

*Christmas  
Wallflowers*

*A* Wallflower's  
Christmas  
Wreath

TAMARA

*Gill*

A WALLFLOWER'S  
CHRISTMAS WREATH  
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A Wallflower's Christmas Wreath

Christmas Wallflowers

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# PROLOGUE

*Christmas Eve, 1821*

Heidi waved to her mama, who stood at the door to their cottage before she made her way along the icy road toward Lord Levinstone's great house.

Today was Christmas Eve, and she had been looking forward to seeing his lordship, her closest friend, again now that he was back from London.

The great, Tudor-style home overlooked their small fishing village, and she admired the estate as she came closer. Huddling into her kerseymere spencer and bear muff, Heidi was glad the stinging, cold air was not so bad during her walk.

Multiple carriages came and went, and her steps faltered with the uncertainty of whether or not she should have called. Had she come at a bad time? What caused such a flurry at his lordship's normally quiet estate?

She continued on, a slice of her mother's herb-buttered bread—a favorite of the viscount and a gift she gave yearly to him—safe in her hands. The thought made her smile, and she came to the front door after several minutes of walking.

Heidi knocked and beamed at Smithers, who greeted her. "Ah, Miss Lewis, Merry Christmas," the old retainer said,

gesturing for her to come inside.

“Merry Christmas, Smithers,” she returned, glancing past the butler and spying a pretty young woman hanging off Levinstone’s arm.

Heidi smiled, hoping the gesture hid her shock and walked up to her friend she had known since childhood.

“Merry Christmas, Lord Levinstone, and welcome home. The village has been wondering when you would return from Town since the Season has been over for several weeks,” she said, glancing at the young woman whose distaste was as clear to see as the ocean from his lordship’s front door.

“Miss Lewis, what brings you here?” Levinstone sputtered, looking nervously at the woman at his side. “Was there something you needed to see me about?”

Heidi frowned, confused by his odd manner and question. “Of course not, my lord. I have brought you the yearly Christmas gift from Mama. Your favorite,” she said, removing her hands from the muff and showing him the wrapped bread she had brought for him.

He barely looked at what she held. “Thank you, that is very kind. Please send my regards to Mrs. Lewis when you return home.”

“What is that?” The woman at his lordship’s arm snickered, her face one of distaste as if Heidi held a rotten, stinking fish instead of a loaf of bread.

“As I said, miss. It is her buttered bread for his lordship. A gift we give him yearly.”

Heidi looked to Levinstone and wondered when he would introduce her to his highly polished, elegant friend. The silence stretched between them all, and unease settled in her

stomach. For the first time in all the years she had known him, she felt unwelcome.

Levinstone cleared his throat. “Miss Lewis, may I introduce you to my betrothed, Lady Emma Arden. We’re to be married before next Season. The wedding is to be held in London at St. Paul’s.”

“Before all our friends,” the woman sneered, looking Heidi up and down. “You should travel to London, Miss Lewis, especially if you’re to call on your local lord. The modiste here is lacking, I must say,” she did indeed say.

Heat kissed Heidi’s cheeks, and she took a cautionary step away from them both, unsure of what was happening and why such a barb would be leveled at her for no reason.

That her oldest friend had failed to write to her and tell her of his betrothal was a point she would discuss with him alone, but to be insulted for no reason, well, that was uncalled for.

Heidi looked to Levinstone, waiting for him to defend her as he always had in the past, but nothing was forthcoming. He stood there, his eyes averted from hers. She ground her teeth, biting back the caustic remark of *coward* she wanted to throw at his head.

“Smithers,” Levinstone called, the butler coming over immediately. “Take the loaf of herb-buttered bread to the kitchens, thank you,” he ordered.

Heidi handed over the bread her mama had spent hours baking, using funds already scarce to gift something to his lordship, who had always been a kind and welcome friend to their home. What was wrong with him?

“I see I have come at a busy time. The ball is this evening, and we’re very excited to attend,” Heidi mentioned, smiling at



several maids who moved about the house, finishing their chores before the evening guests arrived. “When would you like to hang the wreath, my lord?” she asked, meeting Lady Emma’s eye. “It is tradition, you see,” she explained. “I always help his lordship hang the wreath, and then the Christmas festivities can truly begin in earnest.”

Lady Emma chuckled. “I’m hanging the wreath this year with my darling betrothed. I’m sorry, but as the future lady of the house, it is my right, of course,” she spat, the lady’s false smile slipping into a scowl.

“Oh, of course,” Heidi replied, unsure what else she could say. The heat on her cheeks increased, and for a moment, she thought about bolting out the door and running home like a coward.

“We also, unfortunately, have to rescind your invitation. The ball this evening is a practice for our wedding breakfast, and I oversee who will attend. And as I do not know you well, it is best that you do not attend. Attending a ball with so many people you do not know will only make you uncomfortable. But you will have the pleasure of the company of your own family, will you not?” Lady Emma said, the false smile back on her angelic features.

The woman was no angel. She was the devil’s spawn. Had Heidi known her an hour or five years, she doubted her opinion of her would have altered. How could Levinstone not see how horrible she was? And to one of his oldest friends.

“You do not wish for me to attend, Matthew?” she asked him, wanting to hear from his lips what his choice would be. Tears welled in her eyes, and she fought not to show emotion, but it was too late. The pain of such a statement thrown against

her was the final blow in this awful reunion with her friend after many months apart.

“Matthew? Oh, my dear, you must not be so familiar. It is Lord Levinstone to you. His is your better, not your equal.”

Heidi did not look at Lady Emma. She deserved no such respect, not after her cruel and hurtful words. She stared at Levinstone, and only after what felt like several minutes did he meet her gaze.

“Is that what you wish, my lord?” she asked again, watching him as he debated her question.

At length, he nodded. “I think you should return home before the day grows colder. Please thank your mama for the bread. I shall be sure to enjoy it.”

Lady Emma scoffed but did not say anything further, and with nothing more to be said between them, Heidi turned on her heel and strode from the hall, the shocked, disappointed visage of Smithers the last thing that swam in her vision.

Tears slipped down her cheeks as she returned to the village, for what had been a day of celebration, expectation, and joyful tidings was no more.

Her dearest friend was betrothed to the devil herself, and there would be no friendship from this day forward. He had allowed his fiancée to belittle and demean her, and to her face no less.

That, in Heidi’s estimation, was no friend at all.

Only an enemy.

# ONE

*Christmas Eve, four years later*

Heidi placed her hands on her hips and glared at the local butcher Mr. Jones. The elderly man's mouth was moving, but she did not appreciate the words coming out of his lying lips.

"You promised you would save me two pigs for my Christmas supper and town ball. You know we hold one each year at the hall, and now you're telling me there will be nothing for the guests? I cannot merely serve them seafood and turkey, not everyone enjoys such fare, and it will mean people like you and me, Mr. Jones, people who work hard and labor for their funds, will go hungry."

The older man rolled his hands together, a deep shade of pink kissing his already mottled cheeks. Heidi continued to glare at him, wanting him to feel embarrassed and lowly. How could he do this to her?

"Apologies again, Miss Lewis, but I did not think to keep the pork. As much as I do not wish to remind you, it took you several weeks to pay for last year's Christmas fare, and I cannot survive trading with such charity. Another local ordered and paid for the pigs in full, and I had to think of my family and business. I'm sorry, miss. I have not done this to be unkind."

She scoffed, turning away not only out of anger, but because his words made her eyes fill with tears, and she would not let the local butcher or her cook, her only live-in staff, know how much such truths hurt. “Need I remind you that I saw you making merry with the food I purchased for the ball last year? Perhaps you should not attend the village ball this year since we’re not worthy of the food you sell. You are only interested in selling to those with titles and influence.”

These past two years since her parents died of a respiratory disease had not been easy, and she had done all she could to reverse the damage her parents had bestowed upon the family purse. But there was only so much she could do, and only so long she could pretend to be something she was not.

Mr. Jones’s reminder that she was poor and growing poorer every passing year was a reality she had not wanted to face.

Her annual Christmas party had been a yearly tradition that her grandparents had started in the village, and she had wanted to continue it. But this year, the first time she would not serve pork seemed like the first death knell to her Christmas cheer and her status in the community.

“Come, Miss Lewis. I meant no harm,” he argued with her.

She shook her head, disappointed in the man more than she thought she ever would be. “I thank you for your honesty, Mr. Jones. Good day to you,” she said, leaving the small shop and starting up the village’s main thoroughfare to her home.

The seaside village was picturesque and overlooked the sea and the many ships that passed on their way to London.

She glanced up to the sandy shoreline that the town sat against, the ragged cliffs some miles away, and the great estate

that loomed over all of them.

Viscount Levinstone's grand Tudor estate was one she had once loved to visit and had spent many a happy day on the extensive grounds. The then viscount's son, Matthew, was her closest friend, but even he, too, had turned on her because of her dwindling financial means. Not to mention the horrible woman he betrothed himself to.

A shiver stole through her at the memory of the woman and her harsh words that had cut her to shreds. Well, that was not entirely true. Matthew's inaction against his future wife had cut deeper still.

How was it that when one needed most friendships and support, people turned their backs, looked the other way, and no longer cared?

Not that she believed Lord Levinstone cared now, for he did not. In fact, she knew who it was that had ordered all the pigs, and the bastard had done so merely to beat her, to ruin what could potentially be her last Christmas party in the town hall. As host in any case.

