome man walking before her. Her thoughts were the same as her aunt’s. Why wouldn’t she enjoy herself before she took on the care of her sister’s boy?

“I have similar thoughts, Aunt.”

“I hope you act on them, dear. It’s good for the soul to claim what you want.”



The fiddlers began the next set of country dances and Ford Barlow strolled away from the gaggle of town girls lined up by the haystacks. He’d danced with four of them, and his feet hurt. Clementine Wingfield was also dancing with old Mr. MacDonald, the hatter. So for once, she was not staring at him, pining for the attention he could not in good conscience give her. And at the moment, he needed a chair, a large tankard of ale—and Vicky.

Where was she?

The last he’d spied her, she danced with Gwen Hughes’s beau, Jack Wrath. But he’d also seen her skipping down a line of a country reel with one of the Beeson brothers. Earlier, he’d even seen her cajoling old Mr. Warren to take to the sawdust floor with her. To many people’s delight the elderly fellow who owned the bake shop had done his jolly best to keep up with those four decades younger than he.

Ford rounded the corner of the bake shop and saw Vicky fanning herself as she braced her back against the wooden frame.

“Come join me in an ale?”

“Gladly. I could take a bath in one and still be parched.”

He offered his arm and grinned that he'd have minutes alone with her.

She allowed him to lead her toward the brewer's stall.

“Did my mother go home?”

“She did. My aunt went with her. The two of them danced one part of the first country set, and they were ready to fly home.”

He ordered from the brewer's daughter and put down his pence on the rough-hewn bar. Two mugs in hand within a minute, he lifted his jaw toward the bales of straw set up for dancers to rest on between sets. “Over there.”

When they were seated and reclined against the large bales, he clinked mugs with her. “To you and Sam.”

“And you and your success here.”

He took a swallow and considered those dancing past him. Townsfolk, young and old, strangers who'd come to town recently, those who took up the local feud and those who had buried the hatchet in just the past few days. Of that, he was so pleased. That old townfolk's dispute was so ancient few understood why they had to fuel it, if only for tradition.

Many of the men and women dancing by with stars in their eyes were new to each other and romance. Gwen Hughes and Jack Wrath. The farmer, Martin, had found a mysterious lady asleep in his barn—and kept her on for chores and then more. His friend Thom Owen, the vicar's son, had taken a liking to the French girl, Charité. In contrast, his cousin Meg Barlow stood alone, her thoughts less than happy as her mouth drooped. Thinking no doubt of the physician she spoke to him about earlier—and his own mother's attempt to marry her off to another fellow.

*Then there is me.* He winced. He wanted to take Vicky to the dance floor and have her look at him as if she could never

let him go. But she had another fellow on her mind these past few days. This child. Her sister's boy.

He was happy she had decided to take this boy. He didn't blame her. If his brothers had sired children, he would take them up in a moment and promise to rear them and love them. But now, because of her choice to take Sam, which was something he'd never put into his plan for this harvest holiday, he had a new problem. His mother, having learned about Vicky's adoption of Sam, was now adamant that Ford court Clementine Wingfield.

"Forget Victorine," she had said to him this morning when they sat alone in the breakfast room. "She has decided to take this boy. And who is he? How can she be sure he is Yvette's? She cannot."

"Forgive me, Mama, but that is not your choice to make."

"It is if you are set on marrying her!"

"I have enough money to rear one child."

"And Victorine?"

"She has money too. Sam Hughes will have a good life and a sound education."

"But Victorine has no children of her own!"

"I don't understand why..." But then his mother's reasoning dawned on him. "I won't continue to discuss this, Mama. Vicky and I have not talked about her marrying me, and all this is unfounded, if not downright premature."

"Not if she plans to make Sam Hughes your heir."

He had stood up. "That's enough, Mama. Sam can never be Earl Barlow. He has not the blood recorded in the parish records."

"But you can give him land. Our unentailed land could be his."

"You fantasize, Mama."

"I forbid it. Victorine cannot give you children, but she can foist Sam Hughes on you."

His mother would never know why Vicky had no children by her first husband. Perhaps she would not by her second, either, if she accepted his proposal. But Sam Hughes would have a good life, regardless of his mother's objections. "I leave you, Mama. The festival awaits. And you need to cool your heels on that sawdust dance floor. Or in your room. By yourself. Never displaying this pique of fit to anyone. For your own sake as well as Sam's, Vicky's, and mine."

She had shot to her feet and flounced from the room.

So now, before he ever dealt once more with his mother on this matter, he had to make certain Vicky cared for him. Wanted him.

He made another try at it. "Don't go tomorrow, Vicky."

She sat, examining him. "I've thought about it. I have. I just...do not wish to be one of those guests whose stay outlasts their laundry."

He snorted. "Hell. Remain as long as you wish. Borrow my clothes."

Her blue eyes twinkled in the starlight. "Your shirt perhaps?"

They both laughed. She had years ago when they had spent the night together and modesty demanded she acquire some covering from him as they talked and kissed and never stopped the urge to lay their hands on each other.

"I have plenty. I may even have that one!"

She gave him a long look. "I doubt it fits you, Colonel!"

"It will fit you," he said with all the longing he'd kept locked away all these years. "Stay. Not just for Sam. But for me."

"If I do..."

"If you do, we can talk like this on more moonlit nights. Dance, too." He motioned toward the revelers. "Finish your ale, and we'll go show them how it's done well."

She worked hard at trying to refuse him. Her reluctance and shyness showed in the way she bit her lips, looked away, then back at him.

“I am not certain I should stay, Ford. I doubt your mother approves of me. Of my decision to adopt Sam. I don’t wish to irritate her, and so I think it best if I leave tomorrow as planned.”

“I doubt that’s good for the boy. He has grown attached to Vicar Owen, Charité and her aunt and Thom. You can’t just pick up the child and run. He’s good natured, but he won’t understand. You’ll have a baby bellowing all the way to Bath.”

“I know. I have to return and stay longer. Perhaps I can stay with Gwen. Although I hate to impose. She and Jack are getting married. Did you know?” Her gaze drifted to the pair as they glided around the floor with a few others in their set.

“To look at them, you can’t but see how much they mean to each other.” *And I want the same for myself. It’s what I promised myself after every damn battle I survived.* “They deserve happiness. So do you. Vicky.”

“I agree. I do. But so do you. And I wonder what would make you happy. I’m not sure I know you anymore. Six years is a long time.”

He took her free hand. “Do I look different to you?”

“Oh, my!” She laughed, suddenly a shy but ebullient girl, years younger. “Of course, you are. Look at you, sir. You were big and broad and luscious before. A young girl’s dream. And now, you are ever so devastating. The warrior. The hero. The man whom all admire and they should.” She put her hand to his cheek. “Last night at dinner, I could not take my eyes off you. Dashing Colonel Lord Barlow. If there is anything I would change about you, my darling man, I’d take this vicious scar away.” She traced her fingertip down the length from his temple to his throat. “I’d take the lines from around your silver eyes.” She traced those too. “And dye the grey from your bold black hair.” She sank her fingers into the waves at his forehead.

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. “I’d change not one thing about you, my darling. You are perfection. You always were.”

She locked her gaze on his. “Perfect, no. But I am trying to become so.”

He put down his mug and drew her near with both hands. “You need never prove anything to me. I know who you are, what you are.”

“No, I—”

“You are the woman I loved years ago. At first sight. The woman I never forgot. The one—”

“The one who refused you six years ago. The one whose rejection drove you to join the army and risk your life! Oh, Ford! I am not proud of that.”

“You had no choice. I had none either. But hear me on this, Vicky. I knew long before you came to visit us and I fell in love with you, that I would have to leave my family and the estate. I was not valued. I was not rewarded for my efforts. The only other worth I had to anyone was my ability to shoot a flying target at top speed. I had to go. My brothers were not going to give me good pay or even build a wing of the house for me if and when I wanted to marry. I knew it. I had heard them talking about ‘what they could afford me’ long before you came. It was nothing. Nothing! Wanting you, falling in love with you, showed me even more vividly that they were selfish. I was their slave. I had to go to the army. It was the only way for me to make a life. And now that I have, I find my two brothers who denied me a decent life with them, have none of their own.”

He swallowed and looked away. “I work at not hating them for what they did. I try not to hold a grudge.”

“And your mother? What was her opinion then?”

He felt some peace fall over him. “She argued for me then. To them, she argued that I should have more for all that I did. But they would not listen. Today, she grieves that her two

oldest children are not alive, but she is thrilled I survive. And frankly, so am I.”

She ran her fingers through the shock of his hair. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“Shall we dance now, Baroness?”

“Indeed, we shall, my dear Earl Barlow.”



## CHAPTER 7



She had not danced in years, and the euphoria of frolicking over and over took her breath away. She had to stop, one hand to her chest. “I’m not used to this.”

“No matter. We will rest.” He took her wrist and led her off the sawdust floor. “You fainted earlier today. I don’t want to have to carry you home!”

She sputtered in delight. “You’re such an old man now. You’d sprain your back.”

“Is that so?” He plunked his hands on his hips. “Who says?”

She pointed to herself.

Suddenly, she shrieked. She was off her feet in his arms and choking in laughter. One hand around his shoulders, she cupped his bristly cheek. “You are the most wonderful creature. I never forgot you.”

A few noticed that the earl had his arms full of the lady who visited him.

He strode with her like Galahad through the throngs.

“Put me down, Ford. They’re watching.”

“Let them.”

He wended his way past the last of the revelers and set off down the lane toward Barlow Hall.

“You must put me down or you will hurt your back. I am heavy.”

“Cannon, my dear, are indeed lighter.”

She grabbed the collar of his waistcoat. “You exaggerate.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Really. Ford! Put me down.”

“No.” The lane was dark, secluded, bowered by old fir trees and ash trees, their limbs swaying, their leaves bristling in the night air.

“You are going to hurt yourself.”

He grunted and took steps off the lane toward the cover of the ancient forest. Then he let her slide down his torso and pressed her to the trunk of a tree. Hands up on either side of her head, he lowered his own. His marvelous mouth was a breath away. “Kiss me.”

She opened her mouth then snapped it shut.

“Kiss me.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Prove it.”

All her reserve drifted off in the breeze. “If I do, I might not stop and—”

His eyes, aglow in the moonlight, flashed wide. “Then what?”

The devil tempted her at that moment because she said, “I’ll want more tomorrow.”

“Let’s see if that’s true.” He brushed his lips on hers. He tasted of ale and all the promises of happiness she’d needed but never heard from anyone.

For all the years she had lived celibate and uncomplaining, his claim was her vindication. His mouth was warm and searching. His desire sweet and at once scorching. His hands were at her back, along her spine, then one to her derriere, the other crushing her every curve to his every plane.

“I adore you,” he said in the space between one set of kisses. “I never forgot,” was another.

“Let’s go home,” she managed as his lips took a path down her chest.

“I like you here.”

“Too cold,” she managed between the second it took him to inch down her bodice and expose one cold begging breast.

“Too far,” he said as he licked her nipple, and she sagged against him.

“Not standing up.” She remembered the things he could do to her if she were prone, and he were between her legs.

His fingers worked at her skirts.

“Not here!” She pushed him away.

He blinked. His black hair dangled in his eyes. “You’re right,” he beamed and grabbed her hand. “Come on, my girl. Nothing like a good run to stir your blood before we have fun!”

She groaned. “You are an ogre!”

“I’m about to prove how bad I really am!”

She barked in laughter and jogged with him down the dark path to home.

Up the front steps, inside in a rush, they paused in the front hall. With the family butler down at the festivities, they cocked their heads to listen to the rhythms of the house.

His mother and her aunt must’ve gone to bed.

A rustle in the far servants’ stairs had them turning to each other, brows up in question.

“A mouse,” he whispered.

“Ouuuu,” she shivered.

“Tomorrow we’ll set a trap. For now....” He pointed toward the great hall and tugged her to follow him.

They ran through the massive medieval room and into a small alcove.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

He pushed open a panel in the carved wooden wall. “Opening secret stairs!”

“Oh, joy!” She hurried behind him and watched him close up the wall. “Who used them?”

“Kings and queens and my brothers with their ladies!”

At the landing, she sobered and yanked at his coattails. “I’m not one of yours, am I?”

He frowned. “One of my what?”

She arched both brows.

“No, Vic.” He patted the end of her nose and pulled her hand to hurry her up the steps. “If you will just pick up the pace, you will be my only lover.”

In two steps, he thrust open an old door that creaked so loudly the two of them froze with the screech of it. “Come, come!” he urged her.

They took two steps.

And *voilà!* They were behind a sturdy door, kicked closed and loudly locked.

He had her once more pressed against a hard surface. He was even more delectably hard.

Her sexual experience was only of that one night they’d shared. Those glorious hours, she thought she remembered so well. His hands searching and kneading her arms, his fingertips stroking and caressing and holding her breasts. His lips following all the sweet little touches with hot wet kisses. The enormous gasps of joy he could elicit from her.

The ecstasy of seeing him, his broad chest in the moonlight. The rack of his ribs. The contours of his hip bones as he dropped his breeches and she gasped at the fullness of him.

His length. Standing tall. Pointed at her. Seeking what she’d give. Giving what she desired.

How could that be? That joining. That mutual gift of love and caring.

He was naked, all dark skin and sculpted muscle. While she still had on her gown, though it was down around her waist.

“Let’s get this off,” he said, his fingers darting for the laces while his lips found skin he’d not yet licked or nipped or sucked.

With much tugging and cursing and pulling, she was free at last. Naked to him, an offering to match his.

“Lovely!” he declared, hands on his hips. Then he upended her, flung her over his shoulder and marched past his sitting room to his bedroom. In a whoosh, his big, soft, comfortable bed was at her back. Like a creature of the night, he crawled over her and kissed her quick. “You are going to marry me.”

The words thrilled and challenged. Might she do that now that so much had changed in their lives? “That Wingfield girl has a different idea.”

He lifted her chin. “My darling, she is wrong. Always has been. Here on a lark. My mother’s.”

She winced. “Let’s not disc—”

“We won’t.” He slithered down her torso to settle between her legs. “Now then. To this business.”

“Business?” She lifted her head to see him grinning up at her from over her mound.

“That of making you my wife.”

“You need a license and Owen for that.”

He spread her thighs wide and blew cool air on her most private parts. “This is our private ceremony.”

“No witnesses,” she said in sighing satisfaction.

“Mmm. Intruders on the proceedings. No. Now do be quiet.”

“Lie back, shall I?”

“Yes, darling. Think of—”

“The king?”

“If you wish.” Then he applied himself most diligently. Got to work, as it were. Long minutes later, he kissed her lips as he prepared to become part of her. “Have a suggestion for me to think of while it is my turn to become... uh... patriotic?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?” he asked as he inserted the hot slick length of him inside her.

She had absolutely no idea.

## CHAPTER 8



**D**awn broke with the patter of rain upon the panes. Ford stirred to kiss her awake.

Her gown in such tatters she could only clutch it to her, Ford draped one of his white shirts over her. Just as that morning long years ago. Yet unlike that morn so long ago, she wore a smile. So did he as he gave her one of his banyans and took another for himself. Then he whisked her down the dark hall to her room in the east wing and scooted her inside.

“Sleep, sweetheart. You’re not leaving today. Tell me you’re not.”

Her euphoria drifted away. “I should. I must. It’s best that I get the house in Bath ready to receive Sam.”

The light in his eyes died. “It’s best if you get this house ready to receive a new mistress and a baby.”

She stepped around him. “One night with you is not enough to build a life.”

He caught her arm and whirled in front of her. “One night with me is enough for you to run away again?”

She sucked in a breath. “I didn’t run from you. We could not have each other. There was no way forward. I had to marry Charlie.”

“And now? There is no reason to leave.”

