



A HOLIDAY REGENCY ANTHOLOGY

CHRISTMAS BELLES

USA TODAY AND BESTSELLING AUTHORS
BREE WOLF, TRACY SUMNER,
COLLETTE CAMERON, CHARLIE LANE,
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ONCE UPON A NOT AT ALL
INNOCENT KISS

A WHICKERTONS IN LOVE NOVELLA

BREE WOLF



Once Upon an Not at all Innocent Kiss by Bree Wolf

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ABOUT THE BOOK

**A damsel in distress.
A knight in shining armor.
A very unusual happily ever after.**

England 1771: BEATRICE HARTLEY, daughter to BARON BENTON, is in love and with child... yet not married. Nor does it seem likely she shall ever be, for the *gentleman* whom she granted not only her heart in a moment of foolish passion refuses to make her his wife.

Shamed and heartbroken, Beatrice confides in her parents, who see only one solution to this most scandalous dilemma: an arranged match to save face. All hopes of love now seem dashed...

... until a gallant knight appears out of nowhere.

CHARLES BEAUMONT, LORD HAWTHORNE, eldest son to LORD and LADY WHICKERTON, finds himself struck by cupid's arrow quite unexpectedly upon his return to England. At a ball, he spies a young lady in tears, and his heart goes out to her.

Yet the Whickertons are sworn to only marry for love. After all, it is a family tradition. But what if Charles's chosen bride longs for another? Is all hope lost?

Of course not.

It never is.

Especially not when it concerns the Whickertons.

PROLOGUE



London, England, early December 1771 (or a variation thereof)

Beatrice Hartley, eldest daughter to Baron Benton, was absolutely certain her heart would burst at any moment. With love or joy or excitement, she could not quite say. Perhaps it was all of them. Of course, she could not deny the nervous tingle that chased itself across her skin, making her hands tremble and her teeth gnaw upon her lower lip. Yes, she was definitely a bit nervous as well. Yet there was no need to be; after all, he loved her.

Following her parents into the large ballroom, Beatrice craned her neck, her eyes eager to catch a glimpse of him, Lord Strumpton. With his tall stature and the dark shine of his almost black hair, he stood out wherever he went. Yet it was the sparkling green of his eyes that dazzled Beatrice like nothing ever had before. He knew how to smile with his entire face, and she felt her knees grow weak at the mere memory of it.

Lord Tennyson's ball appeared to be a crushing success, his festively decorated townhouse sparkling with the joy of the season. Every corner of the grand ballroom was packed with guests, their laughter ringing in the air as they danced to the melody of the orchestra by the terrace doors. Glittering decorations adorned the walls while twinkling lights shone from every corner. The noise felt like a hum in Beatrice's ears, though, and for a moment, she was tempted to cover them with her hands and block out the sound. Of course, her parents would frown upon that, and so she endured the noise, her head still turning this way and that, her eyes eager to spy the man who possessed her heart.

"Is something wrong with your neck?" Beatrice's mother inquired with a

frown upon her face. “Indeed, you look quite odd standing there like that.” She took a step closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is something the matter, dear?”

Quickly regaining her composure, Beatrice fixed a polite smile on her face. “No, nothing is wrong, Mother. It is simply so... so very exciting to be here. I don’t quite know where to look first.”

Her mother patted her hand, a warm smile upon her face. “I quite understand, dear. Yet it is not becoming for a young lady to be craning her neck like this. Above all, it is important to maintain an outward appearance of grace and composure.”

“Of course, Mother. I shall do my best.”

Beatrice’s mother cast her a reassuring smile before she hurried off, quickly vanishing into a circle of friends, their voices adding to the hum in Beatrice’s ears.

“I believe Miss Carlisle is over there,” Beatrice’s father remarked with a nod of his head toward the other end of the ballroom. “She seems most eager for your company.”

Beatrice nodded, grateful for this opportunity to slip away. Of course, she had come to this ball tonight eager for another’s company, yet judging from the excited expression upon Marianne’s face, Beatrice knew she could not simply pretend she had not seen her. In truth, Beatrice wished she could share her news with her best friend; still, it would be wise to wait and speak to Lord Strumpton first.

“There you are,” Marianne exclaimed, her dark curls dancing upon her shoulders as she all but bounced upon her feet. “Is this not the most exciting ball you’ve ever attended?” She clasped her hands together, beaming up at Beatrice.

Of course, Beatrice nodded. Yet she could not keep herself from gazing beyond her friend’s shoulder, her eyes still searching the bustling room. “It certainly is.”

Fortunately, Marianne possessed the ability to hold entire conversations by herself. Only the occasional nod or monosyllabic response was necessary to keep her friend going, words rolling off her tongue without pause. And so, Beatrice remained by her friend’s side, utterly unaware of the words that poured from her lips. Instead, her gaze swept the many dancers as well as those strolling around the large, vaulted chamber, exchanging pleasantries here and there. Indeed, she had never seen so many people in one place, their

voices almost deafening.

And then Beatrice saw him, and her heart stuttered to a halt.

As enchanting and dazzling as she remembered, Lord Strumpton—Eugene!—waltzed across the dance floor only a few paces from where Beatrice stood, a golden-haired beauty in his arms.

Beatrice would have easily thought it no more than a societal obligation—after all, gentlemen often danced with a myriad of young ladies at these events, did they not?—if it had not been for the smile upon Lord Strumpton’s face.

Indeed, it spoke not merely of politeness or even simple amusement. No, it was the sort of smile that had won him her heart months ago. It was the sort of smile that lit up his entire face, illuminating his dark brown eyes in a way that Beatrice felt certain she could see into his soul. It was the sort of smile she had been certain Lord Strumpton had reserved only for her.

All of a sudden, the room felt much too crowded, the air too thin and too hot. Beatrice’s knees grew weak, yet not in the wonderful way they had before. Waves of nausea rolled through her middle, and she all but stumbled backward, her legs unable to support her.

“Are you well?” Marianne inquired with a worried expression upon her face before she clasped Beatrice’s arm and led her to a row of chairs by the far wall. “You look pale.”

Beatrice hardly knew what to say as her heart pounded in her ears. She could barely breathe, let alone form a coherent sentence. Oh, what a fool she had been.

Indeed, she had come here tonight with no thought for concern. Perhaps she had been a little nervous, but she had never truly felt worry, not even the slightest touch of uncertainty.

Now, she did.

Once I tell him, Beatrice thought, will he propose? Only moments ago, Beatrice had been certain of the outcome of this night. Now, she was no longer. Now, fear slowly crawled into her heart, tensing every muscle in her body. *Does he truly love me? Or was I mistaken?* Over the past few months, they had exchanged secret messages, whispered words of love to one another and—quite shockingly, yes!—met in private with no chaperone present. Of course, Beatrice had been hesitant at first, concerned for her reputation; but Eugene’s deep devotion had eventually won him her heart... and she had thrown caution to the wind.

“He is a gentleman.” The words slipped from Beatrice’s lips without thought. “He will do the honorable thing.” Her right hand settled upon her belly, where waves of nausea still rolled.

“Pardon me?” Marianne inquired, leaning closer. “What did you say?” She cast a disapproving glance at the orchestra nearby. “I’m afraid I did not hear you.”

Beatrice shook her head, barely able to look at her friend. *He will propose, will he not? Yes, he will. I simply have to speak with him. Yes, all will be well. I’m certain of it.*

Yet as Beatrice continued to watch the man she loved dance with another woman, her heart grew heavy. *Oh, God, what have I done?*

CHAPTER I

A SHAMEFUL SECRET



Every step Beatrice took down the long hallway toward the drawing room felt as though it was weighted down by lead. Dark shadows loomed this late in the day, every bit of cheer the Christmas season usually promised gone, and she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling cold. Yet there was no help for it. This was not a situation Beatrice knew how to handle herself. It was not something that would go away if only she ignored it steadfastly. No, she needed her parents' help... if it was not already too late for that.

Again, tears threatened, and Beatrice determinedly willed them away. She had to be strong. She knew that. Yet it was easier said than done. Never would she have thought her life would take such a drastic turn and lead her away from the dream she had always entertained.

A dream of love and marriage and family.

Breathing in deeply, Beatrice stared at the closed door, her limbs unwilling to move. Still, there was no choice, and it was that reminder that finally propelled her forward.

As Beatrice stepped into the drawing room, both her parents looked up. While her father had been immersed in one of his books, seated in a comfortable armchair near the fire, her mother had retreated to the settee, her latest work of embroidery in her hands. "Are you well?" her mother inquired, that slightly concerned frown once again upon her face. "You've been rather quiet these last few days." She exchanged a look with her husband, who nodded in agreement before both turned their attention back to Beatrice.

With her hands clasped together almost painfully, Beatrice straightened, willing herself not to crumble before their eyes. After all, her parents had

always been kind, their family born out of convenience, yes, but also respect and compassion. “I’m afraid there is something I need to tell you,” she began, her voice trembling ever so slightly. “I... I’ve made a grievous mistake.”

Her parents’ faces tensed, and they exchanged another concerned look. Then her mother set aside her embroidery and beckoned Beatrice forward, patting the spot upon the settee next to her. “Come. Tell us what has happened.”

Truthfully, Beatrice would have preferred to remain near the door. Somehow, being face-to-face with her parents, only an arm’s length or two separating them, made it harder to speak.

Seating herself on the far edge of the settee, Beatrice clasped her hands in her lap, her gaze downcast, her courage now all but gone. “There is... there is no good way to say this,” she murmured, still not daring to look up at her parents. “So, I will simply say it.” She closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath. Then she lifted her chin and looked at her mother. “I am with child.”

For a moment, it appeared time had stopped, as though the world had ceased its rotation. There was not even a flicker of a reaction upon her mother’s face, her expression almost blank as she stared back at Beatrice.

A quick glance at her father told Beatrice that her news had stunned him as well. He barely blinked, his shoulders still as though he did not even dare draw breath.

“I’m so sorry,” Beatrice mumbled, bowing her head in shame. “I know I disappointed you. I know I made a grievous mistake. I wish I—”

Her mother shot to her feet, and her mouth fell open as though she wished to speak. Yet no sound came out. Then, quick steps carried her around the room, her eyes wide and her hands clasped to her mouth. Long moments passed, before she spun around to face Beatrice. “Who? Who is—?” A muscle in her jaw twitched, and she glanced at her husband.

Beatrice’s father remained where he was, his expression now stern, his eyes moving as he no doubt thought of a way out of this predicament.

Swallowing hard, Beatrice met her mother’s eyes. “Lord Strumpton.”

Her mother’s eyes closed, and a heavy sigh left her lips as she bowed her head in what looked like resignation. “How could you have been such a fool?” she huffed, seeking Beatrice’s gaze, her own accusing. “The man’s a known rake. I assume he refused to marry you, is that not so?”

Unable to speak, Beatrice nodded in confirmation, tears blurring her vision as she recalled the moment she had shared her *happy news* with the

man she loved.

It had been that very night at the Tennyson ball. Beatrice had waited for what felt like a small eternity until she had finally caught him alone.

Seeing him leave the ballroom, Beatrice had excused herself, telling Marianne that she was heading to the powder room and would be back within moments. Her friend had nodded in acknowledgment of her words before quickly turning back toward the dance floor, hope in her eyes to find herself out there among the dancing couples soon, too.

Quick steps had carried Beatrice out of the ballroom and toward the powder room. There she had waited until no one had been nearby before rounding the next corner and hurrying after Lord Strumpton. She had not dared call out to him until the noise of the ballroom had faded away.

“Eugene!” Indeed, calling him by his given name had somehow reassured her, reminding her of the wonderful moments they had spent together, of all the precious things he had said to her.

Surprise had come to his face upon seeing her, and he had quickly drawn her aside, ushering her into an empty room. His lips had found hers without delay, her words stuck in her throat as he had drawn her into his arms. For a moment, Beatrice had forgotten the world around her, once more reassured that all would end well after all.

Reminding herself of the words that needed to be said, she had gained his attention, her heart full of hope once more. “Eugene, I am with child.”

His face had fallen instantly, and he had stumbled backwards a step or two, his hands falling from her arms, as though he could no longer bear the thought of even touching her. “Are... Are you certain?”

Beatrice had shrugged. “As certain as I can be.” In truth, she knew very little about these matters. All she knew she had overheard by sheer happenstance, drawing her own conclusions. Indeed, it could barely be considered knowledge at all.

His lips had thinned, his head shaking from side to side ever so slowly in denial.

Beatrice’s heart had broken in that moment, and yet she had forced herself to ask, “Will you not propose? After all,” her hands had settled upon her belly, “I am carrying your child.”

For a moment, his gaze had followed her movement and lingered upon her hands. Then, however, he had shaken his head once more. “I’m afraid I cannot. My father seeks another match for me.”

Tears had shot to Beatrice's eyes. "Eugene, you cannot mean that."

"It breaks my heart," Eugene had replied, his arms now linked behind his back, his feet retreating another step, "but I have an obligation to my family." He had inhaled a slow breath and then stepped around her and left the room.

All Beatrice had thought in that moment had been that he had not looked heartbroken at all.

"How could you not know?" Beatrice's mother demanded, disappointment in her eyes as she shook her head at Beatrice. "Did we not warn you to be wary of his kind? Of men like him? How could not see that —?" She pinched her lips together and shook her head in a gesture of utter defeat. "There is no point in lamenting what cannot be undone."

Beatrice dapped her handkerchief to the corner of her eye to hide the tear that lingered there. Of course, she had heard the whispers; and yet they had only been that: whispers. After all, whispers existed about almost everyone of the *ton* in one form or another.

Truth be told, one look into Eugen's eyes and Beatrice had *known* him to be different. Even if he was a rake, even if all the rumors were true, everything would change now that he had lost his heart to her. Beatrice had been certain of it.

Only she had been wrong.

His heart had never been hers.

Not even for a moment.

Silence lingered in the small drawing room as Beatrice's mother continued to pace. Beatrice could all but feel her parents trying to think of a way to remedy the mistake she had made, their anger at her momentarily subdued by the desperate need to preserve their family's reputation.

"We must find her a match," her mother stated firmly as her feet finally drew to a halt, her gaze meeting her husband's. "There is no point in trying to persuade Lord Strumpton to do the honorable thing."

Beatrice's father sighed, the expression in his eyes hesitant before he spoke. "I could call him out," he suggested in a feeble voice.

Beatrice's mother scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous! He would kill you, and then where would we be?" She shook her head in finality. "No, we must find her another match. And quickly. She must be married in a fortnight at the latest." Then her gaze swung around to Beatrice. "How long has it been since your last courses?"