She ought to travel up to the grand estate and have her opinion shared on what she thought of the obnoxious bachelor and his uppity Christmas ball that he also held on the same day as hers.

Over the years, her attendees had forgone her forever dwindling fare and entertainment to that of the viscount's abundant party. Those members of the village who had money in any case. People like her remained at the village hall, happy not to step into that glittering world of the nobility up on the hill.

Heidi returned to her cottage and, with heavy feet, made her way upstairs. She entered her room and slumped on her bed facedown, only then allowing the tears she had held so stoically to run free.

Her life played out before her through the blurred vision of her bedding. A life of toil, of becoming a maid or cook in a great house like where one of her long-lost friends lived. Of waking early morning and retiring late in the evening to make another's life easy.

How had she allowed her life to become so hard?

Heidi rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling where the paint had started to flake off. Well, she may not be able to change her fate, but she'd be damned before she would allow the uppity Lord Levinstone to get away with acting the selfish prig.

He would get a piece of her opinion on his dealings and his blatant thievery from his neighbors, and she would not sleep until she had her voice heard.

Jumping from her bed, she clasped her shawl and bonnet and, with determined steps, started downstairs and outside, slamming her gate shut before walking toward the great house.

It was time Lord Matthew Stanford, Viscount Levinstone, was brought down a peg or two, and she would relish being the one to do it.

MATTHEW SLUMPED BACK INTO HIS LEATHER WINGBACK CHAIR and threw the short missive from Mr. Jones onto his desk. He cringed and rubbed a hand over his brow, already feeling the telltale signs of an impending headache.

He sighed, having not known that Mr. Jones had bestowed on his house all the pigs for his ball tomorrow evening, leaving none for the locals.

Well, one local in particular. Miss Heidi Lewis, his once closest friend, now his adversary.

He could picture her now, blowing fire out of her pretty nose, her plump lips pulled into a displeased line.

Matthew ran a hand through his hair, glad at least that his sister was not here this year for his annual ball, having decided to remain in Scotland with her husband, the Earl of Grandison.

She would not have been pleased that his household had taken all the pigs and would have demanded he return some, but how could he? He already knew his cooks were preparing and baking them for tomorrow night's dinner and ball. He would have, of course, had he known the butcher had played such a hand, and would have stopped the order, but it was done now. He would merely have to ensure it did not happen next year.

The wind picked up, and one of the shutters on a front-facing window slammed against the glass. Matthew walked over to the window, opened it, and, grabbing the shutters, pulled and locked them closed. He then rang for a servant, and his butler entered with haste.

“You called, my lord?”

“Yes, there looks to be a storm rolling in from the sea. Please have all the shutters closed so no windows are damaged, and notify the stables to bring in all the horses for the night.”

“Yes, my lord,” Smithers said, leaving to do his bidding.

Matthew strode over to the fire and threw two more logs on the already-stoked blaze, a dropping chill in the air warning that a storm was brewing.

The sound of unrelenting knocks on his front door made the pit of his stomach drop before the windswept, high-of-color Miss Heidi Lewis stormed into his library with burning, angry eyes, and a finger jabbing dangerously in his direction.

“How dare you— You ... you ... intolerable, selfish man. How dare you take all the pigs for your gluttonous friends and family? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and if you think I shall allow you to get away with this, you are mistaken. I’m going to let everyone in town know what a greedy little lord you are, and believe me, Levinstone, you will have zero friends when I’m finished with you.”

A crack of thunder rumbled in the sky, making himself and Miss Lewis start. Footsteps sounded in the foyer, up and down the stairs, and Matthew did not have time to reply before the butler entered a second time. “My lord, this storm coming in from the ocean seems fierce and sudden indeed. I fear we’re about to get a drenching, and it could make traveling to and from the village impossible.”

Matthew looked to Heidi, understanding his butler’s words exactly, and the last thing he needed was the termagant before him being caught here. “Excuse me, but what are you saying?” Miss Lewis asked, dabbing at her rain-covered face with a handkerchief. “I just walked through the causeway, and it wasn’t flooded,” she said.

A servant ran into the library and passed the butler a note. “Not anymore, Miss Lewis. I just received word young Buckley barely made it through bringing your mare in from the top paddock, my lord. It’s rushing through and rising



quickly.” His butler paused. “You are stuck here, Miss Lewis, for this evening.”

“What?” Both he and Miss Lewis said in unison. “She has to leave. She’s a maid, and I’m unmarried, and there is no one here to chaperone her,” he argued.

Miss Lewis scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Do not think you’ll tempt me, my lord. I would rather try my luck out in the storm than be seduced by the likes of you.”

He stared at her, wondering if that were true, but then decided to ignore her jibe entirely. “Prepare Miss Lewis a room,” he said, glaring at her. “It seems you’re here for the duration of the evening and let us hope no longer.”

## TWO

Heidi was led into a large, opulent room upstairs. A maid came in, and within minutes a roaring fire replaced the dark, unlit hearth that greeted her.

She strolled about the space, running her hand across the deep-green bedding and the multiple cushions. Did people of great wealth really need all those cushions to sleep? Hers at home held one, and not as fluffy as all those.

Several books sat on the bedstand, and she slumped onto the bed as a maid lit the sconces on the wall and several candles on the mantle and furniture.

Within minutes the room was welcome and warm, fighting off the chill from the storm that raged with ever-increasing ferocity outdoors. Perhaps the causeway was flooded, and she was stuck here. Although she could see his lordship lying about such facts, if only to ruin her, she could not see the servants doing so. Not when a lot of them were her friends and people she had known since she was a child.

The shutters rattled, and the house made an eerie whistling sound, accompanied by squeaks and groans as it tempered the storm.

This high up on the hill, overlooking the sea and the gully where their small village sat, the house was often buffeted by

inclement weather. Heidi could only hope that it survived the night since she would be a guest here.

“Miss Lewis, it is lovely to see you again,” the housekeeper, Mrs. Feathers said from the door. “Do let me know if you need anything, a cup of tea or a bath. I’m more than happy to have either brought up to you.”

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Feathers, that is very kind.” She thought about the housekeeper’s words a moment and decided she would take her up on the offer. Why not use Lord Levinstone for all she could? And it would save her from having to bathe tomorrow evening for the town ball. Should it go ahead, of course.

“I would adore a bath if possible. The walk up here was trying, and I feel a little windswept. Are you certain it will be appropriate?” she asked, knowing the housekeeper would not deny her anything, having always liked her.

“It is no trouble at all. We always keep water on the boil for his lordship. I shall have it brought up directly,” she said, leaving her alone to organize.

Within a quarter of an hour, she stood beside a bath before the fire in her room. A maid had placed a drying cloth and lavender-scented soap on a chair before the tub and left her alone.

Heidi slipped from her gown, the mud starting to dry about the hem. She glanced upon the dress the housekeeper had lent her for the evening, one of Lady Grandison’s, the viscount’s elder sister, she assumed. Never had she worn silk in her life and a little part of her thrilled at the idea.

Heidi stepped into the bath, sinking under the water and sighing at the delight of being warm and in clean, scented hot

water. How delightful and how easy the lives of the rich were. If only the people in the village had such luxuries, their hard living would not be so very trying.

She soaked in the bath for some time before a maid returned to her room and started setting pins and a brush on the dressing table.

“What is that for?” Heidi asked as she stood and reached for the towel.

“Mrs. Feathers said I’m to help you dress and do up your hair for this evening’s meal. I’m very capable, Miss Lewis. I do Lady Grandison’s hair when she does not travel with a maid,” she explained.

The thought of being pampered was too much for her to resist, and she nodded, pulling on the clean shift and undergarments before the maid helped her with the gown.

The dress was of the softest silk, a deep shade of blue. Not that she was supposed to wear such shades being an unmarried maid, but at his lordship’s home, in the wilds of Cornwall, she supposed one night would not hurt too much.

The maid took very little time in taming her long, brown locks, and for several minutes Heidi stared at herself in the mirror, unsure she recognized the woman looking back at her.

Gone were the strains of having to work to survive, the inability to bathe as much as she wanted, and forgo pretty gowns as the one she now wore. Instead, a woman of means, of luxury, stared back. A life she would glimpse for the night before returning to her reality.

The words from Lady Emma floated through her mind, reminding her how a woman of her low birth and connections was no longer welcome under this very roof.

Heidi turned and clasped the maid's hands. "Thank you for helping me this evening. You are very talented, for anyone who can make me look half-respectable is a marvel," she teased, smiling.

The maid's smile cheered Heidi up even more. "You are most welcome, Miss Lewis, and if I may say so while I'm here with you, I'm hoping to attend the village ball tomorrow evening. Much better fun than the one being held here," she said, leaving the chamber.

Heidi laughed, and couldn't agree more.

"Oh, Miss Lewis," the maid said, popping her head back through the door. "Dinner will be in twenty minutes. I understand you are familiar with the house, so please make your way downstairs to dine with Lord Levinstone when you're ready." She shut the door quietly.

Heidi nodded, wishing she could refuse his lordship's invitation, but then, she had more things to say to the pompous fool.

*Perhaps I shall make him wait until his dinner is cold ...*

No, she could not do that either, not when Mrs. Feathers had gone to so much trouble to make her evening comfortable and equal to his lordship's, who no doubt would be preened and pressed to within an inch of his life for the dinner.