Grateful he had not repeated the insulting word ‘run’, she stood her ground. “Yes. There are many reasons to leave. You are the earl, the heir to a family proud in its tradition of caring

for this estate and its people. You are the man who will be respected and sought after to solve the problems, tend the wounds, heal the sick and care for the dying. You need an heir. And I? I cannot give that to you.”

Gentle Ford took on the mien of the Warrior Colonel, dead set on conquering his opponent. He grasped her elbows. “Did your husband ever bed you?”

“No.” She shook back her hair, embarrassed and defiant. “No.”

“Then you do not know if you are capable of bearing a child.”

“You and I made love six years ago. I was a virgin.”

He nodded, but his silver eyes beamed brightly in anger. “You were.”

“And we made love...twice.”

“No. Not entirely.”

She blustered. Her memory was not bad. “We did!”

“I was inside you, but never gave you the substance that could make you bear a child.”

She blinked, trying to recall the specific details of their hours of intimacy.

“You were a virgin, true. Untried. And not knowing everything about the getting of children, I see you did not realize that I never came inside you. I did not wish to ruin you completely. I only wished to love you to the best of my ability. That you were not pregnant from our mating was what I wished—and what I had some presence of mind to ensure.”

That flabbergasted her and she stared at him.

He circled his arms around her.

But she inched away. “You still need an heir, and I am a poor candidate for that.”

“Why?”



“Because I am thirty years old. Long past good age to breed.”

He growled. “Many women bear into their forties. You cannot fob me off with that.”

“Still...” She put out her arm to hold off his attempt to embrace her. “We do not know.”

“You could have my babe within you now.”

She caught her breath.

“I was not as careful last night, I regret to say. I am not as diligent now as I was then. And I want you badly, Vic. You are my only love.” He reached out a hand to caress her cheek. “Don’t you love me?”

She swallowed wild sobs. “I do!” She sniffed back hot tears and gazed at the ceiling. “I love you now as I did then.”

“*But?*” He was so angry. She had never seen a man so wounded.

“I love you, my darling. But I will not ruin your life, your future. If we marry, what is there for us if there is no child?”

He swore so loudly it reverberated off the wooden beams. “No mornings in bed together? No dances at the harvest festival? No kisses in the garden or holding hands in sickness and in health?”

“Oh, Ford!”

“Darling mine, I do not care if there is no child. I want *you!*”

She backed away from him.

But he tracked her. “Not convinced? Very well. What else is there in this argument of yours, eh? What else keeps you from me?”

“Respect. Who will respect that you married an old widow?”

“Oh, please. Is that all you have?”

“If you bear no heir, who will the title and lands go to?”

He waved a hand. "Some cousin. I have a few. You see, we Barlows are prolific breeders." He bared his white teeth.

"This is not funny."

"Don't I know!"

"Stop this. I have to think of Sam."

"Sam will have a good life with you. And us."

"If I marry, I lose my dowry. I will have no money to raise him! "

"I have money. I earn money. It may not be equal to yours, but what is the price of your happiness?"

"How can I ask you to raise a child of my sister's?"

"If Yvette had wed any other man than farrier Evan Hughes and they had both died, would you not take in your sibling's child?"

"Yes, but—"

"Are you saying you do not think I would accept him?" He was now bellowing. "Because he is the farrier's boy?"

"No!"

"You had better believe that, my girl. I fought with men who never had an education, could not read, could not write, and many who never had a trade. So, you had better not think that I valued any man less because of his lack. Or because of his trade. Or his religion. What I saw in a man was his devotion to his king, his country, me and his comrades. After that, he had better be a damned good marksman and destroy anyone I chose in one kill shot."

"I cannot ask you to raise a boy who is not yours."

Fierce as he was now, Ford circled her round and round. At once he stopped and pointed a finger at her. "If you had come to me with a boy of your own, would you not ask me to raise him?"

"Yes. Yes, but that would be different."

"It is not. You walk around this problem, Vic."

“I do not!” She fisted her hands at her sides. “I want to marry you. Bring Sam. Live here. I want to give you all those things a woman can give a man. But I have no hope I can give you the one thing you need of a wife.”

“The one thing I need of a wife is to love me. Kiss me in the morning. Laugh with me at noon. Hold me as darkness draws nigh.”

She swiped at the tears cascading down her cheeks. “I have no hope I can give you the one thing I have wanted for myself! All these lonely years since I first fell in love with you, the only thing I wanted was a child. Someone to love and care for. I have no hope left for that.” She broke into sobs.

He swept her up into his arms and took her to a big chair. There he wiped away her tears and tucked her face against his shoulder. “Cry, my darling. Cry it all away. One thing I brought home with me is hope. A treasure trove of it. I had it every time we faced a battle. Each time we saw the enemy run at us. Each minute was an hour filled with the hope to survive. To endure. To return to home and hearth and someone to love. You. Only you.”

He urged her to look up at him. “I have enough hope for the both of us. Marry me, Vic, and let me give you my hope. Mine is so bountiful, I can share it. With it, together we can thrive, we can struggle and endure. We can find happiness. Marry me, my love. We can do all things together and do them best only with each other.”

She kissed his jaw and snuggled closer. “You make sense.”

“Thank you. I thought so myself.”

She cuffed him.

He chuckled.

Noises of people walking the halls signaled those in the house were making ready for the day.

She sniffed back her tears. “I think we may have awakened a few people.”

“Good. Time they were up. There is much to do here today. We’ve a wedding to plan.”

She clutched the sleeve of his banyan. A new terror hit her. “We must tell your mother.”

He stroked her hair back from her cheeks. “She’ll be thrilled.”

“She’ll need whisky.”

“A lot of it, too.”

Vicky gasped. “She does not want me, Ford.”

“I do. She will accept us with open arms especially if she would like to live out her days invited to birthdays, harvests, Christmases—and christenings.”

“I pray there will be many.”

“There will be and not for lack of practice.” He picked up the muslin at the collar of his shirt she wore and moved it aside so his lips could brand her between her breasts.

She sighed, relieved, and let him have his fill. “I think this time I will lay back and think of Prinny.”

He guffawed. “Good luck with that, my love. I understand the man is a terrible lover.”

She caught his silver gaze. “I want only you.”

He stood, caught her up in his arms and strode toward her bed. “And so you’ll have me, madam. Banns, I think. Four weeks.”

“No special license to get married sooner?”

“Oh, no,” he said as he dropped her on the mattress and climbed near. “Before that, we’ll be too busy.”

She shoved her hands beneath the silk of his banyan and took the robe away. “What will we be doing?”

“This,” he whispered as he sent his hands over her breasts and sank between her thighs. “This.”

## CHAPTER 9



Four weeks later, Vicky took the Barlow traveling coach down the lane toward the island and the church where so many waited for her wedding to Ford. Beside her rode her aunt Celeste, happy for her and her soon-to-be husband.

“He loves you. You deserve this joy, *ma petite*. Yvette is happy for you, too. You do her the kind service to bring up her son, Vicky.”

She accepted the felicitations of her aunt, believing every word she said. “It took me much to get here, but I could not have chosen better.”

A new gown of Prussian blue silk pelisse flowed over her figure well. With long billowing sleeves caught in spangled cuffs, the dress was easy to wear. Vicky appreciated that because she’d missed her monthly two weeks ago and had developed a new anxiety about wearing tightly fitting clothes. She’d told Ford, and he had whirled her about, then said whatever happened, he adored her.

This morning, Vicar Owen would preside over their wedding. He’d been a busy man this past month and had a few more marriages to perform in the coming weeks.

This morning, ten minutes late as she was for the ceremony, all the guests awaited her inside. Clutching her bouquet of late autumn wildflowers Ford had picked himself this morning, she took the footman’s hand to step down and lead her into the church.

Aunt Celeste turned at the doors and grinned at her. “You once told me you thought people did not change, Victorine. Some don’t. Most do. You have, my sweet niece. You were always an obedient girl. A young lady who did her duty. A wife who endured. But with this marriage, you have shown that a woman who is responsible, can also be brave. Life demands it. Love enriches it. I leave you to your future, my dear. Your years will be glorious.”

Vicky watched her walk away and prepared herself for her most happy wedding. She stepped to the threshold and the congregation rose for the bride. At the front of the church stood the vicar and Ford. Her groom, who grinned at her, had imbued her with hope that urged her forward toward all their bright tomorrows.

How she loved the sight of them all who’d come to see her wed her darling Ford. Standing before him with a smile she would not tame, she winked at him and turned to gaze upon the congregation.

In the first pew sat Vicky’s Aunt Celeste. Beside her sat the lady who was now her mother-in-law, Countess Barlow.

Yesterday, that lady had retired to the Dower House two miles away from the Hall. The conflict between her and Vicky was more than resolved. It was forgotten. Ford had made it plain to his mother that no other woman would ever become his wife.

“I take the title of earl because it simply comes to me,” he had told his mother in Vicky’s presence the day after the Harvest Festival. “I work the land because I learned early how to make it prosper. I marry Vicky because she is the only woman I have ever loved. I ask nothing more in life than to do the work I am good at for the happiness and prosperity of the woman I love and a future we create together.”

That her son was happy was the most important thing in this world to the lady. She showed it as she smiled and nodded at Vicky.

Next to the older ladies sat Jack and Gwen Hughes. Gwen held Sam in her lap. The little boy had come to live with Vicky

and Ford in Barlow Hall a few weeks ago. She, Gwen and Charité had worked steadily at the transition. Each day all of them had visited with Sam. Each day Vicky and Gwen had taken him up to the Hall and shown him the house, the garden and his nursery bedroom. He had wooden toys that many in the town had carved for him. A small riding horse that Thom Owen had crafted. A new small bed with rails made by Jack Wrath and Ford together. When Sam came to live at the Hall, he was ready to go. He'd hugged Charité when she bade him goodbye. Lately, encouraged by Ford's mother, Sam called Vicky 'Mama.'

Vicky loved watching Gwen and Jack who minded Sam but paid attention mostly to each other. Hand in hand, they had little regard for the buzz of conversation around them. They were, as usual when together and at leisure, absorbed in one another. Even the most traditional of the belle dames who criticized the couple for ignoring the God-ordained order in their household—for Jack not only looked after the house and Griffith, but had taken the name Hughes—could not resist a sign of envy at the couple's manifest love for one another.

A row behind them, she saw Thom Owen and his bride Charité smiling at her and Ford. Charité visited Sam often but just as often came to see Vicky, consulting her on how to deal with some of the more prickly members of the Mill-School committee. Yesterday, Charité had confided that she might be *enceinte*. She wanted and deserved a child of her own. Vicky could not be happier for her friend. Behind them sat Meg Barlow and her betrothed the physician, Adam Wagner, the Beeson brothers, and many in the two families who had for so many decades argued with each other, but no longer did.

Vicky smiled at them all. So many of them had changed.

*Even me.*

“Victorine Anne, will you repeat after me?”

She considered the handsome face of her husband. The man who had argued with her and who had promised to love and honor her. The man she would honor and adore for all the days of her life.

“Victorine Anne? Will you repeat after me?”

She nodded to the vicar. “I will. I most certainly will.”

THE END



Always great fun to add a short story to our Bluestocking Belles' box sets, this story holds a special place in my heart. It's for all those 'good girls' who do get everything their hearts desire...eventually! Do visit my webpage to read more of my stories: <https://cerisedeland.com>



## ABOUT CERISE DELAND



I'm a USA TODAY bestselling author who likes to give a good girl a good man because there is nothing like just desserts! Writing for most of my life, I'm addicted to a great story—and work hard to deliver it every time.

And at home every day, she loves to cook, hates to dust and tries (desperately) to coax vegetables from her arid backyard in south Texas!



# LOVE IN ITS SEASON



# JUDE KNIGHT

# LOVE IN ITS SEASON

## JUDE KNIGHT

The Battle of Waterloo lost Jack Wrath the use of one arm and ended his career in the cavalry. With nothing better to do and nowhere else to go, he sees his doctor home to Reabridge—and stays because of Gwen, the female farrier he rescues from a lustful lord. After all his years of wandering, Gwen's cottage feels like home.

Gwen Hughes is taller and stronger than many men, and runs her own business. Perhaps she intimidates the men of the town, but that is fine with her. She doesn't have time for courtship. She'd be a fool to refuse Jack's offer to help her father, who is in his second childhood, and even more of a fool to read too much into his kindness.

Under the harvest moon, two people who believe romance has passed them by find it is their season for love.

## CHAPTER 1



The farrier plied his business from a workshop on the southern outskirts of the little market town of Reabridge. Or his daughter did. The housekeeper at Dr. Wagner's where Jack was staying had been voluble on the subject of dear Miss Hughes, who needed help now that her father was ailing but was too proud to accept it.

The position of the cottage and workshop was not particularly defensible, Jack noted as he led the two horses through the open gate. Too open, with access not only from the road, but from the lane that ran beside the neat cottage where the farrier presumably lived, and across the fields behind the buildings.

But Jack was in peaceful England, not Spain or France or Mauritius or the Indies or any of the other far-flung lands to which King George had sent his soldiers. Of which Jack was only one because he had not yet officially resigned, and if he wasn't Captain Jack Wrath of His Majesty's 25th Lancers, who was he?

One of the horses took advantage of Jack's inattention to pull sharply away to the right, towards a tub planted with peppermint and chamomile. Jack jerked on the lead rein, and received a hurt look from the other beast, Adam Wagner's patient mount. However, the recalcitrant gelding Adam had loaned to Jack fell back into line.

Jack led them past the dusty curricule that stood outside the barn, its shafts empty, then slowed his steps as raised voices in

the barn hinted at an altercation. He sped up again when he caught the words.

“I’ll have the constable on him. The man is mad. Locked up, that’s what he should be.” A man’s voice in the crisp accent of the aristocracy, the nasal tones shrill with anger.

“*Locked up*, is it? I’ll be giving you *locked up*!” That voice was deeper and rougher, with hints of a Welsh lilt overlaying the Cheshire vowels.

Jack hesitated. What was he getting himself into?

“Father! Keep back!” A woman’s voice, sharp with fear.

“Yes, keep him back,” the aristocrat sneered, “or I’ll shoot him like the mad dog he is.”

“He was only coming to my aid, my lord,” the woman protested. “You cannot blame a father for defending his daughter.”

Jack reached the open doors as the aristocrat growled, “I wasn’t hurting you. You and he both need to learn your place, bitch.”

“What is going on here?” Jack demanded, cringing his own pronunciation into the counterfeit of his so-called betters he had perfected since he was first made up to lieutenant.

The scene within had him dropping the reins and moving forward. The workshop was occupied by three people and two horses, the latter a pair of bays that Jack immediately characterized as more showy than sound.

The aristocrat was much as expected: tall, but with too much flesh for his height. Overdressed for the occasion, with lace at his neck and cuffs, and a coat the color of squashed strawberries over a maroon waistcoat heavily embroidered in gold. Gold tassels on his boots, too, and gems glinting from his cravat, his fobs, and his rings.

The pistol had set Jack moving. A dueling pistol, heavy on the gilt but not less dangerous for its ridiculous adornments. It was wavering between the two other people in the barn, and

the hand that held it was shaking. The pompous lord was scared out of his mind.

The woman stood at bay, her hands held out palms backward as if to restrain the man behind her. She was nearly as tall as the lordling who was nearly as tall as Jack himself. She was muscular, too, with powerful shoulders. Her dark hair, curled like a crown on her head, proudly proclaimed she was a woman. He would have known anyway. Even in an old shapeless coat, men's trousers, and a leather apron she was so exquisitely female that Jack's mouth dried. Her gaze met Jack's, her dark eyes full of defiance, fear and anger.

Her father topped the rest of them by a head. He was a massive man, big and burly, with iron grey hair and dark eyes like his daughter's. Those eyes were currently wide and dazed, as if something had hit him on the head and knocked him silly.

Jack took in all of that at a glance before the nobleman spoke. "That idiot peasant attacked me," he said. "Call the constable. I want him arrested."