Beatrice blushed profusely while her father cleared his throat

uncomfortably before he rose to his feet and moved closer to the door. “Almost six weeks,” Beatrice replied in a small voice.

A muttered curse flew from her mother’s lips. “We can be certain she is with child,” she murmured to herself before approaching her husband. “Who?”

For a long moment, Beatrice’s parents looked at one another, not a word leaving their lips as they considered every option.

Beatrice felt sickened. Of course, like all young ladies, she had always dreamed of a love match, and for a time, she had thought she had found it. Now, though, everything came crashing down around her. Yet despite the awful thought of being ruined in the eyes of society, Beatrice could not deny that a match of convenience was something almost as awful. What sort of man would her parents choose? Would they tell him the truth about her situation? What if they did not tell him and he found out?

All sorts of disconcerting thoughts raced through Beatrice’s head as her parents considered their next step.

“John Carter.”

Beatrice flinched at the sound of her father’s voice as well as the name he spoke.

“Do you think he will agree?” her mother inquired, doubt in her voice. “Has he not said more than once that he does not desire another wife?”

“He has,” her father confirmed. “Yet if I ask him as a friend, he might grant me this favor. After all, it need not be a true union.”

Mr. John Carter had been a school friend of her father’s. As the second son of a baron, he possessed no title, yet he was well respected. He had been married to his wife for almost two decades when he had suddenly lost her to a lung infection. The disease had moved swiftly, and Beatrice remembered the crestfallen expression upon Mr. Carter’s face after losing the woman he had loved all his life. He had always been a kind man, and yet the thought of marrying him made Beatrice feel sick.

“Then send word to him,” Beatrice’s mother insisted. “Tonight. Now.” She heaved a deep breath. “There is no time to lose.”

Her father nodded and hurried from the drawing room, his receding footsteps echoing down the hall.

“No one must know,” her mother spoke in a calm and clear voice as she moved back to Beatrice’s side. “Do you understand?” She grasped Beatrice’s hands, her eyes insistent upon hers. “We will attend every function, every

event as though... nothing happened.”

Beatrice nodded in agreement, fighting to hold back the tears that wished to rush forth. Yet this was her predicament. She had made a mistake, and now, she would have to pay for it. She had no one to blame but herself.

Indeed, Beatrice had been a fool to give her heart away so easily, to ignore the whispers, the tentative warnings she had heard in her head now and then. Yet her heart had been too full of love to heed them.

“Dance and smile and converse as always,” her mother instructed, one finger lifted in warning. “Do you understand? No one can know you’re with child.”

“You’re with child?”

Beatrice and her mother flinched at the sound of Francine’s squeaked exclamation, their heads whipping around to stare at the door.

With bare feet, Beatrice’s five-year-old sister stood in the doorway, her green eyes wide with excitement and her unruly blond curls falling into her face. “Truly?” She tiptoed closer. “You’re having a baby?”

Beatrice knew not what to say, her eyes darting to her mother, seeking support. Her mother, too, appeared shocked witless; however, she quickly recovered. “Come here, Darling.”

Francine bounced closer, and their mother pulled the girl onto her lap. “You were not meant to hear this,” their mother sighed, casting a fearful look at Beatrice. “However, now that you know, it is important that you keep this a secret, do you understand?”

Francine frowned, her wide green eyes darting to Beatrice in question. “But why? Are you not happy?”

Beatrice almost laughed hysterically in that moment. And so, she quickly rose to her feet, turning her back to her sister, and hurried over to the window. Tears fell freely now, and she gritted her teeth against the sobs that rose in her throat as she listened to her mother’s gentle voice, urging Francine to keep quiet.

Are you not happy? Francine’s question echoed through Beatrice’s head like an awful taunt. Indeed, happiness would not be hers now. She had taken one wrong step, and everything had come undone. At only nineteen years of age, all hope was now lost.

For good.

CHAPTER 2

AS WITH ALL GOOD PLANS



England was cold and wet, and Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne, eldest son to the Earl and Countess of Whickerton, wondered if the sun would ever shine again. Indeed, they had been gone from English soil for so long that he barely remembered his home country.

“I don’t like it here,” Elizabeth, his twelve-year-old sister pouted as they stood in front of the terrace doors of their London townhouse. “It always rains.”

Charles could not disagree.

Ever since their arrival barely a fortnight ago, it had rained constantly. If only temperatures were to drop a bit more... “Perhaps we’ll see snow soon,” he murmured, trying to cheer up his little sister. “Don’t you want to see snow?”

Lizzie’s face brightened as she looked up at him. “Yes,” she breathed, awe in her voice, before another cough wracked her little body.

Charles held her close, rubbing a soothing hand over her little back and murmuring words of comfort. When her coughing had calmed, Charles seated himself upon the floor and pulled Lizzie into his arms. “We won’t stay long,” he murmured, tickling the corners of her mouth to make her smile. “Only long enough for you to see snow.”

Since birth, Lizzie had suffered from a weakness of the lungs, which could not be cured but was eased by warmer climates. Unfortunately, that was not something to be found in England.

Footsteps echoed closer, and then the door to the drawing room was flung open. “There you are,” Henry exclaimed, dressed in formal evening attire. He strode closer, then he laughed. “You look miserable,” he remarked with a

grin.

Charles chuckled, casting a meaningful look at his brother, younger by three years. "And you look dashing." He looked down at Lizzie, her eyes wide as she gazed at Henry. "We were talking about snow."

Henry kneeled down in front of their sister. "I heard temperatures are bound to drop any day now," he told her, putting a smile onto her face.

Leaving Lizzie in Henry's care, Charles hurried to dress for tonight's ball. Indeed, despite his twenty-one years on this earth, it was his first, and he could not deny a touch of nervousness. In truth, he did not much care for the idea of being crammed in a room with a myriad of strangers. He preferred the country, the wide-open expanse as well as the quiet. Henry, though, could probably not wait to mingle.

Still, being back in England after all these years, Charles wanted to see the world his parents had grown up in, the world that would one day be his as well. Yes, he was determined to make the most of their time here.

As they arrived at Lord Atwood's townhouse later that night, the sound of laughter, conversation, and music filled the hall, echoing off the walls and vibrating against Charles's chest. He felt overwhelmed by the sudden noise, and a wave of anxiety washed over him.

"It is quite different, is it not?" his mother, Edith Beaumont, Countess of Whickerton, asked with a twinkle in her pale eyes. "Consider it a social study of a foreign culture."

Charles chuckled, grateful for his mother's words. "I shall," he replied, not unaware of the expression in his father's eyes as he looked at his wife. Indeed, Charles's parents were the embodiment of true love, the bond between them transcending everything Charles had ever encountered. He had seen love in others before, but it had never come close to that which connected his parents. As far as he knew, there was not even a word in any language he had ever studied that would do it justice.

While his parents easily glided through the throng of guests, Charles and Henry remained behind. "What do you think?"

Henry shrugged, eager eyes sweeping over the crowd. "Not the greatest adventure I've ever imagined, but," he grinned at Charles, "it'll do for tonight." Then, he, too, disappeared into the crowd.

Charles could not deny that he enjoyed being on his own, even in a crowd. His brother had the tendency to speak without pause, and Charles often felt drained having to pay attention to his brother's endless stream of

words. And so, instead, Charles retreated to a quiet corner—relatively quiet, at least—and watched, observing those around him with almost scientific interest. Indeed, customs differed greatly across cultures, and he wondered about the many nuances he had yet to learn.

Quite content, Charles spent the next hour upon the fringes of the ballroom, watching couples dance and lords and ladies interact. He saw young women bat their eyes, coy smiles upon their faces, and gentlemen square their shoulders, an air of importance surrounding them. Old matrons stood in one corner, watching everything with hawk's eyes, secretive words exchanged between them. Charles could not help but wonder what it was they saw when they looked at this ballroom, how different their experience was from his own. Almost entranced, Charles strolled along, his gaze sweeping over the many guests in attendance, with many more still arriving minute by minute. Their voices were now only a hum in the background, the meaning of their words lost to Charles. It was a soothing sound, and it made Charles feel more at ease; after all, he was merely a spectator at tonight's ball, glad not to have any sort of active role in it.

In Charles's opinion, the evening could have progressed in this very manner until the time of their departure. However, as with all good plans, sometimes they took an unexpected twist.

Lost in his observations, Charles did not notice the young woman until they collided in a tangle of arms, his feet firmly planted upon the hem of her skirt, her fingers grasping his arms to regain her balance. The moment was upon him so abruptly that Charles felt his heart pause in his chest, his eyes staring down into her face in utter shock, the rest of the world momentarily lost to his senses.

Indeed, for a moment, all Charles saw...

... was her.

Wide blue eyes looked up into his. Indeed, it was the most astounding blue he had ever seen, and yet Charles could not quite say why that was the case. Indeed, it was a remarkable blue, a mixture of the sky on a bright summer's day and the deep, almost turquoise waters he had seen in the south of Europe. It was a color that held mystery and depth, a color that intrigued him and made him wish to know what lay beneath the waves.

And then Charles blinked, and he saw her face.

Not unlike his own, it held surprise, visible in the widening of her gaze. Yet beyond that, Charles saw deep sadness, anguish even. Tears clung to her

lashes, and even after regaining her balance, her hands still clung to his arms, holding on, as though she feared she could not stand on her own. Indeed, an almost crushing weight seemed to rest upon her shoulders, and Charles felt a fierce need to protect her, to carry her burden for her... whatever it might be.

It was the oddest feeling, for he did not even know her name.

"I'm sorry," Charles managed to say after finally rediscovering his voice. Although it sounded rather like the croak of a frog than the voice of a human. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm sorry. I suppose I did not look where I was going. Are you all right?" As Charles took a step back to look into her eyes, the young lady's hands slipped from his arms, and he instantly regretted the loss of her touch. Again, it was the oddest sensation.

Blinking her eyes fiercely, the young lady bowed her head, clearly struggling to regain her composure. Still, Charles was certain that it had not been their *collision* that had unbalanced her. Indeed, whatever had upset her had happened before their meeting. "I'm quite all right," she replied in a small voice, her head still bowed, her eyes refusing to look back up into his.

More than anything, Charles wished to know what had happened to her. He took a careful step forward, his head slightly lowered, and whispered, "Is there anything I can do? Please." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded pleading. Indeed, in that moment, he would have said anything to keep her by his side.

Unfortunately, the young lady had other plans, for she shook her head and retreated another step, reestablishing the distance between them. "No, I'm truly all right." Then, slowly, ever so slowly, she lifted her chin, and it seemed to be a great effort to her. She met his eyes, and then the most ingenuine smile Charles had ever seen touched her lips. "Nothing happened. I'm... I'm fine." She nodded to him as though in confirmation of her words and then slipped back into the crowd so fast that for a moment Charles felt as though he might have simply imagined her.

He still did not know her name. He could not even remember the color of her hair or her dress. All he remembered were those wide blue eyes filled with sadness, and yet, strangely enough, he thought that in that moment he had seen her.

Truly *seen* her.

And he knew that it had changed everything.

CHAPTER 3

A LIFE IN RUINS



Beatrice wished she could leave the Atwood ball. She wished she could run far away to a place where no one knew her, to a place where she did not feel trapped. Only she could not. This would be her life from now on, forced to pretend, to put a smile on her face no matter how loudly her heart sobbed.

“There you are,” her mother exclaimed, waving her closer.

Beatrice stumbled onward, barely aware of where she was going. Indeed, she ought to pay closer attention. Had she not just a moment ago collided with a young gentleman? And he had seen something in her eyes, had he not? Yes, Beatrice was certain of it. There had been concern in his voice, and the way he had stepped closer and tried to look into her eyes had deeply unsettled her. Every fiber of her being had screamed, *He knows!*

Of course, he could not know not the truth. Still, the way he had looked at her had brought fear to her heart.

As though she had witnessed her daughter’s abrupt encounter with the young gentleman, Beatrice’s mother eyed her disapprovingly. “Pretend better,” she whispered, leaning in so no one would overhear. “You look miserable.”

Indeed, Beatrice did feel miserable, and she felt even more miserable knowing that she would feel miserable for the rest of her life.

“Here he comes. Put on a smile.”

Heeding her mother’s words, Beatrice forced a smile on her face as she turned in the direction her mother was indicating. Indeed, her father was walking toward them, Mr. Carter at his side. He looked as Beatrice remembered him, tall and slender, his dark hair graying. Only the kindness

she had always seen in his gaze was suddenly gone, for he fixed her with a hard stare. Yes, he knew. He knew the truth, and he was ashamed of it.

Beatrice wanted to sink into a hole in the ground. She wanted to run and flee this moment. Perhaps even her life. How had this happened? Only a few weeks past, everything had looked so promising. Her heart had been so full of hope. And now?

“Jonathan, you remember my daughter?” Beatrice’s father said by way of greeting. His gaze held hers, urging her to act with decorum.

“Indeed,” was all Mr. Carter said, his voice tight and his nose slightly wrinkled as he looked down at her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you again,” Beatrice forced past her lips then quickly bowed her head, not quite in deference but to avoid having to look at him.

Mr. Carter scoffed. “From now on, I expect you to follow society’s rules to a point,” he said in an almost threateningly low voice. “I have agreed to this only in service to an old friend. But I warn you— if you bring shame to my family, you shall regret it.”

Forcing her gaze upward, Beatrice looked at her father. Again, his gaze implored her to act as she had been taught, and so Beatrice nodded. “Of course. I thank you for your kindness.”

Fortunately, this concluded Beatrice’s part in their conversation. Turning their attention to other matters, her father and Mr. Carter soon left their side, joining a small circle of elderly gentlemen on the other side of the ballroom.

“Mother,” Beatrice exclaimed, grasping her mother’s arms, her eyes imploring, “I cannot marry him.” Her voice was only a whisper, and yet it seemed to echo through the ballroom. “Please!”

Her mother heaved a deep breath, and for a moment, Beatrice thought to see regret and compassion in her eyes. Then, however, it vanished, and she spoke the words Beatrice had expected from the start. “I’m afraid there is no choice, dearest. If you do not, you doom us all.” A weak smile touched her lips as she placed a hand upon Beatrice’s cheek. “Trust me, this is the right choice.”

Beatrice almost laughed at her mother’s words. Had she not a moment ago said that there was no choice?

“Ah, Lady Benton!”

At the sound of their hostess’s voice, mother and daughter turned around to greet Lady Atwood. To Beatrice’s surprise, she was not alone but in the

company of a couple the age of Beatrice's parents as well as a young gentleman.

The very gentleman whom Beatrice had collided with only moments before.