As children, the housekeeper had brought cakes, biscuits, and glasses of chilled lemonade down by the seashore when she and Lord Levinstone were friends. A kinder woman there never was. No, she could not refuse the invitation now or ruin the dinner by being tardy.

So many years ago now since those carefree, happy days. So many hurtful words had been said between them that she

had long reconciled herself to never being friends again.

That time had passed, and his snobbery, his allowing his betrothed to talk down to one of his oldest friends, had put paid to that fellowship.

She ground her teeth. What an arse he had been that day.

As if the house agreed with her, a gust of wind rattled shutters and windows alike, and she frowned in thought, hoping they had a stronger constitution at remaining steadfast than his lordship had when it came to his friends.

Heidi checked the clock on the mantel, and she had one minute to arrive for dinner. Taking a fortifying breath and steeling her nerves, she left the safety of her room and started downstairs.

The house was still a hive of noise, busy with servants going about their chores before the Christmas ball tomorrow evening. She supposed it would still go ahead, storm or no storm, pork or no pork.

MATTHEW STOOD BEHIND HIS CHAIR IN THE DINING ROOM AND tapped his fingers atop the wood of his seat. His gaze slipped to the clock. If Miss Lewis was not in here within a minute, she would be officially late.

He narrowed his eyes, hoping time would pass quickly so he could mention her tardiness. When they were children, she was always one to tell him to hurry up; they were going to be late for whatever adventure they were set upon, but here he was, years after those lazy days, and it was his turn to chastise her.

The sound of slippers on the parquet floor told him she was hurrying, and just before the clock struck half past,

she entered the room, a smug, knowing look on her pretty features.

Except, the loud, opinionated young woman he had once known was no longer present.

Not this evening, in any case. Outwardly at least.

The woman sauntering into the dining room was a marvel of beauty and grace.

He blinked, swallowing hard, and wondered what the hell was happening. When had Miss Heidi Lewis turned into a siren?

The pit of his gut clenched, and he inwardly swore. When he had suggested to Mrs. Feathers to have her prepared for dinner, he had expected a little tidying of her clothes and taming of her hair, but this was not that at all.

No. Miss Lewis was all womanly curves in her striking, low-cut gown that accentuated everything he had always wondered about Heidi but had never voiced.

God damn it all to hell. He closed his eyes, forcing his ire, his annoyance at her for being so cold and holding on to her grudge after so many years to come forthright in his mind and stop him from thinking of her that way.

Anything to stop him from imagining what she would look like out of her pretty silk gown.

She was no longer appealing to him, had not been for years. Not after she called him a prig and his fiancée something even less agreeable several days before he left London to marry his then-betrothed.

He supposed she wasn't entirely out of line when she did so.

He shook the thought aside. But beautiful? Surely he had never thought that of her.

“Miss Lewis, it is good of you to join me,” he said, gesturing for her to take a seat.

She glanced at the clock, which at that very moment chimed the half hour. “I’m not late, my lord. No need to sound as though I am,” she said, smiling at the footman who pulled out her chair and helped her sit.

Matthew watched his servant and frowned. Had there been a look between the two of them? Without thought, he glared at the young man and observed with little satisfaction as he schooled his features and went about his duties as he should.

“The Christmas decorations are lovely, my lord. What a shame that the poor, common folk of the township that grants you your privilege in so many ways will not see it,” she said, picking up her red wine and taking a healthy sip.

A droplet of wine sat on her lip, making her lips appear even redder than they usually were, and plumper. When had her mouth changed to be so ... so ... kissable?

He cleared his throat. “You make a good point, Miss Lewis. I shall invite them to tour the house before they’re removed so they may enjoy them as much as I have these past days.”

She raised one mocking brow, and he had the overwhelming urge to ask her what she wanted, why she continued to be so unpleasant toward him.

Their disagreement happened years ago, and he had not married his betrothed after all, not when he himself learned how much of a disagreeable temper the woman had toward servants and himself if she did not get her way.



“Your sister, Lady Grandison, did not travel here this year. I suppose the right thing for me to say is that I’m very sorry for you. I know how much you love her while the other part of me ...”

“Do not voice it, Heidi. I understand your meaning perfectly well.”

“Heidi. You have not called me so in years. I do not think we need to start now. We are hardly friends. You ensured that was so.”

Matthew sighed and prayed for patience. Dinner this evening was going to be very long and possibly leave him with a thick head come the morning after all the wine he would have to down merely to drown out her whining voice.

The thought shamed him. No, for all of his disagreements with Miss Lewis, she was never one to whine about situations. If anything, his ex-betrothed had been the one to do that.

# THREE

Heidi prayed that the dinner would soon be over and that her appearance before Lord Levinstone would end. They had not shared a meal in years, and nor had she planned on doing so today.

Even so, when she had walked into the room and viewed him at the head of the table, waiting for her with an impatient look on his face, she had wanted nothing more than to reach for him, pinch his cheeks as she once had and tease that annoyed look off his face.

She had sat and steeled herself not to be moved by his handsomeness which, if she were correct, had only aged well the older he became. He was more worldly now, and no doubt was used to getting his way in life and possibly with women as well.

A boy who was once her closest friend and now a man was also now a stranger. When he looked at her, she had the overwhelming feeling he understood a woman's needs and had learned many great things when in London.

Well, she needed pork, but he did not seem to be relenting about that.

A footman entered, carrying vegetable soup, and Heidi's mouth watered. With her financial position becoming more

dire every day, food was the first item she started to trim in her life.

Although she had tried to plant vegetables and owned a dairy cow that lived where their carriage horses once were stabled, the costs to survive, to make every pound, shilling, and pence go as far as it could, was difficult. And a lot of what she grew was sold at market merely to keep the debtors from her door, an unfortunate inheritance she had gained from her father's wretched budgeting.

She glanced over the dining table, the center decoration a platter of sugared fruits mixed with macaroons and berries. She shook her head, wondering how some people were born with so much while others had very little, no matter how hard they worked.

To have the kind of wealth Lord Levinstone enjoyed was not a privilege for many, only the lucky few.

“Do you not like the soup?” he asked her.

Heidi met his eye and shook her head. “No, it is delicious. It seems your cook is spoiling me. This is one of my favorite meals.”

“Yes, I remember,” he said. His eyes widened before he glanced back at his plate, spooning the soup with gusto. “You looked very pensive before. Is something else troubling you?”

Not for years had he asked her such a question and a little part of her, deep inside, warmed at his care. If he only knew her real struggles, she could not help but wonder if he would try to help. Be the friend he once was. Or had too much time passed, too many words spoken to repair the damage done? “I was just thinking about all this abundance when so many do with so little.”

He looked over the table and then about the room, and she could see he was taking stock of all that hung in the opulent space. The ivy, the mistletoe over every door, the candles and holly on mantles and sideboards. To Heidi, it appeared as if Christmas had dropped all of its cheer on Levinstone's estate and left nothing for anyone else.

Her own home was sparse compared to his lordship's. In fact, this year she had not even hung holly on the mantels. To walk out to the surrounding forests and cut them from the trees or brambles meant she risked getting ill, and she would certainly fall lower still financially if she could not tend her garden.

"I suppose it does appear as if I have an abundance, and perhaps you are right, but purchasing the food and candles from the township certainly helps the community, and I always try to buy from the village whenever I can. I do not want anyone thinking I lord it over them all merely because I have the highest vantage point in the area."

"I do not think it's because your house sits so high up on the hill that you are thought of lording it over everyone."

He frowned, placing down his cutlery. "Do you jest? Do the townsfolk think that I'm high in the instep?"

Heidi sighed, wishing she could say they did, but in truth, it was only she who thought such things. Everyone else she knew loved Viscount Levinstone. He could do no wrong, just as his late papa had been admired and liked.

"No, no one thinks such a thing."

"Except you," he said, his eyes narrowing in thought. "You forget that I know you very well, Miss Lewis, no matter how many years we've not circulated in the same social sphere."

You do think I'm high in the instep, that I lord it over everyone."

"Well, can you blame me?" she exclaimed. "First, you allowed your betrothed to insult your oldest friend, and then you made me into a ghost, an apparition that could not be seen or talked to. How else am I to feel? Not to mention you stole all the pork and left nothing for us in the village."

A muscle worked in his jaw, and shame washed over his features. "I did not marry her, Heidi."

"Does that even matter? Nor have you ever apologized. I lost my best friend unnecessarily, and you know nothing of my life now. You could not even come to my parents' funerals." Heidi swallowed hard, having not even known that such an event had hurt her so deeply. But thinking upon it, she supposed it had. She had wanted his comfort, his arms about her, his soft, reassuring words whispered against her ear.

*She had wanted him.*

"I was in London and could not make it home quick enough after word reached me. You know that I would have attended had I been here."

"But you did not." The second course of roast beef was placed before her, and she bided her time before saying all she wanted.

Heidi picked up her fork and slowly ate the roast, relishing having beef on her tongue. One could eat only so much chicken broth in a week, and she had certainly had her ration.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I wanted to be there for you."

Heidi stilled at his words, not expecting him to own his mistakes so quickly. But what did it matter now? They were strangers, two people no longer walking a similar path in life.

Hers had diverted toward scarceness, and his had shifted to abundance.

“So am I,” she returned, picking up her wine and taking a healthy sip. For a moment, they ate in silence, both enjoying the food, if not the company.