"Is that right?" Jack said, giving the fool an easy smile as he walked closer.

"Yes, dammit. And the female, too. Stupid bitch." The man turned his face toward Jack, baring his teeth in a snarl and displaying the scarlet imprint of a palm on his cheek. "She hit me. For no reason."

"I see," Jack replied, placing his hand on the pistol and pushing it so it was pointed away from father and daughter. Towards the fool's innocent horses, but in the confined space that couldn't be helped. He took hold of the man's hand and squeezed, catching the weapon as it fell. He spoke over his shoulder. "He assaulted you, miss, and your father took exception."

It was a statement, but she treated it as a question, her answer a cautious, "He came up behind me as I was shoeing his horse, and grabbed... and took hold of me in an inappropriate manner. When I protested, he tried to... I slapped him."



“Oh, come on,” said the aristocrat. “She was wagging her buttocks at me! She wanted it. I didn’t hurt her. Just had a bit of a feel. What sort of a decent woman wears trousers? She was asking for it.”

Part of Jack’s focus was on removing the ball and gunpowder from the pistol, not an easy task with only one working arm, but he was not about to take his attention from the frilled fop. He drawled, “I would suggest the slap was a strong hint your advances were not welcome.”

“Are you going to get the constable to lock this madman up? Or not?” the man demanded.

A simple question with an obvious answer. “Not.” Jack handed the now harmless pistol back to its owner. Perhaps the witless waste of air would see reason if it was pointed out to him. Jack had known it to work with others of his ilk. Though he’d been their superior officer at the time.

“Look, man, if you insist on calling the law, you will find yourself before the magistrate, explaining why you made an indecent assault on a respectable tradeswoman of this town while she worked on your horse, then drew a gun on her father when he came to her aid. The Hughes are known and respected in this town. You are—” he made a guess based on the luggage tied on the back of the curricule— “passing through. You will be lucky to get off with a fine.”

The idiot was taken aback for the briefest of moments, before his self-consequence reasserted itself. He struck an attitude. “I, sir, am Lord Augustus Featherston-Crawford.” He stopped, apparently for applause, for he appeared miffed when none was forthcoming. “I would think that a Featherston-Crawford would be believed over a pair of peasants.”

“Then you would be wrong, Gussie,” Jack told him. “I imagine they called you Gussie at school? Miss Hughes, are Lord Gussie’s horses ready?”

“That one is,” the woman replied, indicating with her hand. “I was doing the left hind on the second when I felt his lordship’s hands...” she trailed off, shuddering, and Jack was barely able to suppress the urge to punch Lord Augustus’s

puffy face. But violence would not be useful in this situation, and besides, he was tired of it.

“Bad form, Gussie,” he growled. The pompous swine opened his mouth to object, but was not stupid enough to persist in the face of Jack’s glare.

Mr. Hughes had wandered away from his daughter and was soothing one of the nervous beasts. “This shoe isn’t on properly,” he declared, lifting a hoof as he leaned into the animal. “Evan! Where is that boy. Here, Gwennie, help your Da. Fetch me that hammer that’s on the floor. I’ll skelp that boy’s bum for him, leaving tools like that.”

The farrier’s daughter scooped the hammer from the floor and a handful of horseshoe nails from the pocket of her apron. She managed to sound like a girl when she begged, “May I have a turn, Da? While you watch?”

The farrier nodded, and let his daughter take the hoof.

“Come along, Gussie,” Jack commanded. He led the other horse out to the curricule, and soon had it harnessed, ordering Lord Augustus to put a hand here or a finger there whenever needed. The lordling objected only the once, but subsided after a glare from Jack.

After a few minutes, Miss Hughes led the other horse out and put it in the shafts. Lord Augustus leapt into the curricule and waited impatiently for her to finish. Jack took the opportunity to spread a little fear to lend wings to the horrid man’s heels.

He strolled over to the phaeton, and leaned his hip against the fore wheel. “Better stand away,” Lord Augustus advised. He had his whip in his hand, and some of his arrogance had crept back in.

“Before I do,” Jack told him, “I want to introduce myself and give you some advice.” He made his voice as menacing as possible. Twenty-five years in the army starting as a drummer-boy and working his way up through the ranks to captain meant he did menacing well.

The fool ignored Jack's tone. "You! Girl! Step out of the way!" He raised the whip, but Jack vaulted up the wheel and wrenched the whip from his hand before it could be used—whether to flick the team into motion or to lash at Miss Hughes.

Lord Augustus cowered back in his seat as Jack looked over him. "I am the son of the—," he quavered.

"I am Captain Jack Wrath," Jack told him, his voice a low growl. "I have served King George in far flung lands. I am an expert at killing and maiming. I do not object to using those skills against bullies who pick on women and the elderly. I do not know your father, but perhaps I should ask a duke or two to pay him a visit and explain to him that his son is a waste of good air."

Never mind that the only duke Jack had a nodding acquaintance with was Wellington, who was in Paris and unlikely to listen to a lowly ex-captain about a civilian matter in any case. The threat did what was intended. Lord Augustus, already pale, whitened further.

Jack bent closer. "You have your horses. Pay Miss Hughes the money you owe her and leave. Keep going out of town. You are not welcome in Reabridge."

"Oh, I say!" Lord Augustus complained.

Jack raised the whip. Lord Augustus pulled a fat purse from the inside pocket of his jacket, and tossed a coin to Miss Hughes, who stepped away from the horses' heads to catch it.

Jack leapt to the ground and threw the whip up to Lord Augustus, who fumbled the catch and had to scramble for the whip on the floor before it could slither away. The team was already moving, and the curricle's rear wheel scraped the gate on its way out before Lord Augustus could straighten and grab the reins.

The curricle turned onto the road away from the town. In Jack's last sight of the lordling, he was swearing at the horses, who had the bits between their teeth and were not minded to pay attention.

“And good riddance,” said Miss Hughes. “I owe you my thanks, Captain Wrath. Or is it Lord?”

“Jack will do,” Jack told her, letting his accent relax and a little touch of his East Midlands home creep in. “I’m not a lord. And I am not much of a captain.” He used his good hand to point at the useless arm, buckled to his side with the forearm bound across his chest so that it didn’t flop into trouble. He glared at the empty road down which Lord Augustus had disappeared. “I dislike pompous aristocrats, and I cannot abide bullies.”

As he spoke, he turned back towards the barn, jerked up his head, and then leapt into a run. Adam’s bleeding horses had made a feast out of Miss Hughes’ barrel of herbs.

## CHAPTER 2



Genillan Hughes had to chuckle at the expression on Captain Wrath's face as he sped toward his horses. Embarrassment and irritation mixed, and her keen ears heard the salty words he muttered as he tore past.

He didn't need to fret. Peppermint and chamomile were tough, and would grow again—and besides, she had plenty more in her herb garden.

She followed more slowly, ready to help if he could not control the two animals one-handed. One arm was strapped to his body just above the elbow, with the forearm held across his chest in a sling that was also bandaged in place across his chest. However, it didn't appear to slow him down, and she was cautious of offending his pride. Men could be touchy about what they saw as weaknesses.

"I must apologize, Miss Hughes," he said over his shoulder, as he tugged the first horse away from the barrel and led it a few steps away to the hitching rail. "I heard a little of what was happening inside and just let them go. I should have remembered them sooner."

"I'm glad you came to my rescue," she reassured him. "I could have handled him on my own, except that my father tried to intervene, and then he pulled out a pistol..." she shuddered. This was not the first time a stranger in town had thought her trousers made her a harlot, but it was the first time she'd been threatened with a gun. Slapping their face usually worked, and her backup plan was a hammer between their

legs. In one case, lacking a hammer, she had chased a man away with her gelding irons.

It was only the strangers. The men of Reabridge did not see her as a woman at all. Apart from one man the year after Evan disappeared, and he had proved to be a disappointment.

He was one of the few men of her class in the town as tall as she was and had been courting her, she thought. His increasingly passionate kisses promised marriage, for they were both respectable people. Suddenly, with no explanation, he stopped visiting, and when she managed to corner him after chapel meeting one Sunday, he did his best to back away, his eyes darting in every direction for an avenue of escape.

“I’m sorry, Gwen, but you can’t have thought I meant anything by it,” he told her. “I’m betrothed to the dressmaker’s daughter.” The dressmaker’s daughter was at least eight inches shorter than Gwen and would never dream of lifting any implement heavier than a needle.

It took Gwen nearly two years to decide she’d had a lucky escape. A man who will cheat on one woman will cheat on another. Still, no-one else had ever shown an interest.

The second horse decided to dispute the need to move, and Mr. Wrath applied his attention to changing its equine mind. He soon had it under control, using a firm calm voice that expected obedience just as much as the strength of his left arm, which must be considerable.

Gwen was used to large men. Her father and her brother Evan were both taller and broader than most. But Jack Wrath was not just their equal in size. He had a presence that made him seem larger still.

Perhaps that came from being in the army. Would Evan have learned the same way of filling a space and demanding attention? Would she ever know? For a moment, the pit of devastation yawned. Evan was gone. They had not heard from him since he left, six years ago. Had he married the girl he ran off with? Had he joined the army as he longed to? Was he still alive?

Mr. Wrath was standing before her with the horse, and had said something.

“I’m sorry,” she had to admit. “I was woolgathering.”

He replied without a hint of irritation. “I said these two horses need to be reshod, Miss Hughes. I believe you received a message from Dr. Wagner’s stables. Are you or your father able to manage them now?”

Bother. She had seen no message. Whoever brought it must have given it to Father, and no doubt he forgot all about it as soon as it was delivered.

“We can manage them now,” she acknowledged. “Would you like me to see to this lovely fellow first?”

“In the orphanage, they told us that *Handsome is as handsome does*,” said Captain Wrath. “Sister Joy would not at all approve of calling this stubborn and willful beast ‘handsome’.”

Captain Wrath had grown up in an orphanage? Gwen filed that piece of information away. “Do you work for Dr. Wagner?” she asked, as she led the way back inside the farriery.

“I am a guest at his house,” Captain Wrath replied.

Father had left the workshop, leaving the door to the cottage open behind him. Should she fetch him? He was happiest when he was working, and she encouraged it, not least because it was easier for her, in some ways. He mostly remembered his craft, even if he forgot everything else. Though his skill with his hands was waning, his ability to control an awkward horse was still second to none. And when he was here, she did not have to worry about what else he might be doing.

On the other hand, at the moment, only their closest neighbors knew of his problems, and they had no idea how confused he was getting. The more people who saw him, the more likely the townsfolk would discover that his wits had gone wandering. Then, it would only be a matter of time before the farrier in the upper town made her father’s

condition an excuse to shut her down so he could have the custom of the whole of Reabridge.

“Go check on your father,” Captain Wrath advised. “I can wait until you have seen to him.”

Gwen opened her mouth to say her father was fine, just as there was a roar of rage from inside the house. She took off at a run, and a crash from the kitchen sped her steps.

What a mess! Da must have become frustrated with something on the dresser, for all the contents of one shelf were on the flagstone floor, most of them in pieces, and Da was sitting in the midst of them. Somewhere in the last few minutes, he must have removed both slippers and socks, for he was weeping over a cut foot.

“Ellen,” he said as she entered, slowing her steps to avoid alarming him. “Ellen.” As was happening more frequently, he took her for her mother. He lost track of the words he wanted to say, another alarming recent development. He pointed to his bleeding foot. “Hurts,” he said.

“Oh, Da.” Ellen wanted to weep, too. She grabbed an old apron off the pile of unfolded laundry, tore off a strip, and wadded it into a ball as she squatted down to look at the foot. The blood welling from the cut made it hard to tell how deep it was, but she didn’t think anything was still stuck in it. She pressed the ball of fabric onto the cut and he did not flinch. “Hold that tight, Da, and I will sweep this lot out of the way before you get hurt again.”

“I’ll sweep,” said a voice from behind her. It was Captain Wrath, leaning over her shoulder to look at her father’s strong fingers holding the cloth against his foot. “You see to your father. Where is the broom?”

Gwen thought of objecting to his invasion of her privacy, but it was too late and she needed help too much. “In the scullery,” she told him. “Through that door. Now, Da, let me have a look, then we’ll see about moving you to your chair.”

She sang to him as she checked the cut—an old song that Ma had often sung while she worked. Da was calmer when she



sang from her mother's repertoire. Except when he remembered that Ma was no longer with them, and became distressed.

Today, the song worked its magic, and she was able to take a good look under the cloth. The cut was still oozing blood but not as deep as she'd feared. Da must have stepped on a sharp edge of the broken china that Captain Wrath was swiftly and efficiently sweeping away from her father, one-handed. He had cleared the path to Da's chair. She supposed he guessed the correct one because it had been made to fit her father's proportions.

"Should I fetch the physician?" her uninvited guest asked, as she finished tying the cloth on firmly. He had picked up a few items that had miraculously survived the fall and set them on the table, had swept the pieces into a heap out of the way, and had found a hand brush and pan so he could clean any shards out of the cracks between the flagstones. How he would manage those one handed, she did not know.

She idly wondered how a gentleman learned to sweep a floor—for all his talk about an orphanage, he was an officer so he must be a gentleman. "I don't think it is deep, Captain Wrath. Come on, Da. Let me help you up. Once you are sitting in your chair, I will bandage your foot for you."

Da shook his head, but he co-operated when she took his hand to pull him to his feet. Captain Wrath didn't wait to be asked to help, but put his hands under Da's arms, supported him to stand, and gave Da his support as they hobbled across the kitchen.

Captain Wrath chattered the whole time. "Well, Mr. Hughes, that was a bit of an accident, wasn't it? Never mind. Your fine lass here will bind it up and it will mend, good as new. Here, let me fetch this box for you to put your foot on. A cushion under it to make it more comfortable? I'll put some of this fabric over the cushion, Miss Hughes, shall I?" He was suiting action to words, and Da seemed mesmerized by the sound of his voice.

Once Gwen tried to take the cloth away from the foot again, though, Da objected, batting her hand away. “No. Don’t touch. It hurts.”

“I need to bandage it, Da.”

“Don’t call me Da,” he objected. “It makes me sound old. A chit like you should have better manners.”

He had forgotten who she was again. She kept her sigh internal. “I need to bandage it, Mr. Hughes.” She made her voice firm and business-like, though she wanted to lie down and howl.

“There will have been many a time you’ve bandaged a cut on a horse’s leg, Mr. Hughes,” Captain Wrath commented. “What would you recommend for a poultice in such a case as your foot? I had a farrier with my troops who swore by turnip.”

That distracted Da. “Epsom salt and bran is good for drawing inflammation,” he proclaimed. “Warm, of course. For a fresh wound, honey is best, I find. You are a cavalry man? I’m sorry I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Jack, Mr. Hughes. Just call me Jack. Yes, I’ve been twenty-five years a lancer, man and boy.”

Gwen let out the breath she did not know she was holding. At moments like this, when he could draw on the knowledge he learned as a boy at his father’s knee, Da sounded almost like his old self. But the disappearing memories of his recent past made him confused and angry.

Da was expressing regret for the cruel life of a war horse, and Captain Wrath agreed with every word. “Mind you, I’ve owed my life to my horse many a time, Mr. Hughes. One thing about this stupid shoulder is that I won’t have to see another horse killed in battle.” His voice was grim, and his gaze fixed on something that wasn’t in the room.

The dark mood seemed to shake Da out of his enthrallment with this new friend. Gwen was spreading honey on the cut, and he tried once again to push her hands away.

“Let me tell you about my Tabby,” Captain Wrath said, suddenly cheerful. “I named all my best horses Tabby, after my mentor, Truth Bridgeman. We called him Mr. Bridgeman to his face, of course. But behind his back we called him Tabby.”