"Allow me to introduce to you Lord and Lady Whickerton," Lady Atwood intoned with a gracious smile, "as well as their eldest son, Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne." Beatrice felt their hostess's gaze linger upon her for a moment, the ghost of a frown crossing her face as though she, too, easily saw through Beatrice's mask. "And this here are Lady Benton and her daughter, Miss Beatrice Hartley."

Pleasantries were exchanged, and all the while, Beatrice could feel Viscount Hawthorne's gaze upon her. She barely dared look up, afraid of what she would see in his eyes. Why was he here? Why this introduction? Clearly, Lady Atwood was not acting upon her own initiative. Had Lord Hawthorne asked to be introduced to her?

Under other circumstances, Beatrice would have felt flattered. Yet today, here, she felt terrified. The idea that someone looked at her this closely unsettled her, and she felt a wave of nausea roll through her belly.

Interestingly so, while their parents conversed with ease, Lord Hawthorne did not say a word. He simply continued to look at her. Only when Lady Whickerton suggested to Beatrice's mother that they fetch themselves a beverage and moved away did Lord Hawthorne step toward her. "I apologize for... this ambush," he said with a teasing smile, yet there was a touch of shyness in his dark brown eyes. "I simply wish to..." The smile faded from his face, and Beatrice could see that he did not quite know how to put his motivation into words.

"That is quite all right," Beatrice heard herself reply, that plastered smile returning to her face. "It was as much my fault as it was yours. I was not looking where I was going, either." She nodded to him and made to turn away, feeling the strain of this forced conversation.

"Are you...?" Lord Hawthorne reached out a hand toward her, pausing it a bare inch before his hand touched hers. "I apologize," he said again, a rather shy smile playing across his features. "I simply meant to ask if there is anything I can do. You... You seemed quite distraught."

Lifting her chin, Beatrice dove deeper into that plastered smile. "As I told you before, I am quite all right. There is nothing wrong. I assure you." She glanced beyond his shoulder, unsettled by the intensity in his gaze, as though

he could unearth her secrets even if she was unwilling to share them. “I apologize, but I must see to my friend. Good day, my lord.” And without another word, Beatrice hastened away, afraid of what Lord Hawthorne might do if she did not escape him now.

The truly sad thing, though, was that if it were not for the fact that her life was in ruins, Beatrice would have liked him.

CHAPTER 4

TOO SOON



Charles cursed his directness. He ought not to have spoken to her in such a forward manner. Of course, he had upset her. After all, who would entrust a painful secret to a stranger? Yet Charles knew he could not simply walk away and forget what he had seen.

His gaze followed her as she moved away, her direction aimless, as though there was no friend in need, as though her sole motivation had been to escape his presence, his questions.

“My, you look as though all the rain clouds in England have suddenly taken up residence above your head,” Henry remarked with a laugh, his blue eyes full of amusement. “Is it because of her?” He nodded in Miss Hartley’s direction.

Charles gritted his teeth, unwilling to discuss this matter with his brother. He himself still felt too shaken by his encounter with Miss Hartley. Was he a fool to feel so protective of someone he had only just met? Why did he care? Charles could not quite say why, yet he knew it to be true.

“You look like a lovesick pup,” his brother remarked with a chuckle, clearly delighting in his observations. He slapped a hand on Charles’s shoulder. “You’re only one-and-twenty. You’re not already looking for a wife, are you?” He frowned, then he laughed, as though the thought was ludicrous. “It is much too soon for that. Now is the time for freedom and traveling. After all, we’re only back in England because of father’s responsibilities to the realm, not to see you hitched.”

Charles sighed. “I cannot say what it is. But when I look at her, I...” Words still failed him. “I feel as though—” He broke off abruptly as he noticed the way Miss Hartley was trying *not* to look at a particular

gentleman.

The man in question was strolling past her, a dark-haired lady upon his arm. He did not even glance at Miss Hartley, and even from a distance, Charles thought to see her heart breaking. He felt a touch of jealousy flare up in his veins at the thought that her heart might belong to this unknown lord; still, the most dominant emotion Charles experienced in that moment was rage.

Fury that this man had dared hurt her.

For he had to have. The expression in her eyes said it loud and clear, and Charles felt her heartbreak as though it were his own pain. Never had he experienced anything like it before.

“Do you know who that man is?” he asked his brother, nodding toward the couple making their way across the ballroom toward the dance floor.

“As far as I know,” came their father’s voice from behind them, “that man is Lord Strumpton.” A question rested in his gaze as he looked at Charles.

“I’ll be off,” Henry declared after a moment of slightly tense silence and quickly disappeared into the crowd once more.

It was rather obvious that his parents were well aware of the direction of his thoughts.

Standing side by side, his mother’s hand upon his father’s arm, they eyed him curiously. While a touch of concern rested upon his father’s face, his mother looked rather amused.

“What do you know of Lord Strumpton?” Charles inquired, wishing to know everything he could, knowing that no matter what he did, his parents would draw their own conclusions.

“Why do you care?” his father asked in return, brows rising meaningfully.

Charles huffed out a deep breath, once more glancing over his shoulder at Miss Hartley. She looked utterly forlorn as she stood on the edge of the ballroom, clearly uncertain what to do with herself. She looked like a spooked deer wishing to flee, yet she clearly could not do so.

“She’s to be married soon,” his father said when Charles remained quiet.

Those few little words felt like a punch to his midsection, and Charles almost doubled over. His jaw dropped, and he stared at his parents in utter shock. “She... She is?” Again, his head whipped around, his gaze first seeking Miss Hartley and then Lord Strumpton, currently dancing with the dark-haired lady. “To him? To Lord Strumpton?” He looked back at his

parents, not in the least caring what they thought of his passionate reaction and what conclusions they drew.

His father shook his head. "From what Lady Benton said, Miss Hartley is to be married to an old family friend. Soon." Again, his father's brows rose meaningfully, his expression saying more than the words he had spoken.

Suddenly, Charles felt weak, exhausted even. He felt as though he had stood in the warm sunshine before and was now abruptly plunged into the deepest winter. Indeed, it was odd! How could he care so deeply for someone he had only spoken a few words to? Yet, rational or not, he did.

"You'd do well to direct your attention elsewhere," his father counseled, the look in his eyes deeply empathetic. "Besides, you're much too young to make that choice right now. Dance and flirt and enjoy yourself." He chuckled, and for a moment, Charles saw a deep resemblance between his father and his younger brother. "Eventually, you shall find the one lady who will steal your heart." His father smiled at his mother, the look passing between them echoing the bond that had connected them for over twenty years now. "When the day finally comes, you shall know." His father assured him. "I promise you."

Charles knew that his father's words were meant as a comfort. Yet they had the opposite effect. "Thank you for your counsel," Charles said, then he turned around and marched straight toward Miss Hartley.

Indeed, she looked close to tears. Although the moment she saw him coming, fear stole into her expression, and she backed away until her back collided with the wall.

Charles stopped in his tracks, shocked by her reaction. Still, he doubted that she truly feared him. No, there had to be another explanation. And so, he continued onward, trying his best to smile at her reassuringly.

The moment he was within earshot, Miss Hartley stepped toward him, a frown upon her face. "What do you want now?" she snapped, immediately shocked by her own outburst. She bowed her head and briefly closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I did not mean..." She exhaled a slow breath through her nose, clearly fighting for composure. "Please, leave me alone."

"I am sorry to have upset you," he began tentatively. "I assure you, it was not my intention." He paused, encouraged when she dared to lift her eyes to his. "Yet I cannot walk away, knowing that you..." He shrugged. "You're clearly distraught. Please, tell me what I can do."

Tears brimmed in her eyes, and for a moment, Charles thought she would

tell him. Then, however, her lips thinned, and she squared her shoulders. “It is nothing,” she echoed her earlier words, her face suddenly pale. Her hand flew to her middle, and she pressed her lips together in a way that Charles feared she might be sick.

“Are you well?” he inquired, inching forward. “Do you need rest? Or perhaps... a glass of water?”

With her eyes closed, Miss Hartley breathed in deeply. Once, then twice. Then her eyes opened and met his. “No, I don’t need anything. All I require is for you to leave me alone.” She fixed him with a pointed stare. “Please.”

Knowing that he was adding to her distress, Charles nodded. “Very well. However, if there is ever anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask.” He offered her what he hoped to be a reassuring smile and then forced himself to turn away and walked back the way he had come.

His father’s words echoed through his head, and Charles realized that he already knew. He felt absolutely certain that he had already met the woman who would steal his heart... for she had already done so. It was insane, yes. Absolutely ludicrous. He had not even known she existed a few hours past, yet Charles knew she was the one.

There was no denying that.

Neither did he plan to.

CHAPTER 5

A SHOOTING STAR



Beatrice felt as though she had spent the better part of the night weeping. The sun had not yet risen, and she felt exhausted in heart, mind, and body. That brief encounter with Mr. Carter had destroyed every last sliver of hope that her future husband would treat her kindly and not regard her with shame in his eyes. In fact, Beatrice felt certain that the look in Mr. Carter's eyes would remind her of the mistake she had made every day for the rest of her life.

Hugging her pillow, Beatrice curled up into a tight ball. In an odd way, she felt like a child, helpless and without power over her own life. At the same time, all the joys and innocence of childhood were now utterly gone, never to return.

Unable to sleep, Beatrice listened to the soft sounds of London slowly awakening, her pillow wet from the tears she had shed that night. How many more would there be? How many more nights like this one?

The echo of soft footsteps drifted to Beatrice's ears, and then the door slowly glided open. A moment later, a head full of blonde curls appeared in the gap. "Bea, are you awake?"

"How come *you* are awake?" Beatrice pushed herself up, resting her back against the headboard.

Francine tiptoed into her chamber, a small canvas in her hands. "I couldn't sleep."

Beatrice chuckled, and the sound felt almost alien to her ears. "Well, that seems obvious."

Giggling, Francine jumped up onto her bed and crawled closer. "I made this for you." She held out the canvas. It looked almost completely covered in

black—especially considering the lack of light currently in the room. Yet there was a small splotch of something brighter right at its center. “You look so sad lately, and I don’t want you to be sad. So, I made you this.”

Beatrice smiled at her little sister. “That is very sweet of you, Frannie.” She glanced down at the canvas once more. “What... is it?”

“A shooting star!” Frannie exclaimed in a burst of exuberance. “I’m not allowed outside at night, so I can’t find you a real one but—”

“And yet you are here,” Beatrice interrupted, grinning at her sister. “Out of bed and in my chamber.”

Grinning mischievously, Francine shrugged, as though the fact that she was out of bed at night was not her fault at all but had simply been brought about by happenstance. “Go ahead. Make a wish.”

Beatrice stilled. “You made this for me so I could make... a wish?”

Francine nodded eagerly. “Yes, so you wouldn’t be so sad anymore.”

Setting the canvas aside, Beatrice held open her arms and hugged her little sister. “Thank you so much. I will treasure it. Always.”

“Don’t forget to make your wish,” Francine reminded her, and Beatrice wished with all her heart that her sister’s words held truth. If only there were some sort of fairy godmother who would grant her a wish. If only she simply needed to scour the night sky for a shooting star and all her problems would be solved.

“Why are you sad?” Francine asked abruptly as she sat back and looked at Beatrice with wide, innocent eyes. “Are you not happy to be having a baby? And Mother says you are to be married, too.”

Beatrice did not quite know where to begin. How did one explain to a five-year-old the confinements of society? The expectations that ruled her life?

“The truth is,” Beatrice simply said, “that I do not wish to be married.”

For a moment, Francine simply looked at her. “Then why do you?”

“Because it is not my choice. Because I am with child, and... I have to be married.” Beatrice closed her eyes, for it felt good to voice her heart’s pain out loud.

“Why do you have to be married to have a baby?”

Beatrice groaned. Of course, she ought to have seen this question coming. In fact, Francine had never met a question she did not like to see answered. “Because... Because people do not like it. Because I cannot raise a child by myself.”

“But you wouldn’t be by yourself,” Francine insisted, a touch of indignation in her voice. “You have us. I’ll help you raise the baby. I’ll feed it and play with it and... and I’ll even share my toys with it.” She gave Beatrice a pointed look, as though she could not believe that Beatrice had not seen this rather simple solution to her problems.

Beatrice chuckled, fighting down tears. “Thank you for your most gracious offer.” If only there were a simple way for her to explain the world to her little sister. Indeed, what Francine had said was true. Why could she not simply raise her child with the help of her family? Why should that ruin them all? It did feel wrong. Yet the world was what it was.

“You said you don’t wish to be married,” Francine reminded her, a quizzical expression upon her face, half-hidden in shadow. “Why? Brides always get lovely presents, and they get to wear a beautiful dress.” She sighed longingly. “And cake. Don’t they have cake at weddings?”

Even though tears streamed down Beatrice’s face, she could not subdue the laughter that rose in her throat. “Yes, I suppose there will be cake, and you shall have the biggest piece. I promise.”

Francine beamed with delight. Yet not even the promise of cake could make her forget her question. “Then why don’t you wish to be married?”

Beatrice heaved a deep sigh. “Because... Because I do not love the one I am to marry.” She brushed a curl behind her sister’s ear. “You’ll understand when you are older. Most people dream of marrying for love, and those that cannot...” She shrugged helplessly, once again overcome by utter sadness.

“Then don’t marry until you find someone you can love.”

Beatrice almost cringed at the sharp pain that shot through her heart. “I thought I had,” she admitted out loud, uncertain whether it was wise to speak to her little sister like this. “Only it turns out he did not love me back.”

“Can you not make him?” Francine frowned. “What makes people love one another?”

Beatrice shrugged, honestly at a loss. “I don’t know. I wish I did.”

“I love you,” Francine told her solemnly, “and I always will.” She sank back into Beatrice’s arms, snuggling close. “I don’t know why he doesn’t love you. You’re so easy to love.”

Beatrice bit her lower lip to hold back the sobs that rose in her throat. She held her little sister tightly, wishing with all her heart and soul she could be five years old again. Indeed, life had been simple then.

Now, though, it seemed to get worse every day.

On the carriage ride home from the ball, Beatrice's parents had informed her that her betrothed was determined to send her to the country after they had been wed. He wished for her to remain there and give birth in secret to avoid the shame of her transgression becoming known to society. With any luck, people would believe that her child had been born early.

Luck? Beatrice wondered. It was an odd thing to say, for she did not feel lucky at all.