“What happened between you and Lady Emma? You left for London, and everyone expected you to return a married man, but you did not.” She glanced at him and found him watching her.

“That is a very forward question to ask.” His mouth thinned into a displeased line that used to always make her smile and want to turn it upside down.

“There is no one to hear our conversation that does not know you did not marry, and I have always wondered.” She watched him, more than curious. “Tell me. I will not share what you say with anyone in the village, I promise.”

“You may leave,” he ordered the one footman. The young man left without further instruction, closing the door behind him and leaving them alone. “So you want to know what happened?” he stated, his attention dipping to her lips quickly before meeting her eyes.

That odd, annoying feeling fluttered in her belly, and she nodded. “Yes.” I absolutely want to hear what happened, so long as you tell me that Lady Emma had a comedown equal to how high she thought herself.”

MATTHEW THOUGHT BACK TO THAT WEEK IN LONDON WHERE everything had been planned, ordered, organized down to a T for his upcoming marriage, and yet everything went so wrong.

“We arrived in London, and within three days of being in the city, I heard word of your parents’ deaths. I suggested we postpone the marriage a month or two, so I could try to return home, but that was met with disappointment and anger, on Lady Emma’s behalf in any case.”

He swallowed and watched Heidi and could see she had no clue that her family tragedy was a factor in his failed betrothal. Her cutlery clattered to the table before she hastily picked it up and busied herself with her meal.

“Your betrothed did not agree?” she asked him, not meeting his eye but keeping watch of her meal instead.

“No, she wanted the marriage to go ahead on Monday as planned, and I would have agreed, knowing that it was unlikely that I would arrive home in time to grieve with you. But it is what she said during that conversation, that I realized I could not marry the woman before me.”

Heidi reached out across the table and picked up the bottle of wine, filling their crystal glasses. Matthew did not say what a lapse of manners such an act was, not when Heidi was doing it. She had never stood on ceremony, and he had always admired that about her.

“You did not think to end the betrothal when she insulted me?” Heidi threw at him. “Odd, but please continue,” she said, gesturing for him to do so.

“It shames me to repeat what she said,” he confessed, meeting Heidi’s eye.

“So it was about me, was it? That does not surprise me,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Shame washed over him, hating to recall what a woman who was to be his wife, so beautiful outwardly but inside as

cold and bitter as a north wind. “It was, well, that is what she started her tirade about. She stated that it was beneath me to attend a local gentleman’s funeral, especially one who held no financial or political clout in the area. She accused me of wanting to see and comfort you instead of staying and marrying my betrothed. The tirade then morphed into her being disagreeable about the village, the smell of the sea, and how she hoped we spent very little time here in the future. It was at that point that I knew I could not marry her. I would not have an absent wife. One who preferred London when I love Cornwall so much and the people who are my friends.”

“But are we your friends, my lord? I do not think that we are, or tomorrow evening we all would have been invited to your grand ball.”

Matthew felt the blow of her words as if she had slapped him across the cheek. He understood what she was saying, and there was truth to her words.

He ought to have invited the locals but, instead, had invited the families of nobility who lived on estates not far from his own. Not that there were many.

“You are right, I should have, and I shall remedy that mistake on the morrow.” He picked up his wine, relishing the sweet red. “Do you think they will attend? Every time my cook goes to the market, she returns with news of other family events and dinners of those in town. I suppose I merely thought they would be too busy to attend.”

Heidi gave him a disbelieving glance, and he supposed she was right.

“I know,” he said, holding up his hand. “I should have invited them in any case, but if I had, what about your



Christmas supper? I never wished to take guests from you,” he said, smiling at the mulish look on her pretty face.

“What makes you think they would have attended your event instead of mine? I’ve been loyal to them all along,” she said.

“Touché,” he agreed. “But I do have the sweetest desserts here, and so that may have won out, and do not forget I have pork.”

## FOUR

Lord Levinstone was far too charming and reminiscent of the youthful, playful boy she had once known and adored.

And she had cherished him so very much. Had often dreamed of him bending down on one knee and offering her his hand in marriage. She would have loved to walk beside him in life, to be his wife and mother of his children.

But that changed the moment her family started to fall into financial hardship, and he left for London to have a whirlwind Season that would see him engaged within a month of his arrival. His choice of a rich, pretty bride with an ample dowry suited him very well by all accounts. In contrast, she was left to scrimp and save to keep a roof over her head in rural Cornwall.

For many years she had resented his wealth, but in truth, it was not his fault. He was born into his rich, titled family as she was hers, and she would never regret such a thing. For all the hardships her family faced during her upbringing, she loved her parents and knew they had done the best for her, just as the elder—may he rest in peace—Lord Levinstone had done for his children.

“I’m not certain it is time to jest about the pork, my lord,” she replied, meeting his gaze. His dark-blue eyes were alight

with laughter, and she could not hold back her chuckle. The man was infuriating, having always had a way of making her laugh, even if she was so dreadfully angry at him.

Which she still was, she reminded herself.

“I have made you laugh. It has been too many years since I heard that sound. One I never thought to hear again,” he said. “It is nice.”

His words caught her off guard and her stomach twisted into a delicious knot. Of course, she ought to be angry with him, not forgive him his past sins against her, but she had never been one to stay angry for long, and certainly not toward a person who apologized. Up until this very day, Levinstone had not said a word of apology, but that did not mean he would not.

“It seems to have been a long time since I had reason to.” She sat back as the second course was removed and delicious lobster rissoles were laid before them. She picked up her fish knife and spiked a little of the tail, slipping it into her mouth. “How I love eating seafood on a cold winter’s night. It always reminds me of summer.”

“I think for us people who have grown up near the sea, the fruits of the water are always coveted most,” he replied, digging into his meal with gusto. “But returning to our conversation about my betrothed, when I told her that I would require my wife to be in Cornwall with me for the majority of the year and that we would come up to London maybe every two or three years for a Season, she agreed that we had made a mistake and would not suit. We ended our engagement affably, and she’s now married and settled in Scotland. So perhaps my person disagreed with her and not so much the ruralness of my home.”

“Well,” Heidi said. “I think she is a little absurd not to agree to marry you. Who would not want to be the mistress of such a beautiful, grand home? A home that overlooks one of the prettiest villages in Cornwall, if I do say so myself. And the staff, who are the most loving and kind to anyone who knocks on your door. She does not know what she missed out on when she agreed to let you go, my lord.”

Heidi wasn't sure where the words came from, nor had she thought her truth would result in silence from the viscount. He watched, his eyes making her heart beat fast and heat kiss her cheeks.

“Are you saying that should I have asked you to be my wife, you would not have said no? That living here, where we do, is favorable?”

“I love it here. You know that. Our village, my home, and your grand estate, even when I was terribly mad at you, I still admired all of it.”

Levinstone threw back his head and laughed, clapping his stomach. “I have missed you so very much, Heidi. How did we let our friendship go as we have? What a travesty and what a miracle you being here this evening has been. To be stuck here with me where you cannot get away.”

Heidi swallowed as nerves fluttered in her stomach. His lordship's words were not what she expected, nor had he spoken to her thus in years. But there was something different, something had changed, and it had not taken them long to slip into their old, comfortable ways and discuss matters as they had always done.

A knock sounded on the door, and the viscount sat back in his chair, bidding the servant entry.

“My lord, the wreath is complete, and you may hang it after dinner if you wish. As per the tradition,” the butler announced.

Heidi reached for Levinstone without thought, taking his hand. “Do not tell me that I have arrived on the one night you hang the coveted wreath on the Levinstone’s estate door? I have not been here for so many years. I did not know if you still did this or not.”

His lordship raised his chin, pride crossing his features. “That you have, Miss Lewis. Would you like to help me hang it? I would be honored to have an old, lifelong, and possibly renewed friend at my side when I do.”

His fingers entwined with hers, and heat licked at her skin. His attention dipped to her lips, and butterflies fluttered in her belly. She had never seen him look at her in such a way. Certainly not even when they were on the verge of adulthood.

*He’s looking at you as if he wants to kiss you, Heidi.*

The thought was not unwelcome, which in itself was thought-provoking. Did she want him to kiss her? Did she want to be his friend and talk and spend time with him as they once did?

*Yes. Yes, she did.*

She had missed him too.

“I would be honored, my lord,” she said.

Without another word, he pulled her up from the chair and dragged her out of the room. The butler stood beside the front door, holding the wreath of holly, mistletoe, and dried fruit to add to the picture that it told of Christmastide and good cheer.

“Thank you, Smithers. I shall need no further assistance,” Levinstone commanded.

Heidi watched as the old retainer walked back toward the kitchens before she turned to the viscount.

“Come,” he said, reaching out to take her hand. His fingers entwined with hers once again, and she had the overwhelming feeling that this was right. He was home, and being at his side was where she had always meant to be.

That from this night on, no matter their history, their friendship was righted, and they would never part again.

He opened the front door and the wind whipped inside. They quickly hoisted the wreath onto the small hook. “Help me, Heidi. I merely need to hook it on the door,” he said, his voice straining.

Heidi helped him lift it and was surprised by its weight.

The wreath fought and poked them with its prickly pines and foliage, but still, they persisted, and soon it was a welcome decoration to the door. A tradition for his family, after all.

A family she had once been part of in years past and now hoped to be so again.