Da was listening, intent on every word. Gwen hurried to wrap a proper bandage around the foot, splitting it at the end so she could tie it into a tight knot behind the calf where, she hoped, her father couldn't find it to undo it.

Meanwhile, Captain Wrath kept talking. “When I made it to trooper and bought my first horse with my first prize money, he had a mane the same color as old Tabby's hair, and a way of looking down his nose as if I'd disappointed him. I called him Tabby as a private joke, and somehow it seemed as if the man himself was with me. My horses have been Tabby ever since.”

Gwen sat back on her heels, confident the bandage would hold. “Which one of those outside is Tabby?” she asked.

Captain Wrath shot her a quick smile. “Neither,” he confided. “They both belong to Dr. Wagner.” The smile faded. “I lost Tabby the Fifth at Waterloo, and I haven't had the heart to replace him.” He met Da's eyes and sighed. “War is a terrible thing for men, but it is worse for horses.”

Da matched the sigh, then suddenly announced, “It is time for bed.” He got up and walked across the kitchen, hobbling only a little. Gwen followed him, to guide him to his own bed if he got confused and finished up in hers or on the sofa in the parlor.

If he made it to a proper bed, he might give her two or three hours to shoe the waiting horses and to do a few other chores. Then he would probably be up in the night, and, dear merciful heavens, she would give her right arm for a good night's sleep.

She rescinded the thought. With Captain Wrath's damaged arm as a horrible example, that was not a bargain she was prepared to make, even as a silent joke.

## CHAPTER 3



From his bedchamber window, Jack saw Adam Wagner leave his gig and horse in the care of a sleepy stable boy. The poor man had been called out in the night. Jack had woken the stable boy to harness the horse to the gig and made sure Adam had a good dose of coffee in him to help sober him up, then seen him off and gone back to sleep.

As he clattered down the stairs to breakfast, Jack wondered how the struggling mother and her babe had fared, and shuddered at the memory of the births he'd unavoidably seen in his years in the army. Even the easiest of them looked like hell to his male eyes.

Adam had just entered the kitchen. "From your grim visage I gather it was a difficult night," Jack commented.

Adam favored him with a brief summary of the night. Patient and mother lived, thank God. Adam didn't go into detail, which meant Jack could enjoy the well-laden plate of eggs and bacon Adam's housekeeper laid before him.

Interesting that most of Adam's comments about the night concerned Miss Margaret Barlow, who was also attending the birth. The woman had clearly got under Adam's skin.

"I hope the surgery is quiet today," Adam said. "If I finish by noon, I'm back to bed."

No doubt only after he emptied whatever bottles he had secreted in his bedroom. Adam was a good doctor, as Jack had

cause to know since he'd saved Jack's life. He was also a good man, even though he was attempting to drink himself to death.

"Do you have any plans?" Adam asked.

Jack had a tentative plan. Miss Hughes needed help, and he could give it to her. She wouldn't hire him, of course. Didn't have the money, probably, and too proud to ask for help, in any case. So, Jack was going to just waltz into the house and start working.

He laid out the problem for Adam. The dotty old man. The woman who was trying to run a business in a man's world while looking after the house and her father. "I can help. Even with my useless arm, I can keep Hughes out of trouble, clean the house, put the kettle on, that sort of thing." And see some more of Miss Hughes. Gwen. What a woman!

Adam sighed. It was obvious he disapproved, and Jack could guess some of the reasons. All Adam said, though, was, "Will they pay you?"

Jack wasn't going to ask. He didn't need the money. What he needed was something useful to do. He said so. "I'm not much use to you," he pointed out. "I can't stop you drinking yourself to death, and I'd make a lousy surgeon's assistant."

Adam's face closed over at Jack's reference to his drinking. Jack should know better than to keep prodding Adam about it, and in truth, it was none of Jack's business if Adam wanted to drown himself from the inside out. But what a waste! Jack couldn't help wanting to fix things.

"I'll be off then," he said.

Adam waved his cup in farewell, and Jack left him to his breakfast.

He strolled through the lower town considering ways to approach Miss Hughes without her turning him away. As the farrier's cottage came into view, there she was. *Gwen*, his heart said. Stupid heart. What use would a magnificent woman like her have for a broken-down soldier, soon to be an ex-soldier, old before his time, beset by nightmares, with only one

working arm, no job and no idea where he was going or what he would do?

She was harnessing a horse to a little vehicle—something between a cart and a gig, with a gig seat in front and a small cart tray at the back. The frown on her face hastened his steps. She was worried, and he wanted to fix it.

“Good morning, Miss Hughes.”

She turned at his greeting, her eyes widening in surprise. “Captain Wrath!”

As an ex-cavalry man, he recognized the setup in the cart back of the vehicle—the farriers and blacksmiths in the army had carried larger versions of the little portable forge, and the other boxes undoubtedly carried the tools of Miss Hughes’s trade.

“Off to work?” he asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of his tone.

“Yes, if...” Relief spread across her face as a boy of about nine raced around the corner of the cottage and skidded to a stop in front of her.

She continued to look in the direction he came, welcome turning to puzzlement. “Is your mother far behind?” she asked the boy.

“Mam can’t come,” the boy reported. “Said to tell you she’s sorry, Miss Hughes, but Chrissie got too close to the fire, and her apron caught, and Mam’s had to take her to the doctor.”

Miss Hughes paled, her eyes widening. “I hope Chrissie is not too badly hurt,” she told the boy. “Does your mother need anything?”

“It’s not too bad, my Mam says. She dropped Chrissie in the rain barrel straight off,” he was backing away as he spoke. “I have to go back and watch the baby. Sorry, miss.” He took off the way he had come.

Miss Hughes nibbled at her lower lip, her eyes full of worry.

“Anything I can do to help?” Jack asked.

Hope lit her face, followed by rejection. “I do not know you, Captain Wrath,” she pointed out. True, but Jack was more and more certain that his heart knew hers. Which surely meant that her heart knew his?

He spread his unbound arm, palm facing her. “I am as you see,” he assured her. “A worn-out soldier, no longer fit for duty, and at a loose end. I came here with Dr. Wagner because I owed him my life and he needed someone to see him home. He will speak for me, if you ask him. But here I am, with nowhere I need to be and nothing to do, after a lifetime of being busy. Will you not let me help you?”

Her teeth worried at her lower lip again, which made it plump and full, and set his body to riot. Which was not what he was here for. He waited. He had said his piece.

He saw her jaw firm with decision a moment before she gave a single nod. She had made up her mind. “Very well, Captain Wrath. I need someone to stay with my father for the day. I have a full day of work today. Customers in town who have enough horses that they want me to come to them instead of them to me, and then the stables of the Duke of San Sebastian.

“I can’t afford to risk the work going to someone else, and I don’t have time to make other arrangements now that Mrs. Carr can’t come, so I am going to have to trust you. You were good with him yesterday.”

“I’ll keep him as calm as I can, stop him from wandering off, and clean him up if he messes himself,” Jack offered, as he obeyed her gesture, which beckoned him to follow her into the house.

“You have cared for someone like him before,” she guessed.

“Faithful Bridgeman. He was the superintendent of the orphanage where I grew up. His son Truth—I mentioned him yesterday—took over when old Faithful’s memory got too bad for him to continue. By the time I left, we older boys had been

taking it in turns to care for the old man for several years.” By that time, Faithful had been barely able to speak except in grunts, and had forgotten everyone around him. Mr. Hughes was nowhere near as bad.

Miss Hughes seemed satisfied. She showed him the pantry, told him what her father liked to eat, and explained where to find clean clothes should the old man need them. “He is asleep, Captain Wrath. He sleeps a lot, but he might wake at any time. Please watch for him, lest he wanders off.”

Jack nodded. “I once tracked Faithful through Stamford in his nightshirt. I almost lost him altogether, because I stopped to put my trousers on. That was the last time I fell asleep on the job, and in my defense, I was only ten. I got him back safely, though.”

She awarded him a brief smile for the story, but the worry did not leave her eyes. “I will watch,” he promised. “And I will not let him wander off.”



Gwen could not believe she had left a stranger to care for her father. Something about Jack Wrath inspired trust, with his anecdotes and his eagerness to be of use. He had a calm way about him, too. Surely such a kind man could not be a villain?

Nevertheless, as she did her rounds, she worried. Was he still there? Had he got busy with something and left her father to his own devices? Had he stripped the house of anything valuable and taken off? How could she have been so rash. By noon, she could resist no longer. She would go home for a bite to eat before visiting the last customer in town and traveling on to the San Sebastian estate.

First, though, she took a little extra time and drove past the doctor’s surgery, so she could check what Dr. Wagner thought about his friend. She came away comforted. “He is a good man,” the doctor assured her, adding the odd codicil, “Except for his determination to fix anything—and anyone—he thinks



is going wrong.” Gwen didn’t see how that could be a flaw in the man. She was glad of his help.

Back at her home, she soon found her father and Captain Wrath. All she had to do was follow the two voices singing in the kitchen—a somewhat bawdy song about a miller and his customer. Her father’s deep bass and Captain Wrath’s light tenor wound around one another to turn the silly lyrics into a thing of beauty. On impulse, she joined in the chorus.

*“To me right ful la, my diddle diddle lay do,  
Right ful, right ful ay.”*

Captain Wrath turned to smile at her. “That was just what the song needed,” he observed. “An alto.”

“My Ellen,” Da said, smiling. Once again, he thought she was her mother. Gwen had given up arguing with him when he was like this. Captain Wrath put a bowl down in front of him—stew, which he was eating with a spoon. What a good idea! Gwen had been serving her father on a flat plate, and with a fork and knife. And where did the stew come from? Had Mrs. Carr sent it in apology? Which reminded Gwen that she would have to call by and see how Chrissie was. Poor Mrs. Carr was raising the three children on her own, for Carr had taken the King’s shilling rather than be arrested and tried when a political meeting he attended turned violent.

Captain Wrath had filled another bowl. “Are you ready for stew, Miss Hughes?” he asked. “I can make a pot of tea, too. The kettle has just boiled.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a seat on the bench next to her father. Jack put the bowl in front of her. “What have you two men been up to today.”

Da was shoveling stew into his mouth. He spoke without waiting to finish the mouthful. “Jack tells stories,” he swallowed. “He went to the war.” He took another spoonful.

“Did he?” Gwen asked, at a loss for what else to say.

“Damn fool thing to do,” Da grumbled. “No good comes of going for a soldier. Thugs and villains.”

Gwen took a worried look at Captain Wrath to see if he was offended, but he grinned as he brought his own bowl to the table. All three of them with bowls and spoons, and bread they could tear with their fingers. Well, why not? It was not a formal dinner party.

“Ellen likes us to eat proper,” Da said to Captain Wrath in what might be intended as a whisper. He dipped his bread into the soup, scooped soup on to it and lifted it up, dripping, to shove into his mouth.

“It’s not the officers’ mess,” Captain Wrath whispered back. “Proper doesn’t count if it’s not the officers’ mess.” He nudged the bowl toward Da, so more of the soup would fall into the bowl while the bread was being transferred to Da’s mouth. Da had a towel tied round his neck, so the rest would at least be easy to clean up. Another good idea.

Father accepted Captain Wrath’s explanation, and continued spooning up his stew, while Captain Wrath gifted Gwen with a twinkling smile.

“How has your morning been?” he asked. The kettle whistled again, and he got up to pour the water into the teapot, then brought it, a cup, and a jug of milk to her place at the table. Gwen had not been waited on since she could toddle. It felt both wonderful and slightly uncomfortable. Shouldn’t it be her job to serve the food and the tea? But if it did not bother Captain Wrath, why shouldn’t she enjoy it?

“Is all well?” Captain Wrath asked.

Gwen collected herself and answered his question. “I have had a busy morning, thank you. Everything is well.” What was it about Captain Wrath that scattered her thoughts? “How have you and Da enjoyed yourself?”

“I think it has been a good morning for him,” Captain Wrath confided. “He has been talking well, and has accepted me, though he keeps forgetting who I am.”

At that moment, Da pushed back from the table and glared at them both. “What are you doing in my house?” he demanded. “Who are you?”

Gwen tensed. Last time he had suddenly had no memory of her at all, he taken offense at having a strange woman in his kitchen and had chased her from the house brandishing a broom.

“I am Jack,” Captain Wrath said, “And this is Gwen. You may remember you invited us to a meal with you.”

Da frowned, but didn’t challenge Captain Wrath’s statement. He pointed. “Something wrong with your arm?”

“Bullet in the shoulder,” Captain Wrath said. “Dr. Wagner says it damaged the nerves and muscles. Now the arm is pretty much just a useless lump of meat.”

Da nodded thoughtfully. “Poacher, was it? Or highwaymen. Not a duel, I hope.”

“No,” Captain Wrath said. “Not a duel.”

“Good,” Da said. He bent over to take a closer look. “No movement at all?”

Jack wiggled the fingers that poked out of the sling. “A little.”

“Hmmm.” Da frowned in thought. “A good sign. Keep it bound so you don’t bang it into things. But make sure you get your wife to exercise it twice a day. Massage, too. Ellen can give you some of my liniment to use. Do the dishes, Ellen, and see this stranger out. I’m going to have a little lie down.”

Gwen was back to Ellen again. She began to get up to see that her father made it up to bed, but Captain Wrath gestured for her to sit. “I’ll do it,” he said. “You finish your meal. I know you have a busy afternoon ahead of you.”

Gwen should have insisted. After all, it was her job to look after her own father. But it was such a blissful luxury to sit and eat a meal on her own; to finish a cup of tea while it was still hot. She had to admit that Captain Wrath was handling her Da well. Better, in fact, than she did.

The least she could do was offer him the liniment Da mentioned, and help him exercise his arm. Unless he had a wife. He had not mentioned a wife.

## CHAPTER 4



Miss Hughes left after finishing her cup of tea, but when she heard he didn't have anyone to massage his arm for him, she said she'd do it when she got back. He probably should not accept. Adam had offered. Even done it once or twice when he was sober. Jack could afford to pay someone, in any case.

But Miss Hughes was a farrier, and used to treating muscle injuries. On horses, but presumably her experience would count for something. Who was he kidding? He wanted her hands on him. *Behave yourself, Jack. She's a respectable woman.*

Mr. Hughes slept for long enough that Jack was able to wash the dishes, clean up the kitchen and the little scullery, and hunt around to see what he could prepare for dinner. Miss Hughes had a link of sausages in the pantry, which was probably what she intended to cook tonight. No vegetables other than potatoes in a crock on the floor, but he found carrots, parsnips and turnips in the garden. He pulled a few and scrubbed them clean.

He had a light hand with pastry, so he made a small apple pie with some apples he picked from the tree, put it in a pot, and raked some embers away from the main fire to sit the pot in, putting a shovel full of embers on top.

When the old man woke up, Jack had to explain who he was again, but after that, Mr. Hughes was quite amenable to stacking wood—Jack had noticed that more needed to be

brought from the wood shed to replenish the wood pile by the kitchen door.

They sang again, old country ditties, some of which Jack had never heard before. Mr. Hughes had a rich voice with a wide range, and knew some very provocative lyrics that Jack hoped the man never sang in front of his daughter. She would probably think Jack taught them to her father, whereas the reverse was the case.

After that, Jack rescued his pie from the fire and put it in the pantry to cool. He cleaned the hearth, and then he and Mr. Hughes sat and played checkers, until Mr. Hughes got frustrated and upset the board. He had forgotten the rules, and his speech was fading, too, as the day drew on. Jack suggested a stroll in the cottage's little orchard, and beguiled the minutes with a story about the time he and his men camped in an orchard in Portugal, and were so hungry they roasted and ate green apples, despite the sour taste.

“We all had a small portion, but in the night, we discovered that two of the privates had decided to finish what was in the pan. They were betrayed by their groans. The revenge of the green apples.”