CHAPTER 6

A FOOL FOR LOVE



Although Charles loved both his parents dearly, his father had a way of stating his opinion clearly, not leaving any doubt about what he thought was the right course of action. His mother, on the other hand, was different. While Charles did not doubt that his mother, too, possessed clear opinions, she rarely voiced them in a way that made others feel obliged to share them.

And so, the morning after the Atwood ball, Charles sought his mother in the drawing room. “Do you have a moment?” he inquired, closing the door behind him. “There is something I wish to ask you?”

His mother eyed him curiously but with a mischievous twinkle in her pale eyes. “It seems to be something secretive,” she remarked, glancing back at the closed door. “Those are my most favorite conversations. Come. Sit.” She settled herself into one of the armchairs by the fire while Charles took the other. “What is on your mind, dear? Is it about Miss Hartley?”

That was another thing about his mother. She had an uncanny ability to read people’s thoughts, knowing precisely what lived in their hearts and minds.

Charles nodded. “It is,” he admitted freely. “What do you know of her?”

For a moment, his mother remained quiet, and her pale eyes shifted in a way that Charles almost thought he could see the cogs in her head turning. “Well, as you are aware, she is the eldest daughter to Lord and Lady Benton. She has a younger sister who goes by the name of Francine. As far as I know, the girl’s only five years old.” She tilted her head sideways, her eyes slightly narrowing as she watched him. “And she is set to marry a Mr. Jonathan Carter in a matter of days.”

Charles felt an icy lump settle in his stomach, every muscle in his body tensing at the prospect.

“Mr. Carter and Lord Benton know each other from their time at school. Mr. Carter was married to his first wife for the past few decades and lost her only a few years past to a sudden fever. From the way people speak, he loved her dearly and never quite overcame her loss.”

A part of Charles wondered how his mother had obtained all this information in a single night. Yet she had always had her ways. “Then why would he marry Miss Hartley now?” he thought out loud. “From what you just said, I would’ve suspected him determined to remain a widower. Does he... Does he need an heir?” Indeed, asking that question felt almost painful.

Holding his gaze, his mother shook her head. “He does not. He has three grown sons.”

Charles frowned. “It sounds like a marriage of convenience, does it not?”

His mother nodded. “More than that,” she murmured, holding his gaze as though waiting for him to draw his own conclusions.

Charles sat back, a jolt going through his body. “Do you think...?” He shook his head, disbelief echoing through his body. “Do you think her marriage is meant to cover some sort of... scandal?” Although Charles had spent most of his life far from English society, his parents had often spoken to their children of the rules that governed the world they came from.

“I would not be surprised if it were so,” his mother agreed. Her gaze softened, and she looked at him in the way parents often did when they found themselves astounded to see their children grown up. “Why do you ask?”

Charles exhaled a deep breath. He knew his father would advise him to forget about Miss Hartley, especially under the circumstances. Yet every fiber of Charles’s being told him it would be a monumental mistake. “Can I ask you for a favor?” he said, instead of answering his mother’s question.

Smiling at him, she nodded. “Always.”

“Can you find out which function Miss Hartley will attend next and assure that we shall be invited also?”

Instead of once more inquiring after his motives, his mother merely nodded. “I shall see to it.”

Charles exhaled a breath of relief. “Thank you.”

That very night, Charles and Henry accompanied their parents to the ball of an old friend of theirs. As a young boy, Charles had even played with Lord Wilton’s son; though he could not remember it. Still, as he set foot inside

their townhouse, vague memories returned.

“Welcome back on English shores,” Lord Wilton exclaimed, grasping Charles’s father’s hand. “It’s good to have you back.”

Charles’s father laughed. “Though it won’t be for long, I assure you. We find that a warmer climate suits us better.”

“How is dear Elizabeth?” Lady Wilton inquired, a compassionate expression in her brown eyes. “Is she any better?”

Charles’s mother shook her head. “The doctors agree that there is no way to cure her affliction; yet near the sea in southern Europe, she’s a changed child.” A deep smile shone upon her face, and Charles remembered how worried his parents had been after Lizzie had been born and the doctors had prophesied that she would not live long.

Yet they had found a way, and deep down, Charles had come to believe that no matter what, there was *always* a way.

Excusing himself, Charles ventured into the ballroom, his gaze sweeping the many guests in attendance. “You’re looking for her again, aren’t you?” his brother remarked with a chuckle. “What is so special about her?”

Charles looked at his brother then shrugged. “I don’t know. Everything.”

Laughing, Henry slapped his shoulder. “If you say so.” Then he caught sight of a group of young gentlemen, friends he had made only the night before, and was soon lost from sight.

Of course, Charles did not mind in the least. After all, he was on a mission of his own. First, though, he needed to find Miss Hartley. That, unfortunately, proved difficult. While he eventually spotted her parents as well as Mr. Carter, there seemed to be no sign of Miss Hartley herself.

As Charles ventured from one side of the ballroom to the other, peeking down darkened corridors, he feared that perhaps Miss Hartley was not in attendance tonight. Had something prevented her? Perhaps a headache or—?

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles suddenly caught a glimpse of her. It was only a second. She was there and then gone. Yet every cell in his body knew that it had been her.

Quickening his steps, Charles hurried after her. He left the ballroom behind and hastened down the corridor. Women were walking in and out of the powder room to his right, their voices almost deafening in the comparative quiet of the hallway. Yet Miss Hartley seemed to have another destination in mind, for she quickly slipped past the powder room the moment no one was nearby.

Charles hung back, wondering where she was going. He could only see the back of her head and wondered if, once again, her heart was in peril. Was she in tears? Was she fleeing the ballroom to find solitude?

Turning around another corner, Charles saw her slip into a quiet alcove. From everything he had learned from his parents, he understood a young woman ought not be venturing along darkened corridors unchaperoned. If she were found, it could severely damage her reputation.

As though on cue, voices drifted closer. A group of young men was making their way down the corridor and straight toward where Miss Hartley was hiding.

Charles's heart sped up, his muscles tensing, before he rushed forward, ready to intercept them. Yet what ought he say? He had never been as nimble-witted as his brother, only that did not matter now. If he had to make a fool of himself in order to protect her, he would.

"I'm afraid you cannot be here," Charles stated the moment the group of young men came around the corner. They drew up short, surprised to see him, laughter dying on their lips. "This area is off-limits to guests." He squared his shoulders, meeting their eyes unflinchingly, praying that this would work.

Only a few steps behind him, he thought to hear Miss Hartley draw in a sharp breath, and he prayed she would stay where she was and not suddenly dash out of the alcove.

"Is that so?" one of the young men challenged, and rather belatedly, Charles recognized him as Lord Wilton's son, his former playmate of childhood days long gone. "Who says so?"

Charles cleared his throat, wishing in that moment he had taken the time to refamiliarize himself with Lord Wilton and his family. "My name is Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne," he replied, holding the young man's gaze. "My parents are Lord and Lady Whickerton."

At his parents' title, a spark of recognition lit up the other man's eyes, and Charles felt utter relief wash over him. Though it did not automatically solve his problem, perhaps Lord Wilton's son—Edward, as far as Charles recalled—would grant him this favor.

"It has been some time," Edward—if that was indeed his name—replied with a nod. "My father said that your family recently returned to these shores." He cast a questioning gaze past Charles's shoulder at the alcove before flashing him a bit of a teasing smile. "Welcome back, Charlie."

Indeed, *Charlie* did ring a bell, and a vague image of chasing a dark-haired boy down these very corridors entered Charles's mind. "Thank you."

For a moment, none of them said a word, and Charles raked his mind for something to say, some excuse that would send them back in the direction they had come. Edward still eyed him most curiously while the other three men continued to look back and forth between them, clearly aware that something was going on.

"So," Edward began, an oddly familiar looking smirk on his face, "why are you trying to get rid of us?" His brows rose teasingly, and once again, he glanced past Charles's shoulder. "Let me guess," he continued before Charles could attempt any sort of reply. "You are in the company of a young lady and wish for a moment of intimate solitude with her." He grinned widely. "Am I correct?"

Worried that Miss Hartley might hear every word they were saying, Charles felt mortified at the innuendo in his childhood friend's words. Still, what else could he give by way of explanation?

And so, Charles nodded, unable to utter a single word.

Edward laughed good-naturedly then slapped his shoulder. "It's good to have you back. Don't be a stranger, you hear?" Then he stepped back and nodded to his friends, gesturing for them to return to the ballroom. "Good luck," Edward called over his shoulder, another one of those smirks upon his face.

Charles exhaled a deep breath, every inch of him trembling, every inch of him in disbelief that this had truly worked. Indeed, penning words to paper with the time and leisure to think each and every one through had always come easily to Charles yet speaking words in the heat of the moment and making them coherent and rational and compelling eluded him. In truth, Charles knew it had been luck instead of competence that had saved him this night.

Still, it did not matter. All that mattered was that Miss Hartley had remained undiscovered.

Exhaling a deep breath, Charles turned around and carefully approached the alcove. "It is all right, Miss Hartley," he said quietly, hoping his words would reassure her. "It is safe to come out."

CHAPTER 7

OF DAYS GONE BY



Beatrice's heart pounded in her chest, making her feel certain that her rib cage would crack at any moment. Her breath came fast as she stared through the small gap in the curtain, her feet rooted to the spot. Oh, once again, she had been a fool!

Yet back in the ballroom, she had felt tears coming and found herself unable to hold them back. Certain her parents as well as her betrothed would not look kindly upon them, Beatrice had been left with no choice but to flee from the ballroom. She had not known where to go but ran blindly along the corridors. For a moment, she had thought herself safe, a reprieve from the drone of the many voices in the ballroom, certain all she needed was a few moments to gather her wits before she could return.

Then, however, voices had drawn near—men's voices!—and every muscle in Beatrice's body had tightened in terror. Suddenly, being found crying in the ballroom had not been the worst she could have imagined. Indeed, if she were found out here in the darkened corridor with a group of young men...

Beatrice pinched her eyes shut, unwilling to imagine her parents' reaction, Mr. Carter's reaction, the *ton's* reaction.

And then another voice joined the others.

A voice that had rang with vague familiarity.

Holding her breath, Beatrice bit her lip, listening intently, trying to make out the words as a distant murmur drifted to her ears. For a second, she wondered if perhaps she could slip away while the others—whoever they were—were distracted. Yet those who faced the alcove would easily spot her if she were to try to make her escape. And so, despite her trembling nerves,

Beatrice remained where she was.

“So, why are you trying to get rid of us?” one of the young men inquired of the man with the familiar voice, who stood with his back to the alcove, his face hidden from her. “Let me guess. You are in the company of a young lady and wish for a moment of intimate solitude with her. Am I correct?”

At the man’s suggestion, Beatrice’s hands curled into the curtain of the alcove, her body trembling with outrage and fear. And then, to her even greater shock, the man with the familiar voice nodded.

Beatrice stared at him. How could she not? She did not even know who he was. She did not even—

Her mind reeled when she—rather belatedly!—realized that the man had to be aware of her presence in the alcove. Indeed, had he not glanced over his shoulder at one point? Beatrice could not quite recall, her memory too blurred by the rampaging emotions racing through her body at present. Indeed, he had to be aware of her presence. Why else would he have confirmed the other man’s words? Only why had he done so? What motive could he have?

And then the group of young men turned away and headed back toward the ballroom. Beatrice exhaled a breath of relief while her gaze fixed upon the man with a familiar voice... or rather the back of his head. If only she could—

The moment he turned, Beatrice recognized him.

It was none other than Viscount Hawthorne, Lord and Lady Whickerton’s son, the man who had been so insistent upon making her acquaintance the night before. What could he possibly want? Beatrice wondered in panic. Then she shrank back, deeper into the alcove, when Lord Hawthorne took a step toward it.

“It is all right, Miss Hartley,” he said in a soft voice, barely louder than a whisper. Again, he cast a look over his shoulder, back toward the ballroom. “It is safe to come out.”

For a long moment, Beatrice merely stared at him through the gap in the curtain, unable to move. Yet as she slowly drew air into her body, taking one deep breath after another, she realized she did not have a choice. After all, she could not spend the rest of the evening here. Other people could come upon her. Her parents would eventually miss her. All kinds of things could happen that would see her ruined. No, she had to step outside. At least, for the moment, there was only Lord Hawthorne there.

Tears still clung to Beatrice’s eyes as she slipped through the curtain back

into the hallway. Her gaze remained fixed upon Lord Hawthorne's face, trying to gauge his intention. He had to know what would happen if they were found here together.

Alone.

Why was he still here? What did he want? She wished he would simply leave so she could return to the ballroom. At the same time, Beatrice knew that she was far from presentable. If she returned now, everyone would see her distress, her heartbreak, her despair. No, somehow, she had to calm herself first. Yet how could she do so with him watching her?

"I know a place where no one will find you," Lord Hawthorne said suddenly, his voice still soft, his words barely making themselves heard. "Come. I'll show you." He took a step to the side and gestured for her to follow him.

For a moment, Beatrice hesitated. Yet when Lord Hawthorne moved down the hallway, her feet carried her after him as though of their own volition. After all, what choice did she have? She could not stay here, and neither could she return to the ballroom like this. Even in this very moment, Beatrice could feel fresh sobs rising in her throat, her lips pressing together so hard to keep them at bay she was certain she would see them bruised.

Silently, they followed the long corridor and then turned a corner. Farther down on the right side, Lord Hawthorne opened a door and then beckoned her inside. Again, Beatrice hesitated yet for only a moment. Then she stepped after him, her eyes sweeping over the darkened chamber, recognizing it as a small sitting room in the back of the house, tall windows allowing a glimpse of the star-spangled night sky.

As the door closed, Beatrice spun around to find Lord Hawthorne on the inside. Perhaps she had been a fool to think that he would leave. "What do you want?" Beatrice demanded, her hands trembling as she eased backward.

At the tone of suspicion of her voice, Lord Hawthorne flinched, the shocked expression that came to his face reassuring Beatrice even more than the words he spoke next. "I assure you, you've nothing to fear for me. I am merely here to stand guard, to keep you safe." He retreated a step until he stood with his back to the door, as far away as possible from her.

For a long moment, they looked at one another, and then Beatrice nodded. "Thank you," she murmured because it felt appropriate to say so. Despite her suspicions, he had done nothing to harm her. Had he truly sent those men away in order to keep her safe? Had that been his motive? Did gentlemen

exist, after all?

“If need be,” Lord Hawthorne said with a nod toward a wooden panel on the right, “if anyone comes upon us here, you can escape through there. It is a secret passage that leads back out into the corridor farther down, closer to the ballroom. No one will see you. I shall stay behind and distract whoever might come.” He still stood with his back pressed to the door, an almost apologetic expression in his eyes as though any of what had happened tonight was his fault.