MATTHEW PULLED HEIDI AGAINST HIM AND RETURNED indoors, shutting out the wind and rain that battered the outside.

He marveled at the knowledge that his oldest and most-missed friend was again with him. Hanging the wreath as they had done for so many years as children, albeit with the help from staff all those years ago.

“There.” The wreath is up. Now we should return to our dinner and enjoy what’s left of the evening, blustering as it is,” he jibed, only half-meaning his words. What he would rather do was whisk her into his library and be alone. Be apart from his servants and talk as they once had, all night long if need be.

They had so much to catch up on. He had missed so much of her life, and he would not bumble the second chance she was gifting him. Heidi was a proud woman, and he knew the cost it took for her to forgive him his sins.

Heidi hugged him back, and he pulled her tighter to his side, liking the feel of her there. They had been so close once. The best of friends who shared all their dreams and plans for the future.

He hated that everything went so wrong. That they had fallen out over someone who no longer factored in their lives.

Not that he should have allowed himself to get swept away with the fancy London society and whirlwind Season. Nor what he had permitted his betrothed to say about his oldest friend.

He let her go as they started back to the dining room before he thought better of it. “Shall we return to my library for a nightcap instead of dinner? There was not a lot left in any case, and we can ask for the dessert to be brought into us there instead,” he suggested.

She glanced in the direction of his private sanctuary and where he spent the majority of his time. “That sounds heavenly. I should imagine your library is much warmer too.”

They moved into the library, and he smiled as Heidi made her way over to the fire, warming her gloveless hands.

“Tell me, my lord. Your engagement was so quick. Did you fall for the charms of Lady Emma so hastily that you forgot to enjoy the Season you had originally left for? I will admit that I was surprised you became engaged within the first month.”

Matthew poured two glasses of brandy and handed Heidi one, coming to stand at her side. She stared at him, and a long, pent-up need started to rumble in his soul.

There had always been something about Heidi that he looked for in others as a means to value their character, and even after their quarrel and falling out, he still followed that rule. He supposed he should have listened to his inner warning bells about Emma before it became too late.

“You are right. I did exactly that, much to my shame. I wish I had not, for had I given myself more time, I may have realized she was not the woman for me.”

Heidi met his eye over the rim of her glass as she sipped her brandy. “Have you decided when you shall return to town to find the woman who will suit you? You’re not getting any younger, my lord, and perhaps you ought to do so soon before you’re old and gray and have a terrible disposition.”

Her teasing grin sent a bolt of reminiscence through him. They had missed an opportunity when he had made the grave mistake of proposing to Lady Emma. What a fool he had been then. So sure he was making the right choice when leaving for London in the first place had been a mistake. There was nothing in the city that he did not already have near home.

In truth, he ought to have courted the woman at his side, a woman he had always admired and, perhaps a tiny little bit, adored.



Who was he kidding? He had always cherished her, and it had been a daily battle to hide such emotions.

He stared at the flames, wishing he could tell her such truths. Make amends in any way that he could for his past missteps. Seek her forgiveness, but he did not. She would not want to hear it.

Not yet at least.

## FIVE

“I changed, did I not?” The silence stretched between them, and he could take no more.

She glanced at him, her shoulder lifting in the smallest shrug. He thought back to the gown she had arrived in, tattered from wear and at least four Seasons out of style.

Had her life been so very hard, and he had not noticed? It was any wonder she had been so very angry at him for taking what little enjoyment she partook in at this festive time of year with him and his family and removing it.

He should have made amends for his actions years ago instead of letting her think he did not care. He did very much.

“You did, and for a long time, I thought not for the better, but tonight, with us being hitched together in this storm, maybe my opinion of you has altered a little bit.”

“A little?” he queried, hoping he had changed far more than that.

She grinned up at him and reminded him of a memory he had of her, hanging upside down in the tree near the shore, breeches and shirt on, a mischievous light in her eyes.

He would do anything to go back to those days. Ensure that he never lost her friendship in the first place.

“Well, any more than that is still to be determined.” A roar of wind shook the shutters, and she jumped against him. Matthew wrapped one arm around her shoulder and held her tight, liking the feel of her in his arms.

“We are safe in here. This house has stood for hundreds of years and will continue to do so long after we’re gone.”

He helped her sit on the woolen rug at their feet, watching as the flames licked the wood, the draft of the wind making the fire splutter and flame higher every so often.

“Do you ever wonder what will happen in the future? If this house will indeed be standing, or our town still prospering? I do hope that is the case,” she declared.

“As do I.” He paused, mulling over her question. “I would hope that my children and their children and grandchildren will be enjoying this estate, the grounds, the smugglers’ caves.”

“Cannot forget those smugglers’ caves.”

He studied her profile, a warm, comforting feeling wrapping about him, no matter how wild and wicked the storm outside raged.

“Do you wish to marry and have children, Heidi? We are the same age, and it’s certainly something that I think about often.” Did she want children? Did she still long for marriage and a husband?

Matthew frowned at the idea of her marrying some gentleman farmer or local lord and moving away. He wrinkled his nose at the idea, hoping she would remain a spinster and be close by forever.

And yet, that was not fair either.

She deserved love.

She deserved the world.

“I did, of course. I’m alone most nights as my cook returns to her cottage to be with her husband. As you know, most of my friends, too, have married and moved away. It seems we’re both alone, but at least you have prospects. No one will wish to marry me now. I bring nothing to a union.”

“That is not true, Heidi,” he implored, taking her hand and placing it on his lap. “So what if you have no fortune? That is not what makes a person have worth. You have far more value than something so conceited.”

She raised a skeptical brow. “How much brandy have you consumed this evening, my lord?” she asked, touching his forehead with the back of her hand. “Are you burning up? Perhaps you suffer from the ague.”

He shook his head, pushing her hand away. “You may jest, but what I say is true. You are honest and caring. You do not discriminate against people who are better or worse off than you. Your laugh can make anyone stop and stare, smile at the wonderfulness of it. I think you are marvelous, and should you have had a Season, I know I would not be the only gentleman who would have noticed you.”

Her cheeks burned a bright red, and without thought, Matthew reached out, brushing his thumb across her jaw. That she did not shy away from his touch but kept perfectly still gave him hope.

Was there something still between them? They had never discussed anything past friendship, but that did not mean there could not be more.

He was rich enough for both of them. She did not have to supply him with a dowry ...

She moved away, severing the touch. "Come, Matthew, you always saw the best in people, maybe to your detriment. I am no different, and nor am I perfect. Do not forget I stormed up here this afternoon with no regard for my safety or the possibility you may have guests staying here to scold you. That hardly sounds like someone who is always kind."

HEIDI DID NOT PARTICULARLY LIKE HOW HER BODY REACTED TO Matthew's touch. Of course, when they were children, they often hugged, played, and ran about, but now everything was different.

They were both adults with adult thoughts, wants, and needs.

That her body had wanted to push into his caress like a cat obtaining a pat was not what she needed right now.

Her life was disheveled, a constant struggle to remain fed and clothed. She had only come up to the Levinstone Estate to berate the viscount, not allow him to touch her in inappropriate ways.

No matter how enticing that thought was or how utterly delightful his hands on her felt.

"We have not sat on the floor before a fire like this for many years. I did not think I would be doing so when I arrived here this afternoon. I thought I would be home by now, seeing out the storm in my cottage."

"I should have called on you. I feel that with one argument we had, we threw away a perfectly good friendship."

Without thought, Heidi reached out, clasping his hand. His fingers entwined with hers, and knots settled in her stomach. This time, however, she did not pull away.

Their eyes met.

Held.

“I should not have remained so angry at you, especially when I heard you had not married Lady Emma. I should have been there for you, helped you through your difficult time, even if we were at odds over your ball and whom you invited.”

He played with her fingers, inspecting them, his brow furrowed in thought. He was so handsome. That had never changed about him. The boy she knew had grown into a tall, athletic, strong man who caught the eye of anyone who saw him.

She was no different.

Whenever he walked or rode into town, she had found herself at the window, hidden by shadows, watching him, admiring the view. That he had always looked in her cottage’s direction soothed the hurt she felt at his cut.

“I was not so very sad. How terrible do you think me now?” he said, letting out a self-deprecating laugh. “I did not love her. In fact, most of the time, I do not think I cared for her at all, but she would suit the title of viscountess and bear me children. How hollow and unfeeling I was.”

“There is a woman out in the world for you, my lord, just as there is a man for me too, we merely have to find them.”

He met her eyes, his attention dipping to her lips. “I do not like the idea of you marrying. It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.”

Heidi swallowed, unwilling to be so honest and tell him the thought of him marrying Lady Emma had broken her heart.

She had lost her only friend in the process and possibly the only man she had ever wanted to fill the position of husband for her. Not that she could admit such a thing to him.

Nor could she ever.

For a moment, neither spoke before Matthew, with excruciating slowness, leaned toward her. He stopped just before his lips brushed hers, meeting her eyes. “I want to kiss you, Heidi. I’ve wanted to kiss you for so long. Please say you will allow me to,” he asked her.

Her body longed to lean forward, close the space between them and kiss him back, but her mind halted her from doing so. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. If she did kiss him, she knew everything would change.

*But is that a bad thing? Your life may change for the better, Heidi.*

His hand cupped her jaw, and he moved closer still. Their breath mingled, and she could almost taste the brandy on his tongue. She had never kissed a man before, and trepidation thrummed through her.