Mr. Hughes chuckled, though whether at the story, his own memories, or because he liked the sound of Jack's voice, who could say? The sun was about an hour from the horizon, by Jack's reckoning. Would Miss Hughes be home by dark? Should he have dinner ready for her? Should he cook for Mr. Hughes if she was delayed? He began another tale to keep Mr. Hughes entertained.



Gwen was late home. She had been unable to finish the work at the San Sebastian stable. For one thing, they had been saving problems for her to attend to when she came. For another, she had been called away in the middle of the afternoon when a cart horse on a nearby farm threw a shoe and

brought an entire team of harvesters to a halt while someone ran for the farrier.

Even if she had finished the estate's shoeing, she'd have to return with medications that she had in her stores but hadn't taken with her. No matter how often she reminded her customers to let her know if she needed to come prepared for any particular problem, they usually forgot to let her know before she arrived with her cart.

And now she would have to cook dinner and prepare her father for bed. *He is all I have*, she reminded herself, *and has loved me all my life. Looking after him now is my privilege.* Even if, on nights like tonight, it felt more like a burden.

She walked into a warm kitchen where her father sat nodding by the fire, clean, dry and fed, and a meal waited for her in a covered dish, keeping hot on a pile of embers.

Captain Wrath waited only long enough to ask after her day, make her a pot of tea from the kettle that was waiting on the stove, and agree to return the next day. "We can save my treatment until tomorrow," he said.

He was there all the next day, and every day after. It proved to be a busy week. She managed to put in two busy mornings at the farriery, with a succession of horses to be shod or treated for some injury or illness. Otherwise, she was out in her cart, traveling from stable to stable, busy all day long.

She did not leave each day, though, until Jack—he was Jack to her now—had stripped to the waist so she could move his arm in a series of exercises and then massage his arm and shoulder.

She tried to pretend—to Jack at least—that it was no different to treating a horse. She had never reacted to a horse the way she did to Jack's naked torso, which was a thing of beauty, for all it was covered in dozens of scars, each of which had a story.

He had a little movement in his fingers, but otherwise the arm hung from the shoulder, unresponsive. He and Dr. Wagner had devised the belt, sling, and bandage to stop it from flailing

about and banging into things as he moved. He could get into the device himself, maneuvering his arm into his shirt and jacket, and then catching the tag end of the belt in his teeth, wrapping it around his back and over the damaged arm, and placing his barely usable hand so the fingers could trap the buckle while he worked the tag into it with his other hand.

Then it was just a matter of fitting the shaped sling over the arm. What she had thought was a bandage was actually sewn into the elbow so he had only to wrap it across the arm and around the body, and tie it off with a couple of deft one-handed knots.

“Thank you,” he said politely the first time, when she asked if she could help, “but if you don’t mind, Gwen, I like to do what I can for myself.”

When he suggested that she call him Jack, Gwen had been unable to resist the urge to hear her name on his tongue. *He is just filling in time and doing a good deed, and you are a fool to fall in love with him, Gwenillan Hughes. A great tall streak like you, doing a man’s job and too smart for your own good.*

Each day, it was a pleasure to return to her peaceful house, where a cup of tea was always ready. A pleasure, too, to have a contented father, who sometimes recognized her and sometimes not, but nonetheless had been kept happy enough to welcome her, whether it was for a short break between customers or at the end of a long day’s work. Except for the first night, Jack always stayed to have dinner with them, and afterward for a second round of exercises and massage.

They were precious moments, though she took care to make sure that the door was locked and her father occupied elsewhere. Her reputation would never survive other people knowing she had put her hands on a half-naked man, and she needed to keep her good name safe. It was too late to save her heart, so she might as well enjoy his company while she had it. Her pride and dignity—those she could also keep, as long as she never gave him any hint about how she felt.

In bits and pieces, she learned about his life and told him about her own. “You have seen the world,” she said to him one



evening, as she washed the dishes and he dried them. “I have seen this town and a few of the nearby villages. And Chester, once.”

Jack gave a rueful twist of his lips. “I have seen mud, dust, the rump of the horse in front of me, and the glint of a rifle barrel in the trees. All countries look the same from a column on the march. And when we sit around a fire in camp, those soldiers who are off seeing the world talk about how they yearn for their little town or their tiny village.”

“Did you?” Gwen asked.

“Yearn for the place of my childhood? Often. Familiar sounds or sights would take me home. Or scents. Scents especially. I would walk down a dusty street in a hot town, foreign birds making an alien racket in the wrong kind of trees, surrounded by people I didn’t know dressed in ways I’d never seen and talking in languages I didn’t understand. Then out of the blue I’d walk past a spice shop and catch a whiff of cinnamon and nutmeg. In a moment, I was transported to Sister Heart’s kitchen, and the spiced buns she would make as a treat when one of us went to be apprenticed.”

“Sister Heart? Was she the cook at the orphanage?”

“She was, though the other sisters took turns helping her, we older children did, too. It was not... I have talked to other orphans, and they grew up in grim places, where they were yelled at, beaten and half starved. I was one of the lucky ones. It was not an official place, just a family home that took in babies and little children, and treated us as if we belonged.”

He paused as he left the scullery to hang a pot on the pot rack, but continued the story when he returned. “While I was there, we never had fewer than twenty orphans in the house, and the Bridgemen family as well: Father, son, and four sisters. How they paid for us all, I have no idea. They must have raised money somehow. We wore cast off clothing donated by supporters and ate plain food, but we never went hungry. We slept three to a bed—five, for the littlest ones, but we were not cold. We had chores to do, but we were not worked from dawn to dusk.”

He took the second pot through and returned.

“It certainly does not sound like any orphan asylum I have heard of,” Gwen acknowledged.

Jack nodded. “We had our letters and numbers to learn, too, and those of us who showed promise were kept to our books even after we could read and do a bit of adding and subtracting.” He chuckled. “I didn’t appreciate it at the time. I was glad of it when I was first promoted.”

“A battlefield promotion?” Gwen asked, and the conversation moved away from his childhood and on to his career in the army. She already knew he had made his way up through the ranks, which was vanishingly rare.

She’d like to hear more about the Bridgemans and the orphanage, but she would take any stories of his life he was prepared to share with her.

She was a sad case.

## CHAPTER 5



For the rest of that week, Jack spent every day at the Hughes' cottage, arriving after breakfast and walking back to Adam's place in the dusk. On Saturday, though, when he mentioned the next day, she said, "No need, Jack. Tomorrow is Sunday. I don't work on a Sunday."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if he could come anyway; perhaps escort her to church. Chapel, rather. She and her father were dissenters, following the religion of the Welsh valleys as Mr. Hughes' father had before them. Which was fine with him, for he had been raised by a family of Puritans whose flavor of dissenting was all their own. If he had any religion at all, it was that of his childhood, and not the Church of England to which an officer had to pay lip service in order to progress in the ranks.

Before he could ask, she said, "Father and I will have a quiet day, just the two of us. Take the day to yourself, Jack, for I mean to be selfish and ask you to come back on Monday, if you are not bored with us. If you can spare the time."

That was progress, for it had always been he who offered, not she who asked. He arrived on Monday with a hopeful heart.

This week was even busier than the last. He only saw Gwen in bits and pieces, as she rushed from one job to another, managing a rush of clients and a mix of work.

"Harvest time is always busy," she said. "The gentry are preparing for the hunting season, too."

As a cavalry man, Jack knew just how important a farrier was, managing not just the essential shoeing and hoof care, but also equine illnesses and injuries. Gwen was clearly much in demand. Too much, in Jack's opinion. At least he could take some of the burden by looking after Griffith Hughes and making sure to have a hot meal ready for her when she arrived home.

Twice more, Adam had warned him to be careful of Gwen's reputation and his own heart. The latter was lost already. Perhaps it had been when he first saw her facing down Ghastly Gussie.

With that in mind, he kept reminding her of his irregular origins, with stories about the orphanage and about his years as a drummer boy and then a trooper. And every time she accepted his story without a blush or a criticism, he tumbled deeper in love.

Two days before the Harvest Festival Jack had been hearing about since he arrived in the town, Gwen joined them for the midday meal as usual. After, she announced that she was going to spend the afternoon in her still room, replenishing her medicinals. Jack would have enjoyed more time with her, but was kept busy with Griffith, who was having a testy day. *I'm a bit cross myself, Griffith. There she is, the darling, just on the other side of the wall, and here I am chasing you around the cottage.*

Well. There was no use being upset with the old man. Jack sometimes thought the worst days were the ones when Griffith was most aware of the holes where most of his memories and his old skills should be.

"He won't help with the chores or settle to spillikins or cards," he reported to Gwen when she emerged from her stillroom. "He refuses to sing, and he makes loud screeches when I try to tell him a story. If you don't mind, Gwen, I'll hire a pair of riding horses and take him out for a ride. I can keep him on a leading rein."

"I'll come along, if you can make it three horses," Gwen said. "I am almost done here, and I've earned the rest of the

day off. Go and fetch the horses, Jack, and I'll watch Father while I make us some food to take with us."

Some things, it seemed, Griffith remembered. He easily mounted the steady horse Jack had hired—a large placid cob that the stable master at the inn recommended. Gwen might think she had kept her father's condition secret, but the stable master knew. Adam's housekeeper knew. Jack wondered how many other people were aware. If so, they should be ashamed for leaving his poor darling to try to manage father, house and business on her own.

He hastened to mount his own horse. Griffith was anxious to be off, and was becoming frustrated when his horse refused to obey his commands. It wouldn't ignore the lead reins that tethered it to Gwen's horse and Jack's.

"This was a wonderful idea," Gwen said half an hour later. She had taken them to an idyllic spot by the river. As soon as Jack spread the blanket for their al fresco meal, Griffith had commandeered it to wrap himself in and had gone to sleep. Jack put his coat down for Gwen to use instead.

She sat on one side, her knees and ankles decorously together, her sensible half boots off the edge of the coat. "There's room, Jack," she said. "Come and share."

Jack shook his head. "Not a good idea, Gwen. I cannot sit that close to you and keep my hands to myself."

She looked puzzled. "Do you mean that you want to touch me? As if...? Jack, what do you mean?"

Perhaps he'd be off to hell in a hand basket, but he could not resist just once telling her how he felt. He would regret it if she sent him packing, as she should, but just once, he wanted her to know.

"I want to touch you." It was a ravenous growl. "I want to kiss you until you don't remember anything but my name. I want to devour you, Gwen, and if you have the least sense of self-preservation, you'll let me sit over here while you sit over there."

Was that a flare of interest in her eyes? Heaven help them both if it was, for her father was no sort of chaperone at all, sound asleep as he was.

Then she floored him. “You don’t have to pretend to desire me, Jack,” she said. “I know I am too tall, too old, and too manly. Believe me, Jack, I know what they think. The only man who has ever kissed me told me to my face that I was a fool to think he was truly interested.” She shrugged. “I don’t know why he pretended. And I am much older now.”

For a moment, Jack couldn’t think of a word to say, then he strode over to where she sat and lowered himself to sit beside her, so close that his thigh touched hers all the way to her bent knee. “Let me prove it to you,” he said. “May I kiss you, Gwen? Please?”

She stared at him, and her eyes gave him hope. Definitely interest. Curiosity, too, if he was not mistaken, and a touch of longing. She nodded.

His muscles quivered with the effort he made to restrain himself. “I cannot touch you without your permission. Words, Gwen. Yes or No?”

“Yes.” It was a whisper, and did not satisfy her, for she repeated it louder. “Yes, please, Jack.”

He started carefully, his hand cupping her face, his lips gently covering hers, moving to caress and stroke. She must have been kissed before, because she responded instantly, and opened her mouth to trace his lips with her tongue.

He deepened the kiss. She had not been kissed very well, or perhaps it had been a long time, for her every response was hesitant and then enthusiastic. She was proving to be a fast learner. As Jack’s hands found her luscious curves and her own hands stroked his back, he was in sore danger of losing all control.

He drew back, panting. “We have to stop, my love, before I cannot.”

She looked as dazed as he felt, but she squeezed her eyes shut and then gave her head a quick shake. “You do not have

to address endearments to me, Jack,” she said, opening her eyes again. The haze of passion was gone, and a bleakness remained. “I know what people think of me.”

Jack’s voice was sharp. “Look at me, Gwen.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Jack Wrath,” she snapped back.

It was his turn to shut his eyes. He took a deep breath and gazed into her eyes. “I apologize. I am not angry with you. I am furious at all the fools who have made you feel this way about yourself. You call yourself too tall. You are the perfect height for me. If we were standing, I could kiss you without my neck and back complaining for hours after. If we danced, I would not be afraid of crushing you.” Danced was not the first activity that had come to mind.

“You are eleven years younger than me,” he continued. “I am too old for you, I know. I don’t know if I’ll ever have the use of my arm. I have been at war for twenty-five years and have nightmares about the things I’ve seen and the things I’ve done. Heaven help you, Gwen, for I’ve decided I’m not going to let that stop me from trying to win you. I won’t blame you if you turn down this broken old man, but you? Too old? What rubbish. You are still in your twenties. You are a young woman.”

She was staring at him, wide eyed, as if he was speaking in a foreign language of which she knew only a few words, and she was not sure he was saying what she thought she was hearing.

“As for manly,” he scoffed, “I have felt your curves, remember. Yes, and seen them, too, when you bend over to shoe a horse.”

She frowned at that. “It’s not my shape that I mean. I assume from the times I’ve been accosted it is well enough. Jack, you must have seen that I don’t behave like a woman. I run the farriery. I bargain with my customers and the merchants I buy from. I do business like a man, and I do not let any man tell me what to do.”

“You are a strong determined woman. It is one of the reasons I’ve fallen in love with you. You can hold your own in a man’s world, and you do. I respect you more than I can say. I like you, too. We have become friends, have we not? We work well together, and we never run out of things to say to one another. We laugh at the same jokes. I want to be with you forever, Gwen.”

She frowned, more in bewilderment than rejection, he hoped. “You are suggesting marriage because we are friends?”

His irritation took over for a moment, and he grabbed her hand and put it on the fall of his trousers, behind which his cock was an obvious and insistent presence. “Does that feel as if I just want a friendship?” he growled, then let go of her hand, his cheeks heating. “I beg your pardon. I should not have done that.”



## CHAPTER 6



Gwen ignored his words. The way his body spoke was much more interesting. The hard length under her exploring hand grew impossibly harder and larger, and his whole body quivered as she stroked her hand up and then down.

She spread her thumb and curled her hand around the girth as far as she could given the concealing fabric of his trousers. The evidence of his desire.

She had a theoretical knowledge of human mating, gained mostly from her observations of horses and a little from listening to others talking. Men who forgot that their farrier was female and shared bawdy tales in her hearing. Women who thought her age exempted her from the usual care they exercised in front of maidens.

Remembering what she had heard, she squeezed. Jack groaned as if in pain, and Gwen nearly snatched back her hand, but then his hips thrust forward to encourage her, and she tried the same maneuver again.

For a moment, he remained still for her explorations, but all too soon, he put his hand on her wrist, not grasping but just halting her movement. “Enough, Gwen. I am holding on to my reason by a thread, but I’ve enough sense to realize that someone could come along at any moment, or your father could wake up.”

He had a point. She reluctantly let go. He gathered her close to him with his good arm and pressed a kiss to her hair.

“Believe me, there is nothing I want more than to let you explore my body, and to explore yours in my turn. In private, though, my Gwen, and with the benefit of marriage. Are you my Gwen?”

She rested her head on his chest and put her arms around him as far as they would go. Her heart and her desire screamed *Yes* in unison. But what would become of Da? What of the business? She had kept it going not just so she had a roof over their heads and food to eat, but so Evan would have something to come home to. Wouldn't it be selfish to put her own wants and needs ahead of those of her family?

“How would it work, Jack? My home is here. My work is here. My father needs me.”