Beatrice nodded in acknowledgment of his words. “Thank you,” she said once more, for there was truly nothing else to be said, was there?

A stifling stillness fell over the chamber, and Beatrice felt her limbs grow heavy... and her heart as well. Her eyes closed, and for a brief moment, she swayed upon her feet.

“Are you all right?” came Lord Hawthorne’s concerned voice. “Perhaps you ought to seat yourself.”

When Beatrice opened her eyes, she saw he had taken a step toward her, his gaze watchful, his expression concerned. “I... I hardly know,” Beatrice admitted with a heavy sigh. Tears welled up in her eyes once more, and she felt them spill over and stream down her face, more chasing upon their heels. Instantly, she spun around, turning her back to him, not wishing him to see. Heavy sobs rose from her throat, and Beatrice all but sank forward, resting her forehead against the wall, her hands balled into fists as they came to rest against the smooth wallpaper.

“Please, what can I do?” Lord Hawthorne whispered, such a pleading and almost desperate tone in his voice that for a moment Beatrice thought he was the one in pain.

“Leave,” she managed to say, unable to move, frozen in this moment. “Please, leave me alone. Please, go.”

One moment stretched into another before Lord Hawthorne spoke again. “I’m sorry, but I cannot do that. Please, let me help you.”

Beatrice heard him move closer, the sound of his footsteps sending an icy chill down her back. Perhaps she was being foolish again, allowing herself to be trapped in a situation like this with a man she did not know, alone and far away from the ballroom. She remembered the night Eugene had asked her for a stroll beneath the stars. She had been in love with him from the first moment they had met, and so it had been only too easy to ignore that voice of warning in her head. The cold had soon driven them back inside, and

somehow, they had found their way to a darkened, empty chamber. It had been a ball at his townhouse, and he had assured her that no one would find them. He had spoken the most wonderful words, whispered them to her, and Beatrice had felt swept away by the moment, by the love in her heart.

Now Beatrice knew that her mother had been right all along. Apparently, young men did say whatever was necessary in order to seduce a young lady they desired. And it had been no more than desire, had it? He did not care for her. Not truly. Not beyond that one night.

“Who broke your heart?”

At the sound of Lord Hawthorne’s voice, Beatrice spun around, finding him standing only two arm’s length away. “How do you...?” Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she exhaled a deep breath. “How do you know?”

A sad smile came to his face, and he shrugged. “It is easy to see,” he replied, holding her gaze gently. “Is it Lord Strumpton?” Beatrice started, and he added, “I saw the way you looked at him, the way he ignored you.” As he spoke, the words seemed to cause him almost physical pain, the expression upon his face anguished.

Panic seized Beatrice’s heart. If Lord Hawthorne had seen so easily, did everyone else know as well?

“Do not worry,” Lord Hawthorne assured her. “No one knows, and I promise I will not breathe a word to anyone of what happened here tonight.” He held her gaze, and Beatrice was shocked to realize that she believed him.

“Thank you,” she said again, knowing that these two little words fell far short of what he had done for her tonight.

He nodded in acknowledgment. “Do you wish to speak about it?” he asked carefully, clearly having no intention of leaving her alone.

Oddly enough, Beatrice no longer wanted him to leave. Somehow, his presence eased her breathing, made her feel less alone. And as unwise as it was, yes, Beatrice did want to speak about it. “I cannot.” She closed her eyes and once more turned away.

Behind her, Lord Hawthorne inhaled a slow breath, and she all but sensed his conflict. “I should call him out,” he said unexpectedly, anger in his voice.

Whirling around, Beatrice stared at him. “What?” She shook her head, trying to clear it, wondering if she had misunderstood. “You cannot!”

Lord Hawthorne’s eyes narrowed, and he inched a step toward her. “Why not? He hurt you. I know he did.” A muscle in his jaw tensed, and Beatrice marveled at the anger she saw in his face. Why did he care?

“He did,” she finally admitted, and speaking those words out loud somehow did ease the ache in her heart. “Yet I cannot allow you to risk your life for me. It would be foolish, and it would change nothing.” She held his gaze and saw his shoulders slump, his anger fading, replaced by something more rational, something gentler.

Lord Hawthorne’s eyes blazed beneath the moonlight, a blue flame of intensity smoldering deep within. Beatrice could read a fierce determination in his gaze that was tempered only by an unexpected compassion. Tall and proud, he stood before her, but with no sense of superiority. In that moment, he appeared to Beatrice like a knight of days gone by, brandishing his sword and ready to fight for her honor. “Perhaps not,” he said in reply to her objection. “Yet no one has the right to hurt you.” His gaze remained fixed upon hers. “No one.”

Beatrice felt her lips begin to tremble, tears once more blurring her vision. “It is not only his fault,” she said honestly. “I allowed myself to be fooled. I was gullible and careless.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then she moved over to the windows, her gaze seeking the stars’ faint light. “I should’ve known better.” She hung her head, and her tears dripped down onto her folded hands.

Again, one moment stretched into another before Lord Hawthorne spoke again. “Why are you to marry Mr. Carter? It is not your wish, is it?”

My wish? Beatrice thought, remembering the small image of a shooting star Francine had painted for her. *What would be my wish?*

Slowly, Beatrice turned to meet Lord Hawthorne’s eyes. “It is not.”

He nodded, looking down at her. “Why then?”

Beatrice knew she should not answer. In fact, she should not remain here with him a moment longer. Still, her feet would not move. Her lips, though, did.

CHAPTER 8

HEART TO HEART



Tears glistened in her eyes and stained her cheeks, and the way Miss Hartley stood before him made Charles fear she might crumble to the floor at any moment. She looked so broken and hurt, her strength waning, that every cell in his body ached to protect her, to guard her from the ugliness of the world, from those who would seek to betray her.

“I am with child.” The moment the words left her lips, her eyes widened in shock, and her hands flew up to cover her mouth as though the movement could draw them back and hide them from him.

Utterly focused on her, Charles felt his own emotions delayed. At first, he simply heard her words, then slowly he understood their meaning. Yet it took a heartbeat or two for him to experience a measure of shock as well as disappointment and anger.

And... jealousy.

Of course, he was angry that Lord Strumpton had taken advantage of her so cruelly. Of course, he felt disappointment because a child meant marriage, did it not? Was that not precisely why her parents had rushed to secure another match? And... yes, a part of him loathed the thought that another had won her heart.

Still staring at him, Miss Hartley made an agonizing sound deep in her throat before her knees gave out. In the blink of an eye, she slumped down, her eyes closing as though in defeat, in surrender.

Charles experienced that moment delayed once more, to his senses it was as though time had slowed, allowing him to see and hear and feel everything.

Allowing him to close that last step between them and pull her into his arms before she hit the floor.

Gently, he picked her up, marveling at the almost weightless feeling of her in his arms, and settled her upon the settee. He sat down beside her, surprised when she did not pull away but rested her head on his shoulder. Her eyes closed as tears rushed down her cheeks. Sobs fell from her lips, and he felt her fingers curl into his jacket, holding on, desperation clinging to her like a heavy blanket.

For a long time, they simply sat there, and Charles held her as she wept. He murmured words of comfort, doubting that she had heard any of them. Yet he wished for her to know that she was not alone. No matter what he would have to do to see her smile, Charles knew he would not hesitate. One day, he promised himself, he would see a true, genuine, utterly bewitching smile come to her face.

Indeed, never had he seen her smile. Never had he heard her laugh. He had only met her the day before, and yet she already meant the world to him.

Charles almost laughed at the notion. Even in his addled mind, it struck him as ludicrous. Yet there were people who fell in love within the space of mere moments, were there not? Indeed, his parents were those kind of people. To this day, his father delighted in telling them the story of how their mother had whispered to her best friend only moments after first laying eyes on him that he would be the one she would marry. *She* had known. But how? Perhaps no one quite knew how. Perhaps it simply did not matter, as long as one was certain.

"I thought he loved me as well," Beatrice murmured once her sobs had died down; yet she did not retreat, her head still resting against his shoulder. "He said so. He said we would have a future together." A heavy sigh drifted from her lips. "Yet truth be told, he never spoke of marriage. I simply assumed I suppose. I..." Another heavy sigh. "When I told him that... I was with child, he said he was obligated to marry another. He said... it broke his heart."

Charles's arm tightened upon her shoulders, holding her closer, anger welling up once more. How dare Lord Strumpton treat a sweet girl like Miss Hartley like that?

"He lied," Beatrice continued, the tone in her voice distant, as though she was barely aware of his presence. "He was not heartbroken. I could see it in his face." She shifted, raised her chin and looked up at him. "He never loved me. I was a fool to believe him."

Her eyes closed, and a deep breath passed her lips. Then she straightened,

and Charles was forced to remove his arm from around her shoulders. Her eyes shone in a deep blue, overshadowed with pain and anguish. He also saw a touch of shyness, of reproach, as though she felt ashamed for having allowed him to hold her. “Now, I am to marry Mr. Carter.” Her lower lip trembled, and she folded her hands in her lap. “He... He made it quite clear that I was to do nothing that would bring shame to his family.” A slightly hysterical chuckle fell from her lips as her gaze moved from Charles to the closed door and back. “Quite obviously, I have a talent for finding trouble.”

Pushing to her feet, Miss Hartley swayed briefly, so that Charles jumped up, holding out his hands to her. “No, I’m all right. Thank you.” She tried to smile at him, yet it fell far short of the kind of smile Charles hoped to see. “Will you... will you please help me return to the ballroom?” She wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks, then she cleared her throat, struggling to regain her composure.

Charles knew that he simply ought to do as she had asked. Yet if he let her go now, he would lose her for good. She would marry Mr. Carter and spend the rest of her life in misery. He was certain of it. No, he had come here tonight on a mission of his own, and he would see it through.

Nothing had changed. His heart still beat for her, and that was all that mattered.

“Marry me,” Charles blurted out without preamble, without any sort of lead-up or explanation.

Miss Hartley stilled, her eyes going wide as she stared into his face. “Pardon me?” she murmured, her eyes blinking furiously as though she wondered if she was even truly awake. “What did you say?”

Charles swallowed hard, straightening his shoulders. “I asked you to marry me.” He held her gaze, needing her to know that he meant what he had said.

Another heartbeat passed, and Miss Hartley continued to stare at him. “You cannot mean that,” she exclaimed then, shaking her head in denial. “No, you cannot.” Her gaze narrowed, suspicion there now. “What are you playing at?” Almost fearful, she backed away.

Charles held up his hands to show that he meant her no harm. “I do mean every word I said,” he said slowly. “I wish to marry you.”

“You cannot. I just told you I—” She broke off, her eyes unblinking. “Why would you...?” Again, she shook her head.

“Because you deserve better,” Charles assured her, afraid that she would

deny him, knowing deep in his bones that if he were to allow her to walk out of his life, he would regret it forever. “I promise, if you agree to marry me, I vow to keep you safe, you and your child, and to do my utmost to see you happy again.” He inhaled a deep breath and took a step backward. “Of course, it is your decision. Though I urge you to think on it. Please.”

As though lightning had struck her, Miss Hartley stared at him, disbelief in her eyes. Yet there was no more fear, no more suspicion, and Charles was grateful for it. He had done what he came here to do, now he could only hope that she would accept him.

CHAPTER 9

A MOMENT OF HOPE



“You need to stop walking off on your own,” Beatrice’s mother chided her upon their return home that night. Of course, her absence had been noted. “We had a hard time convincing Mr. Carter,” she exchanged a look with her husband, “that you were not doing anything untoward, that you were merely in the powder room, possibly delayed because of all the many guests in attendance tonight.” Her mother’s gaze drilled into hers. “You need to pull yourself together, Beatrice. All our future depends on it.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice replied before hurrying up the stairs to her chamber. More than anything, she wished to be alone, her emotions hung by a thread the very moment people crowded around her.

With a heavy sigh, she closed the door and leaned against it. Even now, Beatrice could not believe that Lord Hawthorne had offered to marry her. Yet in her mind’s eye, she still saw the honest expression upon his face. Indeed, he had meant what he had said, had he not?

Beginning to pace, Beatrice reminded herself that she ought never have told him the truth. Indeed, he had caught her in a moment of weakness, and now he knew her darkest secret. If he wished, he could ruin her. Yet instead, he had offered to save her.

Beatrice was certain that any other man would have been appalled to learn her secret. After all, Lord Hawthorne could not have guessed what it was when he had found her in tears. Who knew what he thought had upset her? Still, recalling the moment she had foolishly shared her secret, Beatrice knew she had not seen judgment or disgust upon his face. No, there had been fury there, outrage. Only they had not been directed at her but at Lord

Strumpton... because he had dared hurt her.

Again and again, Beatrice's mind replayed the moments she had shared with Lord Hawthorne, and even when her head finally hit the pillow, she was no closer to knowing what to do. She could not even contemplate it, for her mind continued to argue that he could not have possibly meant what he had said. Even if he had in that moment, come morning, he would change his mind. He was the heir to his father's title, and he could not marry a woman who carried another man's child. No gentleman would do so.

No lord would do so.

"Are you already sleeping?"

At Francine's whispered voice, Beatrice flinched. She had not even heard the door open, nor her sister tiptoe across the floor toward her bed. Yet when her eyes flew open, Francine stood right beside her, her eyes glowing in the dark like two stars. "What are you doing out of bed again?"

Francine shrugged and then nimbly scrambled up onto the bed, slipping under the blanket beside Beatrice. "I heard Mother and Father arguing," she said simply. "What happened? Did you do something to upset them?" Eagerness rang in her voice, and Beatrice knew her sister was hoping for a good story.

Pulling Francine into her arms, Beatrice replied, "No, nothing happened. It was a ball like any other."

Francine giggled. "You're lying," she declared triumphantly as she scrambled back up into a sitting position. "Tell me. Tell me."

Exhausted, Beatrice swung her right arm over her eyes. "I felt sad again tonight," Beatrice said honestly, "and so I walked away from the ballroom to be by myself for a bit. Mother and Father did not like that."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And then? What happened then?" Francine pressed, her hands reaching out to pull Beatrice's arm away from her face. "I can hear in your voice that there's more. Tell me."

Beatrice chuckled. Somehow, her little sister always made her feel a little better. "Well, if you must know," she murmured into the half-dark, "a... a friend asked me to marry him." Briefly, Beatrice wondered if the word *friend* was appropriate. After all, she had met Lord Hawthorne only the day before. Yet the way he had acted today had clearly revealed him as a friend, an ally, someone who stood at her side.