What if she did not like it?

*What if you do?*

She closed the space between them, not bothering to answer with words, but actions instead, and kissed her long-lost best friend.

Her neighbor.

The lord of the manor, Viscount Levinstone.

And promptly lost herself in his arms.



## SIX

The first taste of Heidi was like a thousand gifts being bestowed upon him. Riches beyond his imagining, having her in his arms.

He deepened the kiss, needing to taste her, having wanted her in his arms for so many years.

Since he was a young boy on the cusp of adulthood, he had started to see Heidi in a new light. He had not been immune to her womanly curves that had formed overnight, her slim waist, long legs, and, not to forget, an ample bosom that was in perfect proportion to her body.

She was carefree about him. Her angelic smile, button nose, and large, blue eyes made watching her difficult. She was like an angel, gifted to the world, and him too.

He wasn't ashamed to remember the many nights he'd lain in bed, picturing this very kiss.

How had it taken them so many years to be here together? A waste, and one he was loath to repeat.

She clasped the lapels of his coat, inching close, and the kiss changed, morphed into something wild and hot. A kiss that spoke of years apart, of need and longing.

His head spun, and he reveled in the taste and feel of her. She was so passionate, met his kiss head-on, and mimicked his every move, making his body sing, and burn to have her.

“If you only knew how many times I’ve dreamed of this very moment,” he confessed, kissing the sensitive skin beneath her ear. She shivered in his arms, tipping her head to one side.

“I’ve always wondered, too, Matthew,” she whispered, gasping when he touched her lobe with his tongue. “What you would be like to kiss.” Her hold on his lapels tightened. “I like what you’re doing to me.”

Matthew reached for her, hoisting her onto his lap. Her hip settled against his ever-increasing manhood, and he did not try to hide how she made him feel.

They had spent hours in his father’s library, this very room, reading books that were not for such a young person’s eyes. They had laughed and giggled over drawings and explanations on the art of seduction and marriage.

Not to mention, they lived in the country, and animals did not concern themselves with who was watching them at any given time.

He cradled her in one arm, taking her lips in a searing kiss. She reached for his hand, placing it on her hip, before sliding his touch up her body to sit beneath her breast.

His cock stood to attention, blood pumping fast and hard in his veins.

“Touch me,” she said, meeting his eyes.

He read the determination in her blue eyes and was resolved not to disappoint. He kept his hand on her stomach, keeping his hold on her there. She tried to take his hand and

place it elsewhere, but he refrained, wanting to make his first touch of her memorable. Wanting to tease her a little first.

She wiggled in his hold. Her soft gasps and annoyed growls when he denied her made him smile. Heidi was all soft, womanly curves, just as he knew she would be.

And then he did touch her as she wished. He cupped the underside of her breast. Her pebbled nipple beaded through the thin material of her gown, and he rubbed his thumb across it, teasing it to a point.

“Mmm, that is lovely, I like what you’re doing,” she said, covering his hand with hers. “Now, touch me elsewhere, Matthew. And this time, do not tease me with caresses that go nowhere.”

He grinned down at her, taking her mouth in a searing kiss. He clasped the nape of her neck, holding her still as he kissed them both to the point of madness.

He handled her through her dress, cupping her cunny and rubbing it in long, teasing strokes. His blood roared in his veins. He wanted her. He wanted to lay her down on the woolen rug, strip her naked and tup her to completion.

Damn, she felt good. So right that, for the first time in his life, he was where he wanted to be. Where he should always have been.

“Matthew,” she murmured, her hand reaching down and pulling her gown upwards. “Here. Touch me here.”

Fire licked through his soul at her request. He did as she asked, touching her with guarded strokes, rolling her sensitive bud with careful, determined strokes that he knew would drive her wild.

She had always been a hellcat. Now he would learn just how sharp her claws were.

He. Could. Not. Wait.

HEIDI BIT HER LIP TO STOP HERSELF FROM MOANING AT Matthew's touch. So good, wicked, and fun. She wanted more. She wanted everything.

He leaned down and kissed her long and deep, his fingers playing her to a tune that they were both in harmony with.

But she wanted more.

Heidi broke the kiss and shuffled off his lap, kneeling before him. She clasped his jaw and brought his attention to her face. "I want to be with you. I want you to be the first man I take to my bed."

Heidi saw the confusion, the consideration of her words in Matthew's eyes.

"The first man? Can I hope? Am I being too forward to ask that I'm the only man you will take to your bed?" he asked her.

Heidi wanted that to be the case, even after all their years of bickering, being here tonight, talking to him for the first time in years; something had shifted between them, changed and healed.

She could not imagine going several more years without his friendship.

His love ...

"It is not too much to ask," she replied, kissing him. They tumbled to the floor, and Matthew rolled her onto her back,

coming over her.

She reveled in the feel of his weight, his strong, demanding body that called to hers.

Heidi lifted her dress with his help, their kiss a frenzy of need that had built up over the many years apart.

Maybe they were destined to always come together in such a way. Life had a funny way of working out, and deep down in her heart, she had always hoped to win his friendship back.

His heart ...

Heidi reached between them and tore his breeches open. His manhood sprung between them, pushing against her mons, and she undulated against him, wanting him to satisfy the thrumming ache between her legs.

“Heidi,” he groaned, settling between her legs, rubbing his manhood against her wet quim. “I’m going to shag you until you’re begging me to relent.”

She grinned, pulling him down so she could reach his mouth. She kissed him, deep and long, their tongues fighting the other for supremacy, before she broke the kiss and suckled his bottom lip, hard.

“Ouch,” he growled. “You’re to be tamed, I see.” He pushed into her a little, rolling his hips as he waited for her to become accustomed to his size. He was large and long, a point she had known for several years after catching him sea bathing one summer’s afternoon as naked as the day he was born.

They had not been friends then, had fallen out before the encounter, but it had taken all of her strength not to join him, test him to see what he would do had she been so brave.

“Is that as far in as you’re going to go?” she taunted him. “I thought you were going to try and tame me, my lord?” she asked, her voice husky even to her own ears.

His eyes burned with a hunger that left her breathless. She adored seeing him so at sea. A man who wanted to please his lover and himself.

“I do not want to hurt you,” he admitted.

Heidi wrapped her arms around his neck, slipping her legs over his hips and pulling him against her with her feet. “You will not hurt me, Matthew. Please, take me,” she begged him. “I’ve wanted this too.”

He groaned and kissed her before thrusting hard, taking her innocence and joining them forever. Relief swamped her that it was Matthew she was with and no one else. She had always wanted it just so, and this was the most perfect Christmas gift she could have received.

Other than his friendship once again.

“Heidi, you feel so good,” he breathed against her lips. “I do not think I shall ever let you leave after this night.”

She chuckled as her body slowly adjusted to his size. He rocked into her, slow at first, and then faster and faster. The sensation was odd but not awful, certainly nothing of the kind.

A fire, small at first, burned within her, and with each thrust, each kiss, that flame grew in ferocity and size until she was gasping his name, senseless of who may hear them in the library.

“Matthew,” she panted.

He rolled onto his back and dragged her to sit on his lap. For a moment, she sat there, unsure of what she ought to do.

“Fuck me,” he commanded her. “Ride my cock, make me pay for all the years I kept away.”

His words sparked a need to make him pay, but somehow she knew in this warfare, they would both be winners.

There were no losers tonight, and never would be again.

## SEVEN

**M**atthew bit down on the inside of his lip and fought not to spend. Certainly not before she had found her pleasure.

A man was not a man who did not give joy to their bed partner, and tonight, it was imperative Heidi find release. He needed her to know that he could give her such ecstasy. That they could be friends, maybe even more than that, if she were willing to forgive all his sins and be with him.

She sat atop him, riding him, taunting him with moans and cries of his name.

How had he lived so long without her? How had he not stormed down to the village and demanded she be his friend again?

Hell, he had missed her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he exclaimed, reaching up to pull her gown down over one breast. He teased her ample bosom, pinching her nipple with his thumb and finger.

She closed her hand over his, watching him, her eyes burning with determination and desire. She was close. He knew to his very core she would come, and soon.

She rolled her hips with a siren’s expertise, and he inwardly swore. “Do that again, and I cannot promise you I



will not come long and hard into you,” he warned.

Her hands pressed against his chest as she increased her pace, watching him. “You feel so good, Matthew. I feel as if I could do this always, but that there is something missing. My body wants ...”

“It wants to come,” he stated. “Keep doing what you are and you will find your release, and then there will be no stopping you from darkening my door. I should think you will often call for future relief,” he teased.

She chuckled, biting her lip. He thrust into her, and she moaned. He held her hips and assisted her to fuck him until she gained what she wanted.

“Matthew,” she panted, her eyes flaring wide with awareness. “Oh, Matthew.”

Her orgasm ripped through her, and he watched, entranced as she threw back her head and rode him through her pleasure. Her fingers twisted into his shirt, holding him still as she came, over and over, pulling his release forward.

He came hard and long, pumping his seed into her quivering cunny.

Heidi slumped onto his chest, their breathing ragged. “That was unlike anything I have ever known. I did not know pleasure could be found in such a way. I had always thought it would be a painful, daunting process to be with a man.”

He wrapped his arms around her back, holding her against him. “No, not if it’s done correctly,” he murmured, stroking her back as they returned to earth.