He kissed her hair again, his hand stroking her nape. “You have a home and a life. I don't have a home, and I've lost the only life I know. If you are willing, Gwen, I would like to share yours. I don't know exactly how that would work. We would have to decide that for ourselves. Together.”

It sounded too good to be true. “We are courting then?” she asked.

“If that's what you need,” he confirmed. “Courting, and then, when you are ready, betrothed.”

“If we can decide,” she cautioned. “If we are both happy to go ahead.”

“I will be happy with whatever makes you happy,” he assured her. “But shall I tell you what I think our life might be like?”

She nodded. This was probably a dream or a mistake, and tomorrow or the next day it would all fall apart. In the meantime, she would enjoy it.

“I'd like you not to have to work so hard,” he said. “Is it like this all the time, or is it the season? Have you thought of taking on another person?”

Gwen shrugged. Thought of it over and over, and done her budgets to see if she could make it work. “The trouble is I am a woman,” she pointed out. “Men do not want to work for a

woman, but they might pretend just to get a job, and then refuse to take my orders. And would a stranger treat my father with respect? And if I choose the wrong person, might they take my customers and set up on their own?"

"But you need more help," Jack insisted, "or am I wrong?"

"The work is there," Gwen confirmed. "We used to support three farriers—my father, Evan, and an apprentice, with me helping out when things were busy. I used to have time to make garden ornaments and fancy hinges and other frivolous things. We had a cook and a housemaid, too. But Evan left and the farrier across the river stole our apprentice, and Da..." she shrugged helplessly. "On my own and with Da to care for, it is all I can do to earn enough to pay our bills."

"I can provide money to take a chance on an assistant," Jack told her. "I've won a few prizes and found a bit of abandoned treasure over the years, and most of the money has been invested. And I haven't yet resigned from the army. I'm on the invalid list, and half pay. We could afford to hire one man to start with and then take on an apprentice when business picks up. You'd have to interview the applicants, but I could sit there and look grim."

Gwen smiled at the thought, for he was usually so mild, but then she remembered him taking Lord Gussie's whip and decided he could look grim when he had to. It sat poorly with her, though, to give up her business to a husband, however loved.

Jack seemed to know that without being told. "You would be in charge, Gwen, never doubt it. But I can make sure they respect you and your father. And I've seen your frivolous things. You're an artist, Gwen. There's a market for the things you make, and I'd love for you to have time for them."

She twisted so she could look up into his eyes. *That could actually work!* "If your arm heals, will you go back to the army?" She didn't think she could bear it if he left, too.

He shook his head. "Not a chance. Even if I could bear to be separated from you, Gwen, I couldn't go back to that life." He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "No. The army and I

are finished. They have no claim on me. I did the twenty years I signed up for, and five more besides. As an officer, I didn't have to sign up again. Once I've resigned, I still have money enough for a wife. I get around two hundred pounds a year in interest, and sometimes a bit of a bonus when a ship I've invested in reaches harbor. With what you earn, we could also pay for a housemaid and someone to do the laundry. Or a cook. A cook would be good."

*Two hundred pounds a year!* "It is a fortune," she protested.

"Not a fortune, but enough for a family to live on in a country town."

She settled back onto his chest. "I thought soldiers spent all of their money on gambling, women, and drink," she said. "That's what Father told Evan."

She could hear his chuckle rumble in his chest. "I did some of that when I was young," he admitted. "But it isn't as much fun as you might think when Truth or one of the sisters visits your dreams or whispers in your drunken ear." He managed a good imitation of a woman's quavering voice. "Wrath, I am disappointed in you. We raised you better than that."

"My mother's voice in my head sounds exactly like that," Gwen mused. She remembered a question she had been wanting to ask him. "Wrath is an unusual surname. Was it your mother's name?"

Another rumbling chuckle. "It is actually my first name," he admitted. "Or part of it. Mind you, I have been Jack Wrath for more years than I was Refrain-from-Anger-and-Forsake-Wrath Thursday. Wrath for short. My mother's name was Thursday, so Sister Heart told me. Magdalen Thursday. Sister Heart collected me from the brothel where my mother died birthing me. I have always thought she must have been an orphan too, with the christened name Magdalene and a surname like Thursday. Some orphanage supervisors have no imagination."

Gwen was still thinking about Jack's name. "Your Tabby named you for a bible verse?"

“Not him. His father Faithful, or more properly, He-Will-Guard-the-Feet-of-His-Faithful-Servants Bridgeman.”

“I am beginning to see a pattern,” Gwen noted.

“You are correct, of course, my clever love. He named those orphans who arrived nameless in the same way he was named, and the way he named his children. He opened the bible at random, then hunted the surrounding verses to find one that the child could live up to.”

“Truth?” she asked.

“Sanctify-Them-by-the-Truth Bridgeman. And before you ask, the sisters were Heart, Blessed, Meek, and Joy. My-Heart-Rejoiceth-in-the-Lord, For-the-Lord-Thy-God-has-Blessed-Thee, The-Meek-Will-He-Guide-in-Judgement, and Your-Sorrow-Shall-be-Turned-Into-Joy.”

Gwen’s arms tightened in an effort to comfort. “I am sorry,” she said. She tilted her head to look up, and he was staring at her, his eyes narrowed in bewilderment.

“Sorry for what?”

“For your loss.”

He shook his head. “My loss?”

“You said ‘were’. I thought you meant they were dead.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Jack admitted. “I ran away to join the army, and I have never been back.”

Like Evan. Or did Jack have good reason to abandon and ignore the people who raised him? “Were they unkind to you, Jack?”

His brow furrowed again, and he made almost a question of his answer, drawing out the single syllable. “No?”

“Oh. I thought that might be why you did not keep in touch.”

“It was me, not them,” he admitted. “I thought about at least writing a letter, but by then it was a couple years later. I figured they would have forgotten about me. They must have been angry at me running off, in any case. They disapproved

of fighting and of war. I daresay they haven't given me a thought since I left."

Gwen couldn't let that pass. "They think about you every day. They wonder if you are still alive. They search the casualty lists for your name and give thanks when it doesn't appear. They remember you in their prayers. They worry that you are dead or badly wounded, and that they will never know. They write to the war office to ask for reassurance, but they never hear back. Not even just a small note."

He wiped under her eye, and examined the drop of water he brought away on his thumb as if it was a diamond. "Your brother?" he asked, the sympathy in his voice her undoing. Gwen buried her head in his shoulder. "Family should not ignore family, Jack. Are they not your family?"



The question stunned Jack. Were the Bridgemans his family? "Perhaps they are," he mused. "Certainly, I never had another." Her attentive silence drew a confession from him. "I used to wish they'd write to me." He chuckled at his own foolishness. "Not that they knew where I was, or even what name I was using. I could have written to tell them. I should have, I suppose."

How did he explain that he was afraid that the people he loved would ignore his letter. As long as he never wrote one, he could pretend they were waiting to hear from him. If he told Gwen that, surely she would despise him.

"They hated war, Gwen," he told her. "When I ignored their teaching and went for a soldier, they must have been disgusted, surely?"

"War!" The snort of disgust came from Griffith. "Only a fool goes for a soldier."

Gwen had moved away from Jack at the first sound from Griffith. "Time to go home," she said.

Jack helped her to ready the horses, roll up the blanket and persuade Griffith to mount. He was disappointed and relieved in equal measure that their intimate conversation was over. She'd given him a lot to think about.

"I'll take the horses back," he offered, when they arrived back at the Hughes' cottage.

"Thank you, Jack," Gwen said. "Just wait one moment?"

She led her father to the door and sent him into the house with a whisper in his ear, then hurried back to Jack, who had tied the horses to the hitching rail and waited beside them. "I told him to set up the checkers," she said. "Kiss me, Jack?"

He did not need to be asked twice. She came into his one-armed embrace so sweetly, lifting her lips for his, and the tenderness that welled in his chest kept his initial forays gentle, but she opened her mouth under his ministrations and when her tongue tangled with his, he could not resist deepening the kiss.

The passion with which she responded was almost his undoing. It was as well that Griffith shouted from inside the house, and called Gwen back to her senses. "I must go," she said, her hand lingering in his.

"Shall I escort you to chapel tomorrow?" Jack asked. It was an impulsive offer, but it felt right when he said it.

She blushed and smiled. "Of course. We are courting, are we not?" She had taken two steps away when she thought of something else to say. "Jack, perhaps your family is longing to hear from you. You will never know unless you ask."

He let her have the last word, bent to place one last sweet kiss on the corner of her mouth, and led the horses away. He returned them to the inn, his mind still on her untutored but enthralling response, the taste and the scent of her.

He paid little attention to conversation with the ostler, responding almost at random. The path from the inn stable to Adam's house required even less thought, since he'd walked it twice a day for more than a fortnight.

*She thinks herself undesirable.* At least he had been able to show her undeniable physical evidence that he, at least, wanted her desperately. He groaned as he remembered her enthusiastic explorations.

*What is wrong with the men of Reabridge?* It had worked to his advantage, since she was still single, and willing to allow him to court her. But their neglect of her had caused her pain, and he would wipe that away, if he could. *Though I am not saint enough to wish her married and happy, and therefore lost to me.*

So lost in thought was he that it must have been his soldier's instincts that had him twisting out of the way of the assailant who leapt from a narrow alley between two shops. He stuck a boot in the way of the man's legs, and the villain's own speed sent him crashing head first into the pole that supported the shop's awning.

Just as well, for a second man rushed Jack, this one with an upraised stick that would have done damage if Jack hadn't ducked under it and come up swinging. A fist to the jaw saw this attacker laid out on top of the other one.

A third man lingered in the alley.

"Come out," Jack invited, his fighting spirits high. Even lacking the use of his arm, he'd flattened two men. "There's more where that came from."

"I don't want any trouble," quavered the alley lingerer.

"I won't attack you if you don't attack me," Jack offered, peering into the shadows.

Slowly, sidling along the wall of one of the shops, the man approached. Like the two groaning their way back to consciousness beside him, the third man was respectably dressed—a tradesman, merchant, or clerk, at a guess.

Not the sort of ragged denizen of the slums that Jack expected, and all strangers to Jack. *Theft? Some sort of vendetta against out-of-towners?*

"What's this about?" Jack asked the third man.



One of the others began to struggle upright as he replied. "Leave Gwenillan Hughes alone! We saw you, kissing her in the doorway, leading her astray with your foreign ways."

The third man seemed to take heart from the revival of one of his accomplices, for he said, "Poor old man Hughes might not be able to protect her anymore, but she isn't without friends. If you hurt her, you'll have half the town after you and you'll not be able to use your fancy fighting tricks on everyone."

His words gave Jack a clue to the missing pieces of the puzzle that was Gwen Hughes. "You've been chasing off her suitors!" Jack accused.

"We've been looking after her," protested the third man. "We promised Evan we'd watch out for her."

"And she does not know a thing about it, does she?" Jack speculated. "That's why she thinks she is undesirable and unmarriageable. Because you have scared off anyone who so much as looks at her."

The two men gaped. The one who had attacked first spoke without opening his eyes. "Undesirable? Gwen Hughes? Hasn't she looked in a mirror?"

"She's stunning," one of the others said. "That's why Evan wanted us to warn off anyone who might give her a slip on the shoulder."

Jack shook his head. "And you never said a word to her, right? Come along, gentlemen. We are going to go and explain to Miss Hughes exactly what you have been up to."



Gwen could scarcely believe it. No, actually that wasn't true. She could well believe that Evan had thought to protect her after he was gone, and that his idiot friends had carried out his instructions with a heavy and indiscriminate hand. Come to think of it, Evan himself had intimidated a suitor or two when

she was still a girl. If he was here, he'd probably be proud of his friends.

She wished he was here. He was her brother and she missed him. Even if he was over-protective, bossy, and a terrible letter writer.

The three men shuffled their feet and turned their caps in their hands as they responded to her interrogation with the names of some of the men they had chased off over the past few years. It was impressively long, and the man she'd thought was courting her nearly six years ago was up near the top of it.

They were a bit ashamed of that one. They had not been keeping as close an eye on her as usual, since two of them had just got married and the third was away on his quarterly training with the militia. "I came back and saw him with you at the festival," he said. "Had his hands all over you, he did, in the bushes down behind the church. He didn't hurt you, did he, Gwen?"

"Only when he abandoned his courtship," she retorted. "You fool. Didn't you think to ask him his intentions?"

They exchanged glances and shuffled their feet some more.

"Just to be clear," she told them, "Jack Wrath has asked to court me. So, you will keep your noses out of my business, if you please."

"But Gwen," one of them protested, "he's a stranger. How do we know if he is good enough for you?"

"And what business is it of yours?" she retorted. "I am a grown woman, and will make up my own mind. Now off you go, and stay out of my affairs, or I shall tell your wives what you have been up to. I'll tell your mothers, furthermore, and see if they don't box your ears for you."

Jack left with them, but knocked to be let in again some ten minutes later. "I told them that I know I'm not good enough for you, but if I am lucky enough to win you, I will

spend the rest of my life striving to make you happy,” he reported.

“What business is it of theirs?” she asked again, as she moved into his one-armed embrace.

“Did I do the right thing by making them come to tell you what they have been up to?” he asked. “Does it help to know I am not the only one to have found you attractive?”

“You are the only one to ignore their intimidation,” she pointed out.

“I’ve faced the French Imperial Guard, my love,” he said, “and the Iron Duke. Three slightly flabby townsfolk are hardly a challenge.” He kissed her nose. “I was furious on your behalf when I realized what they’d been doing, and I still want to give them all a good kicking. But at the same time, I am grateful that they were so presumptuous and so foolish. Someone could have stolen your heart years before I even came here, and where would I be now?”

She lifted her face so that the next kiss landed on her lips. “Perhaps I should bake them a cake,” she suggested.

“We could invite them to the wedding,” he suggested. “Will you marry me, Gwenillan Hughes? Will you be my wife, my partner, my friend? I worry that I am older than you, and I have too few years ahead of me to offer you. I worry that I have spent my life as a man of war and I will wake you with my nightmares. But I love you, my fierce magnificent maid. I cannot walk away and pretend I never met you. If you will take a chance on me, I will spend every day of the rest of my life being the best husband I know how to be.”

Gwen was going to do it. She was going to seize the chance with both hands, for he was the man who refused to be scared away by her brother and his stupid friends, or even by Gwen’s own prickly nature. And she loved him. “I will marry you, Jack Wrath. Life is uncertain, and one day I might be gone and you will be alone. Or you might be gone and I will be alone. So, I will be your wife as soon as we can manage it and live each day as if we will be separated tomorrow and as if we shall be together forever.”

He kissed her again, and she found that, enthralling as earlier kisses had been, he had been holding back. The kiss spun out into a symphony of sensation—lips, tongues, teeth; his hands on her body and hers on him; touch and emotion blending in an overwhelming cascade of feeling that left her panting and bereft when, after a mindless stretch of time, he drew back.

“We have to stop while we still can,” he said. His breathlessness and the anguish on his face were reassuring. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

“Why?” she asked. “We are betrothed. We will be wed as soon as we can.”

He kissed her hands, then groaned and pulled her back against his hard body. “A common license. We will talk to the vicar tomorrow, and I shall ride to the bishop in Chester on Monday. No. You need me to look after Griffith while you work at the Harvest Festival. On Tuesday. We can wed the following Wednesday.”

She nodded. That would work. But she wanted more. “In the Welsh mountain valleys, when the winter bites hard and there’s no pressure to stand witness, a promise exchanged makes a marriage,” she commented. “Why should we wait? Stay with me tonight, Jack. Come to bed, and make me your own.”

“I want to treat you with all honor and respect,” he insisted.

Gwen buried her face against his chest, her mouth curving in a smile. That was not a no. “Treat me with honor and respect by believing I know my own mind, love of mine. Come.”

She stepped away, but took his hand to draw him after her. He did not resist.



He left her in the early light of dawn, giving her a lingering kiss at the door. “Latch it behind me, my love. I will be back in time to escort you and Griffith to chapel.”