Excitedly, Francine clapped her hands together. “Oh, what friend? Do I know him?” Then she frowned. “I thought you were supposed to marry Father’s old friend.” She paused then her frown deepened. “Is your friend old, too?”

Beatrice chuckled again. “No, he is not.” From the look of him, he was merely a few years older than her.

“What’s he like? Is he nice?”

Beatrice nodded. “Yes, he is nice. He helped me tonight and kept me safe. And he...” Staring up at the dark ceiling above her bed, Beatrice remembered the look in his eyes. “He acted very honorably.” She grinned at her sister. “Like a knight from the ancient stories.”

Again, Francine clapped her hands together in delight. “He sounds great. Marry him. I would if I were you.”

Marry him. Francine’s words continued to echo through Beatrice’s mind all night. She barely slept a wink, and when morning came, she was still uncertain about what to do. Truth be told, Lord Hawthorne was a kind man and... and she liked him. Yet did that give her the right to be selfish? Would he not eventually come to regret his generous offer?

Knowing that time was short, Beatrice decided to put this question to her parents. And so, with Francine painting in the small studio her parents had set up for her, Beatrice forced herself to step into her father’s study after breakfast. Her mother was there as well, and from the few words she overheard, she knew they were discussing her upcoming marriage to Mr. Carter.

“There is something I need to speak to you about,” Beatrice said outright, closing the door firmly behind her. “There’s something I would appreciate your advice on.”

Her parents frowned, a touch of apprehension upon both their faces. Clearly, they were expecting nothing good.

Was what she had to say good news? Honestly, Beatrice could not say. “Last night, at the ball, I received a proposal.”

“A proposal?” her mother exclaimed, exchanging a rather dumbfounded expression with her father. “From Lord Strumpton?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, not from him. From... someone else.”

“Who?” her father inquired, seating himself on the edge of his desk, his gaze fixed upon her. “Who would propose to you without speaking to your parents first?” He looked at his wife. “This sounds very untoward.”

“I do not wish to say,” Beatrice replied, uncertain why she was keeping Lord Hawthorne’s identity a secret. Was it perhaps because a small part of her still doubted him? Indeed, would she soon receive a letter informing her that he had made a mistake? It was far from unthinkable.

Her mother’s jaw dropped. “Why?” Her gaze narrowed, deep suspicion in her eyes. “Was it someone... disreputable?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, he is a most respectable man, heir to an earldom.” In a few words, Beatrice explained to her parents how she had first met this respectable man two nights ago, how kind he had been and how distraught she had felt. She told them honestly that she had revealed her secret to him and how he had reacted.

“You’re a fool!” her mother huffed, spinning in circles, not quite knowing where to go with her anger. “He could ruin us! He could ruin us all!”

“That was far from wise, my dear,” Beatrice’s father agreed, shaking his head at her, clearly disappointed. “I hope you know that.”

Beatrice nodded, wringing her hands. “I do. I assure you. I do. Yet,” she looked from her mother to her father, “what am I to do? He is kind and—”

“I’ll tell you what to do,” her mother interrupted, her right forefinger lifted in warning. “You will wed Mr. Carter. Do you hear me? And you will tell this *respectable man* that you cannot marry him.”

Beatrice closed her eyes, surprised how heavy her heart felt. “But why?”

“Don’t be foolish again,” her mother snapped. “He probably did not mean it anyhow. What gentleman in his right mind offers to marry a woman carrying another man’s child?” She scoffed. “Besides, marrying Mr. Carter will ensure that your reputation remains intact. As long as a scandal is avoided, what does it matter who you marry?”

“Your mother is right,” her father agreed, his expression tense. “Mr. Carter was kind enough to agree to my request. We cannot dishonor his generosity by refusing him now. Do you understand?”

Beatrice nodded. “Yes, I understand.” Yet deep down, Beatrice knew that the reason she could not marry Lord Hawthorne was not her reputation or the risk to it if he were to change his mind. No, it was because he deserved better. Was that not what he had said to her the night before? Indeed, it was. And so did he. He deserved someone who loved him with all her heart, and if she allowed him to do this for her now, he would undoubtedly come to regret it one day.

Still, for a moment, it had felt good to have hope.

CHAPTER 10

THE MEANING OF LOVE



“**T**here will never be snow, will there?” Lizzie pouted, arms crossed in front of her little chest as she glared at the gray skies outside the windows. “I want snow.” She turned to look over her shoulder at him, as though Charles could simply snap his fingers and make it happen.

If only, he thought. “Patience,” he counseled his little sister as well as himself. “Good things will come to those who wait.”

The scrunched-up expression upon Lizzie’s face told him quite clearly that she did not care for his advice. With another disappointed huff, she left the drawing room, grumbling under her breath.

“You look distracted today,” Charles’s mother remarked from her seat by the fireplace. “Is there anything on your mind?”

Somehow, Charles could not shake the feeling that his mother already knew. “I asked Miss Hartley to marry me,” he blurted out, once again not bothering to hide anything from his mother. She probably truly knew already, and he also cherished her advice.

“You did what?” came his father’s shocked voice from the doorway. His eyes were wide, and after a moment, he began shaking his head from side to side. “Surely, I must have misunderstood you. You couldn’t possibly have...” As he moved closer, his gaze moved back and forth between his wife and his son.

Charles straightened, aware of the amused curiosity in his mother’s gaze. “I assure you; you did not misunderstand. I offered to marry Miss Hartley last night.”

His father raked his hands through his hair, still staring at him. “Why? Why after only meeting her the day before? Why the rush?” He glanced at his

wife, who sat comfortably in her chair, curiously observing everything.

Charles exhaled a deep breath. "You must give me your word that you will not share what I'm about to say with anyone." He looked from his father to his mother.

While his mother did not hesitate to provide her promise, his father frowned, suspicion coming to his eyes. Then, though, he sighed and nodded. "Very well. You have my word."

Charles swallowed. "It is as I suspected," he told his parents. "Miss Hartley is to marry Mr. Carter in order to prevent a scandal." He gritted his teeth, seeing the tension upon his father's face grow. "She's with child."

For a moment, Charles feared his father might explode, his face turning a shade of dark red that looked alarming. However, before he could say or do anything, Charles's mother simply asked, "Is the child Lord Strumpton's?"

"It is. She thought herself on the brink of matrimony and so..." He shrugged.

His father exhaled a deep breath then met his eyes. "Charles, I can see that you care for her, but that is not a reason to marry someone. Surely you must know this."

"I am not a child," Charles insisted, knowing very well that he was acting irrationally. Yet he could not help himself. Neither could he explain his actions in any way that would convince his father. Charles knew so. "I... I love her," he finally said, feeling an odd rush of warmth well up in his chest at saying so out loud. Indeed, he had known from the first moment, and yet speaking the words somehow felt different.

His father laughed, a shocked sound, not one meant to ridicule. "How can you love her? You don't even know her." He shook his head. "And what of her? Does she love you?"

Charles gritted his teeth, knowing his answer only provided his father with further argument.

"I saw the way she kept looking at Lord Strumpton," his father replied, his voice now gentler. "She cares for him, does she not? And she would marry him if only he were to propose." He moved closer and placed his hands upon Charles's shoulders, meeting his eyes. "You are not her choice. Please, understand. Do not throw your life away. It is a miserable fate to be married to a woman who loves another."

Charles swallowed hard. "Perhaps... Perhaps her heart will change."

"And what if not?" his father challenged. "And what of your heart? What

if your heart changes? What if you sacrifice your life for this girl only to realize that what you feel right now is only an infatuation? You are young. How can you even know what love is?"

A spark of resentment flashed in Charles's heart. Yet before he could say anything, he heard his mother chuckling.

"Something amusing, dear?" Charles's father asked, looking at his wife through slightly narrowed eyes.

She smiled at him. "Indeed, darling, you are most amusing."

Relaxing, Charles grinned and faced his father once more, all resentment now gone. "Tell me, Father, how long did it take you to know that you loved Mother?" He lifted his brows challengingly.

Suddenly tightlipped, his father shook his head, then exchanged another one of those meaningful looks with his wife. "I don't want you to get hurt," he mumbled on a sigh, looking from his wife to his son. "Of course, though, this is your choice."

A knock came on the door, and their butler entered, carrying a silver platter with a letter upon it. "For you, my lord," he said, holding it out to Charles.

Inhaling a deep breath, Charles took it, his hands trembling. He did not recognize the handwriting. How could he? In his heart, though, he knew this letter was from Miss Hartley.

Lord Hawthorne,

I thank you for your kindness, yet I am afraid I must refuse your most generous offer. It would not be right for me to place this burden upon you. Still, I shall never forget the kindness you showed me.

Yours sincerely,

Beatrice Hartley

In a single heartbeat, all hope vanished, and Charles sank heavily into one of the armchairs. He did not even resist when his father took the letter from his limp fingers.

“At least the girl shows some sense,” his father remarked dryly, then passed the letter to his wife. “I am deeply sorry for your heartbreak, Son, but I cannot pretend that I am not relieved at this outcome.” He stepped closer and placed a hand upon Charles’s shoulder, squeezing it affectionately. “I believe, someday soon, you shall come to understand.”

Charles hung his head, unwilling to listen to his father’s words. Indeed, he much preferred the gentle regret he saw in his mother’s eyes.

CHAPTER II

A CHOICE OF ONE'S OWN



Standing in her bedchamber, Beatrice watched as her mother instructed the maids on what to pack for their imminent departure to the country. In only two days, Beatrice would find herself married to Mr. Carter. Everything had been arranged, a special license procured through the influence of a friend. Still, everything felt not quite real, as though Beatrice somehow drifted upon the edge of waking from a dream.

As hard as she tried, though, she remained stuck in it.

“Pardon me, my lady.” Their butler stood in the doorway, addressing her mother. “There is a visitor downstairs, asking to speak to Miss Hartley.”

Confused, Beatrice looked at her mother, a matching frown drawing down her brows as well. “A visitor?” her mother questioned, casting a suspicious glance in Beatrice’s direction. “Who is it?”

“Lady Whickerton.”

Beatrice almost flinched at the mention of her name and barely managed to meet her mother’s eyes when she stepped toward her. “Do you know what this is about?” her mother inquired with a frown.

Beatrice shook her head, unable to conjure any words whatsoever.

Her mother sighed. “Well, I suppose we better not keep her waiting. Come along.” Together, they moved downstairs and into the drawing room where Lady Whickerton stood by the window, gazing out at the busy street. As they entered, she turned to smile at them.

“Lady Whickerton, how good to see you,” Beatrice’s mother greeted the other woman. “I admit I’m quite surprised by your visit. Would you care for some tea?”

Lady Whickerton shook her head. “That is too kind of you. However, I

admit I must ask you for a moment to speak with your daughter in private.” Beatrice’s mother’s eyes widened. “I assure you, you need not be concerned. It is a most... pleasant matter.”

The moment Lady Whickerton smiled at her, as though they were in each other’s confidence, Beatrice was certain she was about to faint.

Beatrice’s mother hesitated, considering Lady Whickerton’s request. Then, however, she nodded. “Very well.” With another last look in Beatrice’s direction, she left the drawing room, closing the door behind her.

“Come, my dear. Sit with me.” Lady Whickerton seated herself in one of the armchairs, and after a moment of hesitation, Beatrice chose the other. “I came here today to speak to you. My son informed me of his proposal and also of your rejection of it.”

Beatrice felt the air knocked out of her lungs by Lady Whickerton’s direct approach. Indeed, she would never have expected Lord Hawthorne to speak so openly to his parents. Yet had she, Beatrice, not done so also?

“Is there a question in your words somewhere?” Beatrice inquired, uncertain what had brought Lady Whickerton here today.

The lady smiled, clearly not offended. “Indeed, there is.” She settled herself more comfortably in her chair, and Beatrice felt her pale blue eyes upon her features. “Why did you refuse my son?”

Beatrice inhaled a deep breath. What could she possibly say without betraying her secret? And why on earth did Lady Whickerton care? Had she not been shocked to learn that her son had proposed to a woman he had met only two days prior?

“You need not be worried, my dear,” Lady Whickerton continued when Beatrice remained quiet. “My son shared his reasons for proposing to you.” A meaningful expression rested in the lady’s eyes, and Beatrice gasped, realizing that she knew.

“He... he told you I...?” Words failed Beatrice.

Lady Whickerton leaned forward in her chair, her eyes kind. “Please, do not be alarmed. I promise I shall not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Beatrice’s lips thinned. “Your son promised me the same,” she replied, disappointment heavy in her voice. Had she truly misjudged him? It seemed no one these days could be trusted.

“Do not be angry with him,” Lady Whickerton said gently. “We as a family never keep secrets from one another, only from those outside our home.” A warm smile came to her face. “He did not mean to betray you. He

simply knew that your secret would be safe with us.”

“Why are you here?” Indeed, Beatrice thought it puzzling that Lady Whickerton spoke to her so kindly.

“As I said before, I am here to find out why you refused my son.” Lady Whickerton regarded her curiously. “How deeply do you still feel for Lord Strumpton?”

Caught off guard by the lady’s direct words, Beatrice shrugged. “I thought him to be an entirely different man. Honestly, I don’t quite know how I feel right now.” The words simply poured from her lips, not unlike they had the night before in the presence of the lady’s son. What was it about this family?

“And my son?” Lady Whickerton inquired. “Do you care about him?”

Beatrice shrugged. “I barely know him,” she said honestly. “Yet... I know that he’s one of a kind.” She met the lady’s gaze. “I’ve never met anyone like him.” She closed her eyes. “Had I encountered anyone else that night...” Beatrice heaved a deep sigh. “Why do you wish to know this?”

“Because my son is determined to marry you,” Lady Whickerton replied, and again those pale blue eyes of hers seemed to drill into Beatrice’s soul. “Should you wish to accept him, I’m here to assure you that you have my blessing.”

Utterly dumbfounded, Beatrice stared at Lady Whickerton, wondering what mother would support her son in something like this. Could she perhaps have misunderstood her? “I already sent my answer.”

Lady Whickerton nodded. “Yes, you did. However, I am here to ensure that... your choice was your own. You see, my dear, what is most important in life is that we always remain true to ourselves. Others may advise you, but in the end, this is your life. Your choice.” A warm smile came to her face. “As it is my son’s. I would never dream of taking that from him.”

Tears misted Beatrice’s eyes, and she wondered what it might feel like to have such unconditional support from her parents.

“I can see that this is difficult for you, my dear. However, as I understand it, time is of the essence. You are to be married soon, correct?”

Beatrice nodded.