Her fingers idly played with his hair, before she sat back, staring at him. “What happens now?” she asked, meeting his eyes.

He could read the questions in her deep, blue gaze, and right at this moment, he was unsure what he ought to do. Would she even agree to marry him? She certainly wasn't too happy with him when she first arrived, and he did not want her to think he asked out of obligation, not after what they had just partaken in.

"I think," he said, kissing the tip of her nose. "That I should ring for a bath, and you should join me. The night grows chill, do you not think? And after what we have both done, I think I ought to clean you thoroughly to ensure a comfortable sleep."

"A bath?" she asked him, surprised. "With you and not on my own?"

"Yes, with me," he said, wiggling his brows. "My room is private, and we can enjoy each other's company some more. But only if you're willing, of course."

A mischievous glint entered her eye, and she nodded. "I shall wait in my room until you tell me to come." She kissed him back, lingering until he burned for her yet again. "Until later, my lord," she whispered, gaining her feet and fixing up her gown quickly before leaving him alone in the library.

He watched her leave, and already he missed her. A quandary he would need to correct.

HEIDI MADE USE OF THE SHIFT AND DRESSING GOWN THE MAID had left on her bed and changed as quickly as she could while waiting for Matthew.

She stood in front of her mirror, staring at her reflection, wondering if she appeared as different as she felt.

And she felt wonderful.

How marvelous to have lain with him the way they had and how pleasurable too. Already she wanted to do it again, to have his strong arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her down upon him, giving her so much exquisite delight that she thought she would die should she not experience such again soon.

A light knock on her door pulled her attention away from examining herself, and she opened it just a crack to see Matthew standing before her.

“Come, the bath is ready, and I have dismissed the servants for the evening.”

Heidi could not refuse, nor did she want to. She wanted to be with him again, alone, and have him just as she used to dream about before they had become estranged.

He held her hand as they walked leisurely back to his room. She marveled at his handsomeness, his height, and his strength. That she had been with him intimately did not seem real. It was like a dream, but she had conquered the man before her, the man holding her hand and leading her further astray.

She entered the room and marveled at the sight. In the hour or so they had been apart he had done quite a lot, making use of their time alone. A bath sat before the well-lit fire. Drying cloths sat on a nearby chair, along with a cake of jasmine soap. Several candles burned about the room, and the thick, velvet curtains were drawn closed to keep the storm raging outside at bay.

The sound of the shutters rattling and of the crackling fire were the only sounds that shattered the quiet of the night.

“This looks very enticing, my lord. All of this for me?” she teased him, walking to the bath to run her fingers through the water. “Mmmm, it’s lovely and hot,” she said, boldly reaching for the bottom of her shift and lifting it off her body.

She stood before the bath as naked as a babe and saw the fire lick in Matthew’s eyes. He came to her, reached out, and clasped her hips, wrenching her naked body against his.

He was all hard muscles and a harder still manhood that jutted against his breeches. Wanting him, wetness pooled at her core, and she rubbed against him, teasing him as much as the mere thought of him taunted her.

“You’re too dressed,” she said, reaching for his untied cravat and pulling it from his neck. She threw it aside, grinning at her mischievousness before untying the ribbon at the top of his shirt.

Matthew helped her with the rest of his clothing, stripping himself bare and hoisting her in his arms. She wrapped her legs about his hips, the feel of his jutting manhood making her eager to be with him again.

He stepped carefully into the tub, lowering them both. Water splashed over the sides, wetting the wood floor and a little of the Aubusson rug.

“We’ve made a mess already,” she said, looking over the side of the tub.

He clasped her face, pulling her back to look at him. She inwardly sighed at how perfect this night had become. How lucky she was to be with the boy she once adored, and be alone with the man he had become.

Her friend ...

The term did not sound as nice as it once used to. She did not want to be this man's friend. She wanted to be so much more. His lover, his confidante, his wife ...

But she would not marry out of obligation. She had wanted a love match. Had thought for years prior to their falling out that he would make her the perfect partner in life until he did not. That he would one day declare his unfailing love and devotion.

Instead, he had traveled to London and become intoxicated by a meddlesome, unlikable lady of his ilk.

"You're so beautiful," he said, kissing her deeply. His hands ran over her body, and her skin prickled in awareness. She undulated against him, desiring him and the pleasure he could give her.

Somehow between the kisses and touches, he filled her again. She closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of him joining her, teasing her where she craved most.

"Matthew," she moaned, riding him. "So good." She wrapped her arms around his neck.

He grinned, pulling her arms away. "Move to the other side of the tub and hold on to the side. I'm about to make you feel a whole lot better than that," he taunted.

Without thought, Heidi did as he instructed. She braced herself as he came up firm against her, his hard, muscular chest kissing her back, his manhood pressing against her from behind.

She glanced over her shoulder and met his eye. "Is that even possible?" she asked, trepidation and expectation thrummed through her at the very idea of being taken by Matthew in such a way.

He wrapped his hands about her stomach, lifting her bottom a little before slipping between her wet folds. Heidi moaned as his cock filled her, deep and sweet.

“Matthew,” she huffed, pushing against him, wanting more of him.

He thrust into her, one hand wrapped firmly about her waist, holding her captive as his other clasped the front of the tub, as she was.

“I’m going to make you come this way, Heidi,” he taunted her. “I want to hear my name on your lips. I want to see you come apart in my arms. I want to make you feel so good, my darling.”

She nodded, wanting to feel that sensation again as much as she needed to breathe.

His hand slipped over her stomach and between her legs. She gasped as his nimble fingers flicked her mons and teased between her folds, wrenching her further toward the bliss she knew was just out of her reach.

“You like that?” he asked her, thrusting hard and relentlessly, his pace frustratingly perfect.

“I do like this. I want to come again, as you say.” She looked over her shoulder and met his eye.

His burned with desire, with determination, and her stomach clenched.

“I’m going to make you come so hard,” he teased her. “Just as you like it, my darling.”

His words pushed her over the precipice, and she moaned as her body convulsed about his manhood, her release running

through her in delicious waves. “Matthew,” she screamed, feeling him tense as his release poured out of him.

“Heidi,” he whispered against her ear. “Marry me.”

## EIGHT

Matthew sat on the end of his bed, the storm raging outside and now also inside his house as Heidi paced back and forth in his bedroom. Her wet hair from their bath was tied up in a towel, her shift giving him ample view of her perfect form. One that he wanted to get his hands on again if she would stop making his proposal something that it was not.

“You cannot ask me to marry you. I will not have it.” She stopped and faced him, her eyes narrowing in thought. “Other than what we have partaken in tonight, we hardly know each other anymore, not to mention just because I gave myself to you does not mean I want you as a husband.”

He ran a hand across his jaw, keeping silent as he thought best in these situations. Especially with Heidi, who was prone only to grow more displeased if she thought someone was not listening to her words.

But when she remained quiet a moment longer, he knew he had to say something. “I did not ask you out of some gentleman code because we were intimate. I asked you because no matter the few years we were apart, I cared for you during that time. I know you think I have not, but that was not the case. I have always hoped you and I would be friends again.”



“And we are friends again,” she said, facing him, hands on hips. “But we do not have to marry. If I’m to marry, which I highly doubt given my financial position and age, I want my husband to love me. Not to feel obligated. I will not be the talk of our village or London should I marry you. Everyone will think I married you to save myself from the poor house.”

He reached for her, but she avoided his touch and stepped farther away. “I know this seems hasty,” he agreed. “But you know we fit, Heidi. We belong together.” He shook his head, wondering how else to word how he felt. “I’m just sorry it’s taken this long for me to state the truth to you.”

She snorted and raised one skeptical brow.

He sighed. “But have you never wondered why I have never returned to London? Never courted another lady? It’s because of you. I want you and have known this for some time. By chance, the storm that kept you here was the perfect opportunity for me to remind you of what we once shared. What we can have together should you just trust me. Love me as you used to.”

She stared at him for some minutes, and he could see she debated his words and how truthful she found them. “I did not live very far away. You could have called any time, Matthew, and made amends.”

He nodded, all true and something that needed explaining. “I’m a coward and did not think you would allow me to call.” He shook his head. “And then so much time passed I did not know how to broach the fissure that had grown between us.”

“You hurt me a great deal when you did not defend me before Lady Emma. For a long time, I thought the boy I knew and loved had changed into a man I did not recognize. One with no honor or thought for his oldest friends. Even if those

friends had fallen on hard times and may have needed a friend most at that time, you were not there.”

She removed the towel from her head, laying it over a nearby chair. “I want to believe all that you’re saying, Matthew. I really do, but it is hard for me. You changed so quickly before. How do I know that you’re not merely being a Chameleon and saying all the things I have wanted to hear for so long merely to get your way yet again? I cannot take that risk. I’m sorry, but I do not think I can trust you.” She strode to his door and left him alone.

He let her go, his mind churning as to what he should do to make her believe his words. He supposed he could tell her the real reason his betrothal to Lady Emma ended so suddenly.

That he had scolded his fiancée after she called Heidi a lansprisado and someone she would refuse to be associated with during their married life.

A threat that he had not been able to stomach.

He heard the door to her room close, and he let her go. If he knew his friend at all, Heidi needed time to mull over his words and all that they had done before she would see things clearly.