By that time, he was having second thoughts. It was too late, of course. He had taken Gwen and made her his own. He would have to marry her, though he was not fit. He should have stepped back. Now that her three stupid self-appointed guardians had been discovered and stopped, he should have let a better man win her. A man who could be the husband she deserved.

He did his best to smile as usual, though he sat brooding beside her and Griffith. Then the preacher announced his theme for the day. “Today, we look forward to tomorrow’s harvest festival, brothers and sisters. Let us ponder therefore on those ancient words: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

As he read the passage, certain words leapt out to Jack. “A time to kill, and a time to heal,” the man said. “A time of war and a time of peace.”

Jack listened, absorbed as the preacher spoke of building things up, and all things in their season, and something in his heart shifted. He had had his fill of war, of killing, of tearing down and mourning.

For everything there is a season. He could do this. His harvest for all those years in the army was peace and all that came with peace. He could be Gwen’s husband and the father of her children. *It is my season for love.*

## CHAPTER 7



Gwen was proud to walk into chapel on Jack's arm, if a little apprehensive about everyone guessing where Jack had spent the night. But she was not struck by lightning as she walked in the door, and even the old matrons, who knew everything, did not point at her and berate her for licentiousness.

Not that she regretted a thing. *We are as good as married*, Gwen reminded herself. *We have made our promises, with our words and with our bodies.*

Jack showed no signs of regret or guilt. He joined in all the songs. He listened attentively to the preacher. He smiled at those who smiled at him. For the first time in months, she was happy to linger outside after the meeting, introducing Jack to her friends and neighbors.

"May I make known to you Jack Wrath?" she said, or some other variation of the words, over and over to one group after another. "Jack is my betrothed." Each time she said it, the words warmed her heart, and so did his eyes, straying in her direction every few minutes, as if he could not look away.

At first, she was ready to leap in to deflect any criticism of her father. However, people seemed unbothered that he talked as if he was new to the town and greeted the people who came up as if they were their own parents. Jack had said people already knew her father's condition, and it seemed he was right.

“When are you and our Miss Hughes planning to wed, Mr. Wrath?” asked one of the matrons, and it seemed that everyone wanted to know the answer, for conversations stopped as people waited for his reply.

“We are sending for a common license,” Jack said. “We will be man and wife before the end of next week, if all goes well.”

“Very good,” said Da, approvingly. “It is not good for man to be alone. I can tell you that, young man. I do not know where I would be without my Ellen.” He looked vaguely around him. “Where is Ellen?”

“I expect you will be having a lovely Sunday dinner,” one of the matrons commented.

Gwen nodded, and the matron continued, “Ellen always had the most wonderful meat on a Sunday.”

“Forge doesn’t go out, you see,” Da explained. “Ellen knows just where to set the meat and when. Vegetables, too. Ellen makes the best tatties. I’d best be off. Good day to you, Missus. Cannot keep Ellen waiting.”

He headed for the gate, and Jack and Gwen said hasty farewells to follow after him.

“They are friendly people at the chapel,” Jack said, as they walked home. “Do you go to Sunday meeting every week?”

“Every Sunday unless Da is sick,” Gwen replied. “You do not have to join us, unless you wish to.”

“I will happily come to meeting with you,” Jack assured her. “I won’t lie, Gwen. It has been a long time since I made the effort to attend anything but regimental church parades. But this was nice. It was like coming home. Better, in fact, because I was with you. And dinner to follow!”

“Just a small piece of beef, Jack. But lots of veg, and baked apple to follow.” For as long as she could remember, it had been a Sunday tradition in their family. Mama left everything prepared and ready in the pantry. It took skill and timing to cook on the forge fire (or rather near it). A lack of care and the food would be half-cooked or crisped black—or

both on different sides. But Mama had the skill, and she had taught Gwen.

In less than half an hour, the meal would be cooked and on the table, especially if Jack distracted Da with another game of checkers.



They were sitting in the sun out behind the cottage, pleasantly full, when the messenger arrived—a footman from the Barlow manor with a letter for Gwen.

“I am to wait for an answer, Miss Hughes, and I was also asked to give you this note. Also, sir, may I ask if you are Captain Jack Wrath?”

Jack admitted that he was, and the footman sorted through a pile of invitations in the leather satchel he carried and handed one to Jack.

Gwen paid no further attention. She broke the seal and read the contents of the letter. An invitation to dinner at the Barlows. Tonight. She did not belong at a formal dinner with the Barlows. To be sure, she had tagged along with Evan a time or two in her youth, when Lady Barlow needed to make up numbers. Evan was friends with Ford, Lord Barlow. But since the pair of friends went away to war, the farrier’s daughter had had no further place at the lady’s table.

She opened the note, read the few lines, and read them again, though the note trembled in her hand so that she would have had trouble making out the words. Except that she had read them the first time, and they had not changed.

A warmth in the small of her back, a strength at her side. Jack was there, his hand moving in gentle circles against her spine.

“Jack, this is a note from Lady Wright.”

His nose wrinkled in confusion.



“Her sister ran off with Evan. Or, I suppose, Evan ran off with Yvette. Oh, Jack, she begs me to come to the dinner tonight. She needs to talk to me, she says. What about, I wonder? It must be Evan and Yvette, surely?”

He kept up his gentle circles on her back and said, “I have an invitation too, my love. Let us go and find out what Lady Wright wants. Would your neighbor Mrs. Carr sit with Griffith, do you think?”

Mrs. Carr agreed, so Gwen sorted through all her clothing to find something fit to wear to dinner at the Barlows’, then sat in the parlor and took in the side seams of a gown she’d worn years ago. It was well out of fashion, but the finest thing she owned.

Jack helped Da with a bath before hurrying home to Dr. Wagner’s to get cleaned up himself and changed for dinner. He and Da had been cleaning out the stable and currying the old horse, so Da was tired enough to go straight up to bed. He was sound asleep before Mrs. Carr knocked on the door.

Gwen was struggling with her buttons, and had to put a shawl around her shoulders to go down and let her neighbor in. Last time Gwen had worn this gown, she had had to ask Evan to button her up, and been so embarrassed that she’d sworn she’d never again buy a gown that buttoned at the back. The memory made her smile, now. Tonight, perhaps she would at last find out what had happened to her beloved brother.

With Mrs. Carr’s help, she was ready by the time Jack arrived with a gig he had hired at the inn. He was in full regimentals, looking magnificent. “My goodness,” Mrs. Carr said. “Look at you, Captain Wrath.”

“Look at Miss Hughes,” Jack suggested. “A prettier sight by far.”

Mrs. Carr’s eyes twinkled as she and Gwen exchanged smiles. “Just what a man in love should say,” she told him. “Now off you go to that fine manor, the pair of you. You look the part, you do. Go and make the tradespeople of this town proud.”

“I do not expect anyone will care about whether we are there or not,” Gwen said. “Jack, perhaps, because he is so handsome. But I am just Gwenillan Hughes, the farrier’s daughter, invited because one of their guests is a connection by marriage. I doubt anyone will notice me.”

“I saw Mr. Owen, the vicar, on my way to Adam’s,” Jack told Gwen. “He can do our wedding at ten o’clock on Wednesday a week and a half from now, but he wants to see you, first. I think he wants to make sure that you know what you are doing, marrying a crippled old soldier.”

Gwen gave his knee a slap, not enough to hurt but enough to express her irritation. “Do not refer to yourself that way, Jack Wrath. You are insulting the man I love; the man I have chosen.”

He turned his focus from the horses for a moment to flash an amused smile at her. “I take your point. Let’s make a deal. I won’t insult your husband, and you won’t insult my wife.”

She returned his smile. “The vicar might be there tonight,” she said. “I’ll be sure to tell him that I’m a grown woman and I am marrying a good man. A man I love.”

Mr. Owen was attending the dinner, and greeted Gwen in front of everyone with the words, “Miss Hughes. I understand you intend to marry Captain Wrath, here. Are you doing this of your own free will? Has anyone vouched for the man’s character?”

Everyone crowded around to congratulate Gwen and Jack, and Gwen’s hopes of going unnoticed disappeared.

It took some time for the hubbub to die down. When Lady Wright approached Gwen after dinner and took her to a corner for a private conversation, Gwen expected more of the same. What Lady Wright had to say left her reeling.

## CHAPTER 8



“Do you know about the boy called Sam?” Gwen asked Jack as he escorted her home. “The one from France who is staying at the vicar’s?” She was sitting as close to him as she could get on the gig’s bench, her hand tucked into the elbow of his disabled arm. When he had arrived in the drawing room with the rest of the gentlemen, she and Lady Wright had been alone in a corner, heads close together, talking earnestly. He was, he assumed, about to find out why.

“Yes. His mother came from this village, or so those who brought him here claim.”

“Lady Wright thinks he may be Yvette’s son. Hers and Evan’s. Jack, she had a letter from Yvette a year ago, saying they were with the army near Toulouse, and Yvette was about to give birth.”

“Sam was found near Toulouse,” Jack mused.

“True, but it was an army, Jack. I do not know how many women who followed the drum might have given birth, but what are the chances that a random pair of English tourists might come across my nephew? And know to bring him here?”

Jack shrugged. “What does Lady Wright want to do?”

“Visit. See him. She thinks she will be able to recognize her sister in him. I have seen him, Jack, walking with Charité, who cares for him. Fair-haired with blue eyes, which Yvette had, but he is a baby. Just eighteen months old, I understand. Babies look like babies.”

“Eighteen months,” Jack mused. “The siege of Toulouse. What do you want to do?”

She was quiet for a moment, but he could tell the strength of her feelings by how tightly she held his arm. “If he is Evan’s—he would be a piece of my brother. I could not walk away. But Jack, how would we manage? We are about to be married. We have Da to care for and the farrier business will fail if I cannot attend to it. It matters even more if I am to save it for Evan’s son. But I am not ready to be a mother. I want children, Jack. But not yet.”

“Family is family,” Jack reminded her. “We shall work it out.”



The child was the son of Gwen’s brother. They were in the middle of the marketplace when Gwen told Jack about it, Griffith being distracted by a Punch and Judy puppet show.

Gwen had recognized the chain on the amulet that had been discovered among Sam’s mother’s possessions—the Harvest Festival amulet that was given to all Reabridge maidens when they reached the age of sixteen.

She had tears in the eyes she lifted to Jack, and he yearned to hold her, though it would cause a scandal if he did so right here in Reabridge’s market square, in full sight of all the townsfolk and half the countryside.

“I made that chain, Jack. It was a triple link, very fiddly, and each link was flattened on the long side. I couldn’t mistake it.”

Gwen shook her head. “Vicky wants him. She has the money and the home. She made a promise to her sister. But we will be in his life, will we not, Jack? We will be uncle and aunt to him? A boy needs his uncle and aunts.”

“He does,” Jack agreed, “and we shall be there for him. Lady Wright plans to stay in Reabridge?”

“I don’t know her plans,” Gwen commented. “But if the way Lord Barlow is looking at her means anything, I think she might.”

“Whatever happens,” Jack said, “We will make it work.”

“Family is family,” Gwen commented, returning his own words to him. “Write to Truth Bridgeman, Jack. Invite him to our wedding.”

Jack stared at her for a moment. He had always been afraid Tabby and his sisters would reject him, or write back to abuse him for his choices. But Gwen had said it, and she was right. Perhaps they worried about him. Perhaps they wanted to hear from him. He owed it to them to find out. Hell. He owed it to himself.

“Yes,” he said. “I will.”

Gwen looked up at him, so happy that she glowed, and Jack couldn’t resist. He threw propriety and discretion to the wind, and kissed the woman he loved, and to the devil with what people thought.

It was a glorious and mindful while later that the pair of them were distracted from their kiss by the sound of applause. Their friends and stood around them, clapping and laughing.

“Just as well you are getting married next week,” grumbled one of Evan’s friends, and the woman with him, who must be his wife, nudged him none to gently in the side.

“We are so happy for you, Gwen,” she said.

“Here!” Griffith Hughes shouted, pushing through the crowd. “Who is that you are kissing, Jack?”

“The love of my life, Griffith,” Jack replied. “The love of my life.”

“Well done,” Griffith approved. “She has the look of my Ellen, the finest woman who ever lived. Well done, my friend. Does she like fidget pie? They sell a good fidget pie here at the market.”

“Good idea, Griffith,” Jack agreed, wrapping his good arm around Gwen. “Will you watch the forge?” he asked Evan’s

friend. “Griffith, let me buy you and Gwen a fidget pie and an ale.”

He cast an anxious glance at Gwen, knowing that it upset her when Griffith forgot who she was, but she smiled up at him. “And you, Jack Wrath,” she said, “are the love of mine.”

## EPILOGUE



Gwen was finishing up a few jobs before the holiday, while supervising her daughter Rina. Not that Rina needed a great deal of supervision. At nearly nine years of age, she could already make a simple chain that was nearly indistinguishable from one made by her mother. The triple chain she was attempting was far fiddlier, but not really a great deal more complex. Not once you got into the pattern of it.

“It is hard to keep the heat only on the joint you’re cooking,” Rina commented.

“Slow and careful,” her mother advised, and Rina flashed a smile.

She was not yet heavy enough for much of the farrier work, but she had taken to the more delicate work like a duck to water.

Salt, the apprentice, was making nails. He was getting faster, managing around sixty in an hour, and she had begun giving him other simple tasks. When he could consistently produce one hundred nails per hour, he would have the confidence and the speed to copy some of the metal puzzles she had made herself, both as an apprentice and later for sale. That would teach him much he needed to know about twisting, turning, and shaping the hot iron.

She walked over to examine his bucket, which was more than half full of finished pieces, all of them of the right shape and size to attach a horse shoe.

“Mr. Bridgeman will be very pleased with you, Salt,” she told the boy. Uncle Truth, as Gwen and her children called him, was expected before nightfall, with as many of the aunts as could get away from the orphanage. Almost everyone in the household old enough to keep a secret knew about their visit. Only Jack had no idea that his Bridgeman family was coming for Sunday, the Harvest Festival and Jack and Gwen’s tenth anniversary, which this year fell three days in a row.

The Bridgemans had been thrilled to reconnect with Jack when he wrote to them a decade ago, though they had not arrived in time for the wedding. They came for the following Harvest Festival, though, and remained to celebrate Jack and Gwen’s first anniversary later in the week. Victorine Charity Hughes made her first entrance to the world on that auspicious day, a week late and demanding attention. Gwen had been attended by all the Bridgeman sisters as well as Meg Wagner, who had become a close friend.

Gwen’s assistant Michael and her journeyman, Richard, would be handling the forge at the Harvest Festival the day after tomorrow. She had hired the assistant farrier when she was heavy with Rina. Richard was another protege of the Bridgemans, starting as an apprentice with her eight years ago. Richard had been known as Righteous when he arrived, but within two months had followed Jack’s example and chosen a name of his own.

Uncle Truth had taken the news in his stride, as he had the name Jack had chosen so long ago. He had also been fully in support of Jack’s decision to take Gwen’s surname on their marriage, which had been more than a seven-day wonder in the neighborhood. Indeed, some of the old people had been sure it signaled the second coming of the Christ, or at least the downfall of civilization.

People got used to it in time, and Gwen adored Jack for making the choice. The Hughes’ name lived on at the forge even though her father was seven years in his final rest. It would continue into the next generation if just one of her children chose to follow their mother’s path. They were young yet, though Rina certainly had a gift for iron and the fire.



The double celebration on Tuesday would be particularly special: Rina's ninth birthday and the tenth anniversary of hers and Jack's wedding. And within the next hour or two, Jack's surprise would arrive. She wanted to hug herself with glee as she thought of his reaction.