“Tonight, an hour before midnight,” Lady Whickerton stated calmly, her pale eyes imploring. “I shall send an unmarked carriage to your back gate. You have until then to decide what you want.” She rose to her feet and on her way to the door, paused beside Beatrice’s chair. “Forget what other people

want, what others want you to do. Only ask after your own heart. It shall not lead you astray.”

And then Lady Whickerton was gone, and Beatrice remained behind, completely at a loss. Her sister’s innocent words, *Marry him*, still echoed through her head, and she knew that the thought of marrying her father’s old friend broke her heart. Of course, it would. He did not want her, neither did she want him. With Mr. Carter, there was no chance of finding love, eventually. With Charles, though, there was.

With him, there was a chance, and yet Beatrice knew that choosing Charles would be selfish. After all, a chance was not a guarantee.

CHAPTER 12

IN THE DARK OF NIGHT



Shadows fell over the world as Charles stood in his bedchamber, still one moment and then pacing the next, his mind circling, always returning to one thought in particular: Miss Hartley would be married soon. She would be married soon, and not to him. Perhaps in a day or two or three. In truth, it did not matter. What did matter was that she would be lost to him.

Never before had Charles felt such an agonizing pain deep in his chest. He could barely keep upon his feet, the urge to sink to the floor and weep almost overwhelming. At the same time, though, energy hummed in every muscle, frustration slipping into anger, making him move, making him pace, unable to rid himself of this buzzing hum. What was he to do?

Nothing. There was nothing he could do. She had made her choice, and she had decided against a life with him. Perhaps he ought not be surprised. They did not know each other after all. Yet Charles could not shake that overwhelming certainty that with time they would, and that with time, they would be happy. Was he a fool to believe so?

His father would certainly say so.

A knock upon his door roused Charles from his gloomy thoughts, and with a frown, he turned toward it, wondering who would seek him out this late. Quick strides carried him forward, and he opened the door, surprised to find his mother on the other side.

“Do you have a moment?” she inquired, those watchful eyes of hers tracing every line upon his face.

Charles nodded and stepped aside to allow her entry. “Of course, Mother.” Closing the door, he watched her walk over to the window before turning to look at him. “What is it? Is something wrong?” For a moment, his

heart paused in his chest and his thoughts inevitably drifted to Lizzie.

Soon, they would have to leave England again. Her health demanded it. And Charles never thought that he would be sad to leave it behind. Now, though, the world seemed an utterly different place.

“All is well,” his mother assured him, and Charles exhaled a tense breath. “I have come here to speak to you about Miss Hartley.”

Charles paused in midstep, his eyes narrowing. “Miss Hartley?” He shook his head. “Why?” He cleared his throat, his gaze falling, dropping to the floor beneath his feet, the weight upon his shoulder suddenly increasing. “There’s nothing to say, is there?”

A soft chuckle drifted from his mother’s lips. “Oh, there’s always something to say,” she remarked, amusement tinging her voice. Lifting his head, Charles regarded her most curiously. “Do you care for her?” his mother asked simply.

Taken aback, Charles frowned, moving another step closer. He could not shake the feeling that his mother knew something he did not. “Why would you ask me that? Have I not made it abundantly clear?”

His mother nodded. “So, you still wish to marry her?”

A tingle of excitement trailed down Charles’s spine, and he all but held his breath. “Of course, I do. Why do you ask?” His eyes narrowed in suspicion, hope blossoming in his heart.

A deep smile came to his mother’s face as she stepped toward him and grasped his hands, her pale blue eyes looking up into his. “All I ever wanted was to see you happy,” she whispered, tears misting her eyes despite the smile that lingered. “This is your life, and these choices are your own. No one can make them for you.” She cupped a hand to his cheek. “If she is your choice, then you have my blessing.”

Staring at his mother, Charles felt dizzy, and he forced another breath down his lungs. “What are you saying?”

His mother took his hand and tugged him toward the window. There, she nodded toward a darkened carriage, unmarked, bare of any coat of arms, standing on the other side of the street, half-hidden in shadows. “Everything is arranged,” she told him rather matter-of-factly, as though her interference had not suddenly changed his life. “It will take you to Gretna Green. I sent a messenger ahead to arrange for a quick wedding and a room at the local inn.”

Charles could barely believe his ears. Words failed him completely as he stared down into his mother’s face.

“Don’t worry,” she told him with a bit of a wicked grin. “I shall handle your father as well as Miss Hartley’s parents.” She squeezed his hands. “There’s a bag by the front door with a few of your belongings packed. Take it and go.” Her right eyebrow arched up just a tad. “If she is your choice.”

Charles exhaled a long breath, his hands trembling, and he held his mother’s hands tighter. “She is,” he replied. In truth, there were countless things in life he was uncertain of; yet this one stirred no doubts within his chest. “She is.”

His mother embraced him, holding him tightly for a moment. “Then go and be happy, the both of you.” Chuckling, she gave him a little push. “Be off. I’ll see you in a few days.”

Charles stumbled backwards toward the door, his gaze fixed upon his mother. Countless times, she had impressed him, for the stories he had heard about his parents’ courtship, about his mother securing the happiness of her oldest friend had always made her seem like some sort of fairytale creature granting wishes. As a boy, Charles had wholeheartedly believed that. Perhaps now, it was once again time to believe in fairytales. After all, there was always a way. Why on earth was he so surprised?

“Thank you,” he said, pausing in the doorway. “Thank you for everything.” Then he darted down the stairs to the ground floor, barely remembering to grab the bag his mother had had prepared for him, and dashed out the door toward the waiting carriage.

A stiff wind blew that night, its icy fingers raising goosebumps upon Charles’s skin. He shivered and pulled his coat tighter around his body as he approached the carriage, his heart pounding in his chest. Squinting his eyes, he tried and failed to glimpse Miss Hartley inside, wondering what she was thinking at this moment, what his mother had said to change her mind. He nodded to the coachman, who tipped his hat, and then opened the door.

The interior was dark, no lamp lit, as it was paramount to conceal their presence. Yet Charles’s eyes had grown accustomed to the half-dark of London’s streets, and he could make out the soft outline of her face. “Hello,” he forced from his lips, his throat dry as he climbed into the carriage, dropping the bag onto the seat beside him.

“Hello,” came Miss Hartley’s tentative reply, her voice trembling as much as his own.

Reaching out to close the door, Charles seated himself opposite her, and only a moment later, the carriage rumbled down the street.

Silence stretched between them, their ears attuned to the sounds from outside the carriage. It was the oddest feeling to be seated here together, shrouded in darkness, barely able to make out the other's face. Yet at the same time, they were on their way to be married. Charles felt compelled to speak, to say something to ease the tension. Yet try as he might, his mind could conjure nothing.

And so, the silence continued, grew thicker and heavier as the carriage's wheels kept turning, carrying them away from the life they had known toward a future they could not yet picture.

"Thank you," Miss Hartley said into the stillness. "Thank you for..." Even in the dark, Charles could see her shrug, no doubt overwhelmed as he was by these sudden events.

"There is no need," Charles assured her, grateful to have something to say even if it was nothing truly meaningful. "I assure you, I'm not being selfless." Indeed, he was doing this for himself as much as for her. He was doing this because not doing it would see his own life ruined, would see his own happiness snatched away. In truth, love could not be selfless, could it?

Again, silence stretched between them as they left London behind, heading north toward Scotland. Charles had never been there, as the climate of the northern countries was not beneficial to his sister's health.

"Please call me Charles," Charles blurted out when the silence once more became oppressive. "After all, we are to be husband and wife."

"Very well," Miss Hartley replied, and Charles thought to hear the touch of a smile in her voice. "But only if you call me Beatrice."

"Beatrice," Charles repeated, delighting in the echo of her name. "Will you tell me a little about yourself? It feels a bit odd that we know almost nothing about one another."

A sigh drifted from her lips, and Charles thought it rang more with relief than tension. "Yes, it does feel odd. Everything that has happened lately feels..." Again, she shrugged, the movement accompanied by another sigh. "I scarcely know how to find words."

"I find myself quite overwhelmed as well," Charles admitted, feeling the heavy boulder upon his chest slowly rise and lift away as he shared these open words with the woman he was to marry. "I never quite imagined our stay in England to take such a turn." He chuckled. Of course, he had not. Who would have?

"That is not hard to believe," Beatrice replied, her voice now lighter as

well. “Well, what is there to tell you about me you do not already know?” She paused for a moment, and Charles remembered the intimate secrets she had shared with him only the night before.

“I have a little sister,” Beatrice began, a touch of laughter in her voice that told Charles that she cared about her sister as much as he cared about his own. “Her name is Francine, and she’s five years old. She loves to paint, and she’s quite good at it, especially for her age. She seems young, and yet sometimes there are moments when I think she’s a very old soul.” She paused, and Charles could not shake the feeling that there was more she wished to say but did not quite dare.

“In fact,” Beatrice continued with a chuckle, “she was the one who urged me to accept your proposal.”

“She was?” He sat back, feeling himself relax. “That is surprising. Do you always discuss your marriage proposals with your little sister?”

Beatrice laughed. “It might surprise you to hear it, but she has a very shrewd mind. Indeed, her advice on the matter of marriage was the best one I’ve received.” Again, she paused. “Perhaps aside from your mother’s.”

Laughing, Charles raked his hands through his hair. “Yes, my mother is a very... particular person. I can’t even quite say in what way. Yet she often surprises me.”

“She surprised me as well,” Beatrice admitted, a touch of seriousness back in her voice. “In my experience, mothers do not support their sons when they wish to marry women who...” She swallowed hard. “Women who carry another man’s child.”

Again, a heavy silence fell over them, and Charles raked his mind for what to say. A part of him wanted to blurt out that he loved her, that his mother had done what she had done in order to secure his happiness. And was that not precisely what parents ought to do for their children? Yet Charles sensed Beatrice was not yet ready to hear these words. Her heart still beat for Lord Strumpton, he reminded himself. He would need to be patient and be her friend first and foremost.

As they continued on through the night, Charles listened to the soft sounds of Beatrice’s breathing. At first, it sounded a bit strained, evidence of her own tense nerves. Then, however, it grew more relaxed, and he suspected she had fallen asleep. Indeed, her head seemed to drift forward ever so slightly. And then, when the carriage hit a hole in the road, Beatrice slumped forward.

Charles caught her in the nick of time before she could drop to the carriage floor. Oddly enough, she did not wake. She merely sighed and leaned into him, one hand upon his chest, her fingers curling into his coat.

For a moment, Charles ceased breathing, his gaze fixed upon her face hidden in shadows. Then he shifted gently, pulling her up and easing himself onto the seat beside her. He settled her in his embrace, her head coming to rest upon his shoulder, her hand still upon his chest as though it belonged there, right above his hammering heart.

In that moment, seated in a dark carriage with the woman he loved sleeping in his arms, Charles felt an overwhelming sense of being responsible for another's well-being and happiness. He silently vowed to protect her, to keep her safe, and do whatever necessary to make her smile.

For the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 13

A TRUE SELF



Beatrice stirred in her sleep, feeling a slight swaying motion that seemed to come from deep within her. She remained still for a few seconds longer, her consciousness gradually shifting from the fog of sleep to the more tangible reality in which she found herself. A long moment passed as Beatrice struggled to form a coherent thought, her mind still foggy with sleep and confusion.

In that moment between sleeping and waking, Beatrice felt utterly disoriented, unable to account for the soft swaying motion that shook her gently. Distant sounds drifted into her mind, not helping to clear up the confusion but increasing it. She heard carriage wheels upon a dirt-packed road, the call of a bird as well as the howling of the wind.

Blinking her eyes open, Beatrice was blinded by light, its brightness like a painful stab. She groaned, her hands moving to shield her eyes, and in that moment, she finally realized that she was not in her bed at home.

On swift wings, the events of the previous day and night returned, and her eyes flew open once more. A moment later, Beatrice surged upward when she realized she had slept with her head in her betrothed's lap. "Oh, dear. I'm so sorry. I—" Her breath came fast, and she tried very hard not to meet her betrothed's eyes, her cheeks ablaze.

Charles, though, chuckled good-naturedly. "I am to be your husband," he said lightly. "Is it not my responsibility to ensure that you sleep well?"

Lifting her gaze tentatively, Beatrice found Charles grinning at her. As sensitive and kind and earnest as he was sometimes, there still was a bit of a devilish streak in him.

Beatrice rather like that.

Still, the reminder of their impending nuptials brought something else to mind. After all, a wedding implied a wedding night, did it not? When she had been set to marry Mr. Carter, Beatrice had been uncertain if her father's old friend would have insisted on consummating the union. Indeed, it had been a shuddering thought, and Beatrice was quite relieved to be rid of it. Yes, she did feel more at ease with Charles, but he was a stranger as well. They barely knew one another. Would he insist—?

"Would you tell me more of your sister?" Charles inquired as the carriage rumbled onward. "She sounds like quite the intriguing girl." Another teasing grin touched his face.

"You first," Beatrice insisted, welcoming this new lightness between them. "After all, I already spoke to you of Francine yesterday."

"Very well," Charles relented, tapping his chin with the forefinger of his right hand as he contemplated what to say. "I have a younger brother as well as younger sister. My brother, Henry, is three years younger than me and while I love him dearly, I rarely understand him."

Beatrice laughed. "Why's that?"

Charles shrugged. "Because... Because he never seems to stand still. Wherever he is, he's quickly bored or eager for a new place to discover." He scoffed good-naturedly. "Quite honestly, only looking at his life exhausts me."

"My sister and I are quite different as well," Beatrice volunteered, suddenly remembering that Eugene—Lord Strumpton!—had never spoken to her like this. "Sometimes, she sits very still, and I wonder what goes through her mind. Then later, I see her sitting at her easel, paintbrush in hand, her teeth dug into her lower lip, a look of utter concentration on her face as she paints." She sighed. "And she paints beautifully, not necessarily what she sees or what others see, but sometimes simply what could be."

"She sounds like a truly marvelous little girl," Charles replied, a deeply affectionate smile upon his face. "I cannot wait to meet her."

"I know she will be fond of you," Beatrice replied, remembering Francine's questions about her new *friend*. She paused. "I shall miss her. Ever since the day she was born, we have not been apart." A pang of sorrow touched her heart, and Beatrice thought herself a fool to not have thought of this earlier. After all, marriage always brought on a new life, a life that would not see her live side by side with her sister.

"I suppose it will not be the same," Charles admitted, a kind expression

upon his face as he dipped his head a fraction to peer into her downcast eyes. “Yet she will always be your sister, and she will always be welcome in our home.”

Beatrice found a glimmer of a smile as she looked at him. “And what of your sister?”