He just hoped she would see things distinctly enough by morning and agree to marry him.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING HEIDI WOKE TO THE SOUNDS OF birds chirping. Already a maid had entered her room, opened the curtains and pushed back the shutters that protected the glass from the storm the night before.

She threw off the covers and dressed quickly, pulling on her boots that sat before the fire to dry. She needed to return to

her home, not only to check that she still had a roof over her head, but she could also not stay within such close reach of Matthew and throw herself at his head yet again.

She could never think clearly when he was around, and she needed to decide what she wanted to do.

His words *marry me* floated through her mind as she hastily made her way downstairs and out the front door. The road back to town was a slippery, muddy mess, and she walked with caution so as not to fall over her own feet. Leaf litter and branches scattered the landscape, and looking out over the ocean, she saw the waves appeared angrier and higher than usual.

Thankfully when she returned to her small cottage, all was intact, bar a branch that had broken off from a small tree at the side of the house.

She entered her humble abode and shivered as a chill settled on her skin. Matthew's house was warm; most rooms the family lived in had fires lit daily, but she did not have the luxury.

In fact, she had hardly any luxuries at all.

*Marry the viscount and have many.*

She walked into her kitchen, noting that her cook was not there, and nor would she be today. It was Christmas morning, and her only servant had a family of her own to celebrate the day with.

Heidi lit the hearth and placed a kettle over the fire before sitting at the table.

The previous evening she became a woman in truth after being with Matthew. A wonderful experience she would forever cherish, but did that mean she had to marry him?

Before she arrived they had been a pair of bickering neighbors, and now he wanted her as his wife. She could not fathom the difference a day made, and it caused her to be cautious.

Could she trust his words? Had he really always longed to repair what they had once shared and lost?

The front door of her cottage slammed open, and she jumped before hasty footsteps made their way through the house. Heidi didn't have time to utter a word of annoyance before Matthew entered the kitchen, a severe scowl between his brows.

"You left," he exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "I was waiting in the breakfast room and saw you striding off down the road as if the devil himself was after you. What are you doing?"

Heidi gestured to the pot over the stove. "Making myself a cup of tea," she said, unsure what else there was to say. She did not know what to do or how to feel—last night had altered her life so much that she was reeling a little from all the excitement and fear.

"Do not respond with such answers when you know I was not asking you what *exactly* you are doing." He stared at her a moment before wrenching her from her chair, holding her still in his arms. "I am in love with you, Miss Heidi Lewis. I have loved you from the first moment we played together as children. Even when you threw sand at my face and I was chewing on grit for a week after the fact, I loved you."

Heidi bit the inside of her lip, having never thought in her wildest, most-wished-for dreams that Matthew would be saying what he was. She swallowed hard the lump in her throat, not wanting to interrupt him.

“I lied when I told you that Lady Emma broke off the engagement amicably. I broke the engagement off because she wanted you out of my life. I had failed you by not defending you, uninviting you to my ball, but refused to do as she wished. I could not continue to ostracize you merely because you had fallen on hard times and because you were not nobility. Deep down, I think Emma knew I loved you. It has always been you. Last night merely gave me the opportunity to be a man and own my feelings for you and to your face.

“And now, I’m standing here, doing so again, telling you I love you, not out of duty and obligation, but because I have always loved you. You’re my Heidi, my comrade-in-arms against the pirates, my best friend, the person I want to be my wife and the mother of my children. My heart beats in my chest solely for you. So yes, I’m asking you to marry me again and make us both very happy.”

Heidi placed a finger over his lips, halting his words. Bliss, unlike she’d ever known, rose through her, and she sniffed and blinked back tears as her life changed before her eyes. “I think I understand what you’re saying.” She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning up on tip-toe to see him better. “I love you too, and I’m so happy I have you back.” The weight of not being with him, of not having him in her life lifted from her shoulders. “I believe what you say is in earnest.”

He grinned and leaned his forehead against hers. “So does this mean you’ll be mine from this day forward until death does not even then part us?”

“It does,” she said. “Merry Christmas, Matthew.” She smiled, joy rushing through her veins like mulled wine.

He picked her up, spinning her about the small kitchen. “It is a very Merry Christmas now, my love. And tonight, we shall celebrate with our friends and townspeople, just as I should have always done at the Levinstone ball.”

Heidi kissed him, hugging him close. And how they should always do from this day forward. “Sounds perfect indeed.”

# EPILOGUE

**M**atthew took her hand and swept her out onto the ballroom floor. All of the townsfolk had been transported by carriage up to the great Levinstone Estate to enjoy the ball. Those of nobility who had traveled here for the annual Christmas ball did not seem to mind that this year the common folk of their local village mixed, talked, and celebrated with them yuletide.

Heidi could not wipe the smile on her face and knew that she doubted she ever would again. So much happiness ran through every part of her body, and she could not help but think a Christmas miracle had occurred.

She was back in the arms of the man she loved and who loved her in return. They were engaged and, within a month, would be husband and wife.

“Happy, my darling?” he asked, spinning her quickly through the waltz.

She threw back her head and laughed, beyond happy. There did not seem to be a word that could encompass how she felt at this moment.

Euphoric, thrilled, delirious, too many annotations to mention.

“You know that I am,” she said, playing with the hair at his nape. For so long, she had been parted from him and had not been able to even speak to the man whose friendship she had cherished most in her life. But no longer. Now they were engaged, and he was hers forever more.

The hive of activity about them dimmed as she watched him, perfectly content to spend the evening in his arms, and his arms only. To forget that they were both hosts this evening and remain in the delightful, loving bubble they had created.

“And you? Are you happy, my lord?” she asked, grinning.

He pulled her closer, and her heart kicked up a beat at his touch. “You know that I am. I will forever be thankful for storms from this day forward, for without keeping you here with me, we may never have repaired our friendship otherwise. May never have been given a second chance.”

“I’m glad that I came to berate you.” She chuckled at the memory of her ire and all the hurtful things she had thrown at his head. Not that he did not deserve such a set down, but she was glad all of that was behind them now, and they could start anew. “And I’m glad that you kissed me.”

“I’m glad I kissed you, too,” he whispered, his eyes heavy with desire.

Heat licked along her spine, and she wondered how she had gone several years without seeing him. She doubted she could go a day now without being near him in some way. Of kissing him, holding him, having him as a woman enjoyed a man.

Laughter filled the ballroom, Christmas cheer and the clinking of glasses as their guests partook in the evening fare.



Matthew waltzed her with a skill she hadn't known he possessed before stopping at the top of the ballroom floor.

She met his eyes and noted the amusement that sparkled in his blue depths. "What are you laughing at?" she queried, looking about to see if there was anything funny she had missed.

He looked up, and she followed his line of sight to see a sprig of mistletoe hanging from a chandelier. "We're under the mistletoe, Miss Lewis. You do know what that means, do you not?" he asked, wiggling his brows.

She smiled, heat kissing her cheeks. "You would not dare kiss me so publicly," she asked, not quite certain what his answer would be.

"It is tradition, and we do not want to break such rules. What if we're plagued by bad luck if we do not?" He grinned, slipping his arms about her waist and holding her close. "Kiss me, Heidi."

She shook her head, certain that no matter the rules around mistletoe, they should not be kissing so publicly, especially when they were not married yet. Even if their guests had been informed of their betrothal, kissing in public was improper. "We cannot," she argued.

"Kiss me," he said again, dipping his head toward hers. "Kiss me," he taunted once more.

She studied his handsome face, lifting her hands to cup his cheeks. Desire swirled in his eyes and lit the fire within her, and she closed the space between them and kissed him. He pulled her close, his hands wrapping her in his warmth and love. His kiss morphed into a delicious temptation of what tonight would bring. Of what their future held.

Gasps surrounded them, along with jibes and claps, no doubt from their village friends.

Heidi laughed, unable to comprehend how happy, how perfect this Christmas had become.

“I love you,” he said, loud enough for all to hear.

Her sigh mixed with many who watched them. “I love you too,” she returned before he kissed her again, which was only right since they remained under the mistletoe. Rules were rules, after all.

*Dear Readers*

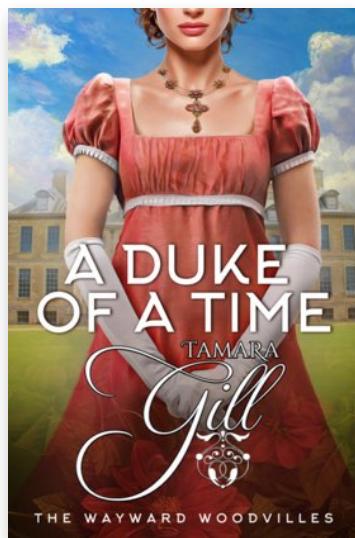
Thank you for taking the time to read *A Wallflower's Christmas Wreath*! I hope you enjoyed the fifth book in the Christmas Wallflower's series.

I'm forever grateful to my readers, so if you're able, I would appreciate an honest review of *A Wallflower's Christmas Wreath*. As they say, feed an author, leave a review!

Merry Christmas!

*Janara Gill*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamara is an Australian author who grew up in an old mining town in country South Australia, where her love of history was founded. So much so, she made her darling husband travel to the UK for their honeymoon, where she dragged him from one historical monument and castle to another.

A mother of three, her two little gentlemen in the making, a future lady (she hopes) keep her busy in the real world, but whenever she gets a moment's peace she loves to write romance novels in an array of genres, including regency, medieval and time travel.