She found herself turning toward the back wall of the forge, as if she could see through it to the training ring beyond. Between schooling young horses and teaching young riders, Jack had made himself a full-time career, and their nephew Sam loved nothing better than to escape from lessons for an afternoon to assist. She knew the pair of them had the new horse on a long lead and were putting it through its paces. Undoubtedly, the rest of the children were watching from the rails.

Not that they were visible from here. *Jack is my sun, and I turn toward him whether I can see him or not.* She laughed at her fancy, but it held a core of truth. Jack and the children were the center of her world.

The rumble of wheels and the clop of hooves drew her attention to the gate, through which a smartly dressed lady was driving a curricule. Victorine Lady Barlow had come to collect Sam.

"Carry on, Salt," she commanded. "The bucket needs to be full to here before you can have the day off tomorrow." She pointed to a spot a bare half inch above the current level, and put one hand in the small of her back to help her straighten.

This fifth child seemed to be twice the size of any of its brothers or sisters. It was not due for another three weeks, but was already inhibiting her bending—and especially her unbending. Meg and Paul Wagner said it would arrive when it was ready, and predicted that the Bridgeman aunties might be attending another Hughes birth in the week they planned to visit.

"Gwen," Vicky called. "Good afternoon. I am here to pick up Sam. Am I interrupting?"

Gwen picked up the soap to wash her hands in a bowl of water. "I have just finished. Let me wash my hands, Vicky, and

I'll be with you. Rina, came and say hello to your Auntie Vicky."

"Auntie Vicky," Rina greeted. "Would it be rude for me to finish just this single joint?"

Vicky told her to go ahead and hurried over to watch the process.

As Gwen dried her hands, Jack and Sam came around the farrier, followed by three more of the children, with the fourth riding on Jack's arm. "Auntie Vicky," shouted Ellen, who was seven. "Did Yvette come with you?"

Vicky held out her hand to Ellen. "Non, ma cherie," she replied. "Yvette and her brother Etienne are at home, which is where Sam and I must be, soon."

"Sam should live here," announced Paul, who was five, and very dogmatic. "His name is Hughes and our name is Hughes."

Sam ruffled Paul's hair. "I belong to the Hughes, sproglet, and I also belong to the Barlows." At nearly twelve, he still had his mother's coloring, but he was also showing signs of his inheritance from his father. For one thing, he was shooting up. In time, he would be as tall as Evan, or even taller.

Evan the first, that was. Evan the second was wriggling in Jack's arms, begging to get down. "Me bang hammer," he demanded. "Me bang hammer, please, Ma."

Evan was fascinated with the forge, and kept the nursemaid on the hop, except when Jack stole all the children from the nursery, which was not unusual.

Sam and Vicky had no sooner trundled out of the yard, than another conveyance approached, this one a carriage dusty with travel. Sam waved wildly as Vicky passed the vehicle, and Gwen's heart kicked up a beat.

She slipped her hand into Jack's elbow. "Come and see who is here, Jack. It is a surprise."

In moments, the Bridgemans were descending from the carriage. They were quite agile, given their ages. All five had

come, and were exclaiming over how the children had grown. The aunties had a kiss, a hug, and a twist of barley sugar for everyone, and Uncle Truth could not stop grinning.

It took them quite fifteen minutes to sufficiently conclude greetings to take the Bridgemans into the house and up to their rooms in a joyous procession.

“You’ll see we’ve finished that new wing since you were last here,” Jack told Uncle Truth. He shrugged. “What with the apprentice and the journeyman, as well as our own growing family, it seemed like a good idea.”

“Very nice,” said Uncle Truth. “Very nice indeed.”

Salt came inside, swearing that he’d finished his task, and saying that Tom was home and was banking the forge, which left Gwen with nothing to do but bathe and change for dinner.

What a difference ten years had made. She now had a cook and a kitchen maid to prepare the food, a parlor maid to put it on the table, and an upstairs maid who doubled as her ladies’ maid when she needed help with her gown and Jack was occupied.

As well as that, a nanny ruled in the nursery with the support of a nursery maid. The laundry, which had grown with the family, still went out to be washed, dried, ironed and folded. Two women from the neighborhood came in twice a week to help with the cleaning. And out in the stables, three grooms helped Jack look after the horses.

The nursery servants would have little to do in the next week. The Bridgeman sisters were there in the nursery when Gwen went to put her little ones to bed. They had the children bathed and into their nightgowns, and were reading them a book, one aunt and one book with each child.

On a previous trip, Gwen had protested that they did not need to work, and had been firmly told that spending time with the children was not work but pleasure.

“We will not linger after dinner,” Aunt Blessed said, as they came downstairs. “Old bones do not travel as easily as

young ones. When did you say that baby is due, Gwen, dear? It looks as if you might deliver at any moment.”

“Babies arrive when they please,” Aunt Joy pointed out.

“It should be another three weeks,” Gwen insisted. “It certainly cannot be before Wednesday. On Tuesday, we have all of our friends coming for a meal to celebrate Rina’s birthday and our wedding anniversary.”

And the niggle in her back was merely a result of spending too much time bending over the past couple of days. She hoped.

Tuesday dawned sunny, which meant they could put the trestle tables up under a marquee on the meadow closest to the house, with lawn chairs borrowed from all their neighbors. The weather held, too. Aunt Heart had spent the morning with the kitchen staff, and a series of wonderfully smelling trays made their ways out to the tables.

By noon, their closest friends had begun to arrive, all with plates of food and bottles of liquid. The group of veterans who had begun to meet a full decade ago had become comrades in life, even if they had never actually been comrades in arms. Their wives, too, formed a tight group—sisters under the skin who could be depended on to lend a hand or a shoulder at need.

Each of the men had needed the support of the group and of their wives during the last decade. Paul Wagner had fallen apart in public just after the harvest festival four years ago, when a booth collapsed, injuring two people and severing one man’s fingers. With Meg’s help, he pulled himself out of it, and their friends rallied round to make sure the family had time to recover.

Annie Wagner, at seventeen the first of the next generation to have her amulet, was sitting with maidens on the brink of young womanhood while keeping an eye on the little ones, including her three-year-old half-sister. The two Wagner boys were part of a tangle of boys chasing a ball up and down the field.

The large wagon from the Mill School rumbled through the gate and disgorged its load. Twenty boarders as well as the children of Thom and Charité Owen, the youngest cradled in Charité's arms.

Each of the older children carefully delivered a covered dish to the table under Charité's supervision, then ran off to join those already teaming the field.

Hannah and Brandon Worthington put their two-year-old under the care of the village maidens, but their adopted son Trevor promised to watch their littlest daughter, who was five. Their eight-year-old girl was making daisy-chains with her age-mate, Cortland and Avery Marlow-Westbrook's daughter. Like Hannah, Avery placed her two-year-old son with Annie and her friends, but the five-year-old would be safe enough out on the field, playing tag with the other little ones, while their mothers kept watch from under the trees.

The niggles in Gwen's back had become quite clear contractions. She continued to ignore them, though she whispered to Meg asking her to follow if Gwen disappeared into the house for any length of time.

Just as a precaution. Each baby had arrived more quickly than the last, but she figured she would have at least two hours before she needed to take her labor seriously. And everyone would be heading home by then.

She almost made it. Only their closest friends remained when she was beset by an urge to push. By five that evening, Meg put newborn Griffith Hughes into his father's arms. Jack always insisted on staying with Gwen while she gave birth. "My doing, my responsibility," he told Gwen, who always assured him that she had an equal part in the conception.

To which Jack always responded, "I cannot have an equal part in the birth, my love. But I can, at least, hold your hand."

*Except this time, apparently.* Jack had his arms full, and Gwen had given birth to enough babies to know what was happening again.

Ten minutes after Griffith, his brother slid easily into the world. Jack stared at him, stunned. “We only have one name prepared,” he stammered.

“This one will be Jack,” Gwen decided.

Meg and the aunties sent Big Jack downstairs with his new sons, one nestled in each arm, to be admired by his waiting friends and the children. He was back again by the time the ladies had finished cleaning Gwen up and settling her against her pillows, ready to put the babies to her breasts.

Everyone except Jack tiptoed away once mother and babies were settled, leaving the four of them together. “What do the children think of their new brothers?” Gwen asked.

Jack chuckled. “Ellen asked why we always have babies in the harvest season,” he said.

It was true. In addition to Rina, and now her two smallest brothers, two of the others had birthdays in October. Only Paul was an exception, being born in March.

Jack’s eyebrows shot up and he smirked. “I told her that Autumn is a season for love,” he said.

Gwen blushed. “Midwinter is a season for love, you mean,” she said. “But I can understand why you did not want to explain that to her.”

He kissed her cheek, being careful not to disturb Griffith, who had fallen asleep on her chest. “Midwinter, when it storms, and there’s little to do for days on end.” His voice had dropped to a sultry purr.

She smiled because it was true, but also because it was not the whole truth. “To everything there is a season,” she said, knowing he expected it, and he did not disappoint. As he had, so many times since they married, he said, “Now, and for the rest of our days together, it will always be the season for love.”

THE END



If you like returned soldier heroes, you might enjoy Jude's Lion's Zoo series, about a group of men who served as exploring officers with Wellington's army, under Colonel Lionel O'Toole, known as Lion.

Famed for their varied skills and their intrepid courage, they were renowned for carrying out missions where others had failed.

Now Napoleon has fallen, they all have a new mission. Each must use his own unique abilities to carve a niche for himself in civilian life.

Read about the first book on Jude's website: <https://judeknightauthor.com/books/chaos-come-again/>

# ABOUT JUDE KNIGHT



Jude Knight always wanted to be a novelist, but life got in the way for decades and she nearly lost the dream. She wrote a thousand beginnings, but it took a huge life event to shove her into writing an ending. That was in 2014. Seventeen novels and counting later, plus short stories and novellas galore, she's living her dream: writing historical fiction with a large helping of romance, more than a dash of suspense, and a sprinkling of humor.

Learn more about Jude at:

**Website and blog:** <http://judeknightauthor.com/>





# THE BELLES WOULD LIKE YOUR HELP!

Book reviews help readers to find books, and authors to find readers. Please consider writing a review for *Under the Harvest Moon*, even a couple of sentences telling people what you liked (or didn't like) about the stories. Reviews can be posted on BookBub, Goodreads and on most eRetailers websites. For links to this book on those sites, see the *Under the Harvest Moon* page on the Belles' website: <https://bluestockingbelles.net/belles-joint-projects/under-the-harvest-moon/>

## **Malala Fund**

The Bluestocking Belles have chosen the Malala Fund as the charity they support, and to which they donate some of their royalties. Periodically, they take on projects intended to directly support this cause, which exemplifies their personal values and intentions: the right of girls and women to do whatever they choose with their lives.

### **How can you help?**

Make a donation at <https://malala.org/donate>

## OTHER BOOKS BY THE BLUESTOCKING BELLES

Find buy links and story blurbs for all the following books on our website at <https://bluestockingbelles.net/belles-joint-projects/>

*The Bluestocking Belles donate a portion of the proceeds to benefit the Malala Fund.*

### *Desperate Daughters (2022)*

The Earl of Seahaven desperately wanted a son and heir but died leaving nine daughters and a fifth wife. Cruelly turned out by the new earl, they live hand-to-mouth in a small cottage.

The young dowager Countess's one regret is that she cannot give Seahaven's dear girls a chance at happiness.

When a cousin offers the use of her townhouse in York during the season, the Countess rallies her stepdaughters.

They will pool their resources so that the youngest marriageable daughters might make successful matches, thereby saving them all.

So start their adventures in York, amid a whirl of balls, lectures, and alfresco picnics. Is it possible each of them might find love by the time the York horse races bring the Season to a close?

### *Belles & Beaux (2022)*

Just in time for Christmas 2022 comes this boxed set of eight charming stories of love, family, and miracles. Each Belle has contributed a tale set in the festive season—one just long enough to fit in between tasks at this busy time of the year. The tales are unrelated, except by the festive season.

Some have been written for this collection, some are made-to-order stories never before published, some have been used as fan giveaways. All are delightful.

### *Storm & Shelter (2021)*

When a storm blows off the North Sea and slams into the village of Fenwick on Sea, the villagers prepare for the inevitable: shipwreck, flood, land slips, and stranded travelers. The Queen's Barque Inn quickly fills with the injured, the devious, and the lonely—lords, ladies, and simple folk; spies, pirates, and smugglers all trapped together. Intrigue crackles through the village, and passion lights up the hotel.

One storm, eight authors, eight heartwarming novellas.

### *Holiday Escapes (2020)*

Holidays, relatives, pressure to marry—sometimes it is all too much. Is it any wonder a woman may need to escape? The heroines in this collection of stories aren't afraid to take matters into their own hands when they've had enough.

These stories are republished here at 20% of the cost of collecting them all from each individual author.

Two bonus short stories round out the collection.

### *Fire & Frost (2020)*

**In a winter so cold the Thames freezes over, five couples venture onto the ice in pursuit of love to warm their hearts.**

Love unexpected, rekindled, or brand new—even one that’s a whack on the side of the head—heats up the frigid winter. After weeks of fog and cold, all five stories converge on the ice at the 1814 Frost Fair when the ladies’ campaign to help the wounded and unemployed veterans of the Napoleonic wars culminates in a charity auction that shocks the high sticklers of the ton.

In their 2020 collection, join the Bluestocking Belles and their heroes and heroines as The Ladies’ Society For The Care of the Widows and Orphans of Fallen Heroes and the Children of Wounded Veterans pursues justice, charity, and soul-searing romance.

***Valentine’s From Bath (2019)***

The Master of Ceremonies announces a great ball to be held on Valentine’s Day in the Upper Assembly Rooms of Bath.

Ladies of the highest rank—and some who wish they were—scheme, prepare, and compete to make best use of the opportunity.

Dukes, earls, tradesmen, and the occasional charlatan are alert to the possibilities as the event draws nigh.

But anything can happen in the magic of music and candlelight as couples dance, flirt, and open themselves to romantic possibilities. Problems and conflict may just fade away at a Valentine’s Day Ball.

***Follow Your Star Home (2018)***

Forged for lovers, the Viking star ring is said to bring lovers together, no matter how far, no matter how hard.

In eight stories, covering more than half the world and a thousand years, our heroes and heroines put the legend to the test. Watch the star work its magic, as prodigals return home in the season of good will, uncertain of their welcome.

***Never Too Late (2017)***

Eight authors and eight different takes on four dramatic elements selected by our readers—an older heroine, a wise man, a Bible, and a compromising situation that isn’t.

Set in a variety of locations around the world over eight centuries, welcome to the romance of the Bluestocking Belles’ 2017 Holiday and More Anthology.

It’s Never Too Late to find love.

***Holly and Hopeful Hearts (2016)***

When the Duchess of Haverford sends out invitations to a Yuletide house party and a New Year’s Eve ball at her country estate, Hollystone Hall, those who respond know that Her Grace intends to raise money for her favorite cause and promote whatever love-matches she can. Seven assorted heroes and heroines set out with their pocketbooks firmly clutched and hearts in protective custody. Or are they?

Eight assorted heroes and heroines find more than they’ve bargained for when they set out for Hollystone Hall for a charity ball.

# MEET THE BLUESTOCKING BELLES



The Bluestocking Belles (the “BellesInBlue”) are a group of very different writers united by a love of history and a history of writing about love. From sweet to steamy, from light-hearted fun to dark tortured tales full of angst, from London ballrooms to country cottages to the sultan’s seraglio, one or more of us will have a tale to suit your tastes and mood.

*Learn more about the Bluestocking Belles at:*

Website: [www.BluestockingBelles.net/](http://www.BluestockingBelles.net/)

Newsletter: [http://eepurl.com/dAJU\\_9](http://eepurl.com/dAJU_9)

*Teatime Tattler* twice-weekly gossip magazine: <https://bluestockingbelles.net/category/teatime-tattler/>

Free books: <https://bluestockingbelles.net/teatime-tattler-free-books/>