“Her name is Lizzie.” Love shone in his eyes, and yet Beatrice thought to see a touch of sadness. “She’s not well,” Charles finally said, a heavy sigh leaving his lips. “She was born with a weak lung, the doctors said. They prophesied she would not live long.”

Beatrice gasped, the thought of losing Francine crippling. She could not imagine how Charles’s family had taken this news. “I’m so sorry.”

A brave smile came to Charles’s face. “Yet she beat the odds,” he declared triumphantly. “They gave her three years. Today, she is twelve, and she is still with us.” He cleared his throat. “Yet cold climates are not good for her. That is why my family left England over ten years ago.”

“Then why did you come back now?”

“As a peer of the realm, my father has certain responsibilities,” Charles explained. “He often went back on his own. Yet this time, we all wished to accompany him. Lizzie has been fine lately, and so we brought her along. Yet the moment she worsens...” He swallowed hard. “In any case, we never planned to stay long.” As the last word left his lips, his brown eyes sought hers. “Now, we need a new plan.”

Beatrice exhaled slowly. “Will you stay here even if your family leaves?” Oh, she had never thought of the possibility of leaving the country, having to bid her sister farewell for perhaps months or even years at a time.

“You are my family now, too.” Holding her gaze, Charles nodded. “We shall find a solution. I would never dream of taking you away from your sister.”

“And I would never dream of taking you away from yours,” Beatrice replied, surprised by the respect and compassion that seemed to come so naturally to Charles’s family. They truly did not seem to care about society’s rules or about how things were generally done. They made choices on their own, based on their own dreams and wishes and hopes, always respectful of one another.

With each word they spoke, Beatrice relaxed, even enjoyed herself, suddenly feeling free to *be* herself. There was no longer any need to pretend. It seemed what Charles truly wanted was to get to know her, the true her, not

the girl she had always portrayed to society.

It made Beatrice wonder if perhaps agreeing to marry Charles had not been such a bad idea after all. Most marriages were based on other things than love. And perhaps friendship and kindness promised a grander future than reputation and fortune. Perhaps, one day, they could be happy.

It was a thought that warmed Beatrice's heart, and she held onto it with all her might.

CHAPTER 14

WITH PATIENCE



Twice, they stopped on their way to Scotland to change horses, stretch their legs and have a quick meal. Their coachman knew precisely where to go, and at every stop, it seemed that they had been awaited, everything prepared for them. Charles smiled, thinking of his mother, amazed by her thoroughness.

By the time they finally arrived in Gretna Green, it was already dark outside. The night was frosty and still as the carriage rattled its way into the village. The moon glowed in the night sky, illuminating their path and casting a gentle silver light over the countryside. The sound of an owl hooting in the distance filled the air, its ancient call echoing through the trees.

Gretna Green was nestled in a valley, surrounded by soft rolling hills and lush forests. The cottages and farmhouses were scattered irregularly, but it was still clear that the village was designed around a central square. As they drew closer, Charles could see many of the shutters were closed and smoke rose from some of the chimneys.

The horses slowed to a trot as they approached the village square, stirring up a cloud of dust in their wake. In front of the blacksmith's shop, the coachman drew their carriage to a halt before he jumped down to open the door for them.

Charles gazed across at his future wife, her face still, her eyes unblinking as she stared out the window. "Are you ready?" Charles asked gently.

Swallowing hard, Beatrice nodded. Then she met his gaze, the corners of her mouth curled upward in a brave smile. Her hands shook as she brushed them over her skirts, clearly seeking something to occupy them.

Charles could not deny that his own pulse had quickened, and he knew

that lingering here would do neither of them any good. No, they had made their choice, and now, they needed to see it through. Without another moment of hesitation, he disembarked from the carriage and then held out his hand to Beatrice, an encouraging smile upon his face.

Beatrice followed him outside, turning her head to take in the peaceful atmosphere of the small village. Looking over his shoulder, Charles spotted the inn, laughter echoing out the door whenever it opened to allow another visitor in. *Later*, Charles thought. First, they needed to be married.

Stepping into the blacksmith's shop, Charles was not surprised to find the man ready for them. Everything was cast in shadow, a fire burning nearby, as the man gestured them forward, a heavy leather apron still tied around his neck. "Ye be Charles Beaumont and Beatrice Hartley?"

Charles nodded, and he felt Beatrice's hand tense upon his arm. He barely dared look at her, afraid that at the last moment she might change her mind.

The blacksmith wasted no time, words pouring from his mouth. Charles barely managed to follow them, catching one here and there, his thoughts taken in by the quietly trembling woman by his side. Was he making a mistake? Was he all but forcing her into this marriage? Yet what would be the alternative?

"I do."

Beatrice's softly spoken words startled Charles, and before he had a moment to comprehend them, the very same question was put to him. His own *I do* followed swiftly, and then the blacksmith proclaimed them husband and wife.

Charles was overwhelmed and from the look of it, so was his bride. Everything had happened so fast that neither their minds nor their hearts had any chance of catching up. Perhaps that was the true purpose of rituals and ceremonies, to ease into change and not be dropped headlong into it. To make it feel real and true.

The blacksmith pointed them toward the inn, and Charles noticed that Beatrice seemed a bit uneasy as they went. Her fingers clutched hold of his sleeve, her grip never loosening. "Are you all right?"

She cast a tentative smile at him. "I suppose so."

"It is the strangest feeling, is it not?" He frowned, shaking his head. "I am now a husband." He scoffed, grinning at her. "Does it feel real to you?"

Another tentative smile appeared upon her face. "Not quite. I cannot help but feel as though... this is a play, and I am merely acting out a part."

Charles nodded. "That is indeed a fitting description," he remarked with a chuckle. He sighed. "I'm famished. What of you?"

Beatrice nodded, the hand that rested upon his arm no longer gripping it tightly. "I suppose I could eat." She smiled at him.

Stepping into the inn together, Charles approached the proprietor and quickly learned that the *grandest* room in this modest establishment had been reserved for them. He could not deny a tingle of nervousness when he thought of his wedding night. Certainly, it would not be a true wedding night. It was much too soon for that. Yet the implications of a true wedding night lingered. Charles could see it Beatrice's gaze. Perhaps they ought to speak about what would happen next, yet it was an awkward topic, and he did not quite know how to broach it.

Without speaking a word, they followed a maid up the stairs and down the corridor toward their chamber. When the door swung open, Charles breathed a sigh of relief to see that it had two beds. Indeed, he saw the same relief upon his wife's face as she looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Do you mind sharing a room with me?" Charles asked quietly as the maid bustled about the chamber, filling the water pitcher and righting the beds.

Beatrice cast him a shy smile. "I do not," she replied, and he knew she was relieved to have a bed to herself this night. How his mother sometimes knew precisely what was needed was beyond Charles. Indeed, it had been the right gesture, saving him from an awkward conversation.

Still, he wished to put all Beatrice's concerns to bed, and as she made to step farther into the chamber, he held out his arm, his fingers touching her hand. She turned back to look at him, and he met her gaze, his voice once more dropping to a whisper. "This is a marriage of equals," he murmured, leaning a little closer, "and it shall always be. My wishes are no more important than yours, and hopefully together, we shall find some middle ground. Do you agree?"

In that moment, Beatrice's blue eyes glowed, the smile upon her face utterly overwhelming. "Yes, I agree," she breathed, her voice only a whisper.

"Yet, this *is* our wedding night," Charles added with a grin, "and it's supposed to be memorable, is it not?"

Beatrice stilled, uncertainty again in her gaze. Yet there was trust there as well, and Charles was glad for it.

"Stay here and wash up if you wish," Charles said to her, following the

maid out the door. "I shall procure us a feast worthy of this day." He winked at her, delighting in the smile that came to her face, and then closed the door behind him. Yes, he loved her smile, and he promised himself that one day it would be the kind of smile that spoke of unadulterated happiness.

While Charles could not deny that he was curious to hold her and kiss her, he could wait. They had their whole lives ahead of them, and more than anything, he wanted to conquer her heart. He wanted what his parents had. He wanted his wife's heart to belong to him, just as she possessed his. He wanted a great many things, and the only way to be granted them was through patience as well as respect and kindness.

As he ventured downstairs, Charles chuckled. After all, if there was one thing Charles knew how to do, it was how to be patient. Indeed, this challenge had been made for him.

CHAPTER 15

TO WISH UPON A STAR



When the door opened next, maids bustled inside, carrying trays of food, bringing with them the delicious aroma of a hearty meal. Beatrice stared as they set the table, lit candles and the fire in the hearth. There were steaming plates of succulent roast beef with fresh fruits, like apples and honeyed melons, and chunks of delectable cheese. Next to the savory dishes, freshly baked pastries, golden brown, with a crispy top and a sweet interior, were spread across the table.

“What do you think?” Charles asked as he stepped back into the chamber. “Smells good, doesn’t it?”

Beatrice sighed, her stomach rumbling loudly. “It smells delicious.”

Beckoning her forward, Charles pulled out a chair for her, then he seated himself across the table. Slowly, they ate, filling their plates with many different delicious bites. Beatrice was grateful for the food. Not only because her body yearned for nourishment, but also because it gave her hands something to do.

“What is your favorite food?” Charles asked, his gaze sweeping over the laden table.

Beatrice grinned at him. “Chocolate.”

He laughed. “Chocolate? That’s your favorite food?”

“You did not ask for a traditional meal,” Beatrice pointed out with a stern expression. “You asked for my favorite food, and chocolate is most certainly food. After all, you can eat it, can you not?”

Charles regarded her curiously. “After that passionate speech, can I assume that in your opinion, there is nothing better in the world than

chocolate?”

Beatrice laughed, half-choking on the grape she had plopped into her mouth. “You certainly can.”

To Beatrice’s delight, the evening continued like this, with light, teasing conversation as they slowly got to know one another, sharing bits and pieces about their past, about their lives.

“These days, all Lizzie wants is to see snow,” Charles remarked when they had both stopped eating, still tempted to sample a few more bites but utterly unable. “These past few days, she stood with her nose pressed to the window, glaring at the skies, as though her fury could make it open up and give her what she desired.” He heaved a deep sigh. “I pray she will not be disappointed.” His gaze met hers, and Beatrice could see deepest sadness there. “I do not think she will ever be able to return to England. This may well be her only chance.” He cast her a brief smile.

Without thinking, Beatrice reached out her hand and grasped his. “She’s lucky to have you, all of you. You cannot tell me she is not a happy girl.”

Charles laughed, and for a brief second, his gaze darted to her hand upon his. “No, I cannot. She has the most adorable laugh I have ever heard.” His hand moved beneath hers until they lay palm to palm, his fingers holding onto hers. “And she laughs a lot. At least, when she’s not pouting about not seeing snow.”

Easy laughter echoed between them, and Beatrice realized she did not mind Charles holding her hand. Indeed, she was beginning to feel comfortable with him. Yes, friendship was a wonderful foundation for a life together. “Is there a place to call home down south? Or do you travel from place to place?”

“We travel a lot,” Charles replied as they seated themselves by the fire. “My brother simply cannot remain in one place for too long, and quite frankly, it is fascinating to see the world. Still, sometimes I wish for a home.” He met her gaze. “A true home.”

Beatrice nodded. “I’ve never been much for travel, either. Yet I have an aunt in France I would love to visit. She is my mother’s sister and married a Frenchman some time ago. We still write to one another, although I have not seen her in years.”

“You have never been to see her?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, there always seemed to be some sort of reason why I couldn’t go. At first, I was too young, and then there were more

important things to do. After all, my parents wanted me to make a good match.” Beatrice sighed, angry at herself because for a moment she had forgotten those past turbulent weeks full of heartbreak and regret. She had lived in the moment, here, with Charles, laughing and joking, and it had felt wonderful.

Charles heaved a deep breath. Then he leaned forward, his gaze seeking hers once more, the light of the flames in the hearth dancing across his countenance. “I am sorry for your heartbreak,” he murmured, not even a touch of accusation in his gaze. “I can only imagine what that must have felt like.”

Beatrice swallowed hard. “It was my own fault. I acted like a fool. I placed my trust where I should not have.”

Charles shook his head, his brown eyes warm and kind. “It is a sad world where promises cannot be trusted.”

For a long moment, Beatrice held his gaze, seeing all that he was, all he had done for her so selflessly. “What if...?” She inhaled deeply, not wishing to ruin the moment, and yet she knew she would not have peace of mind if she did not ask this. “What if I have a boy?”

Beatrice still struggled to believe that the Whickertons did not care. If she were to have a boy, he would be Charles’s heir. Another man’s child would inherit the Whickerton title. How could they not care? All the world cared. If anyone knew, it would be an outrage, a scandal, ruinous for them all. Had Charles, in his haste to protect her, forgotten all about it?

Preparing herself to see an expression of shock come to his face, Beatrice held her breath. Yet what she saw was merely a shrug, the look upon his face as relaxed as before, not at all clouded by her words. “Then we’ll have a son,” he said simply.

Beatrice regarded him curiously. “But will you not regret your gallant act, then?”

Charles shook his head, absolute certainty in his gaze. “There’s nothing more important in this world than love,” he told her valiantly, and once again Beatrice thought of the gallant knight in shining armor, upholding what was right against all the odds. “My parents taught me that. It is what they believe, and it is why they did not object to our union.”

Beatrice stared at her new husband, tears misting her eyes, her heart touched that such people truly existed. “My parents were first and foremost concerned with the possible scandal.” She tapped a finger to the corner of her

eye to wipe away the tears that lingered there. “My mother even asked me why it mattered who I wed so long as my reputation remained intact.” For a moment, Beatrice thought she ought to feel a touch of shame at betraying her mother like this, yet she did not.

“When my parents were married, they swore their children would be allowed to marry for love, just like them.”

Dread settled in Beatrice’s belly for robbing him of his chance to follow in his parents’ footsteps. “I’m sorry,” she murmured, wishing there was something else she could do besides apologize. “I’m sorry you could not.”

An odd look came to Charles’s face at her words, and he looked at her in a way that chased a shiver down Beatrice’s back. “But I did,” he whispered, his brown eyes never leaving hers.

Staring at him, Beatrice swallowed hard. “You cannot mean that. You cannot...” She shook her head. “Do you mean to say that you...?” She had thought him a gentleman, compelled to come to her rescue because his honor demanded it, because his kind character demanded it. She had never once contemplated the notion that he—

“You need not worry,” Charles told her gently. “I did not tell you this to put pressure on you. To love means to put another first, and I am prepared to do that with no regrets.”

Beatrice was speechless. Never had she known people like him, like his family. If only she had known that he loved her. But if she had, would she have chosen differently?

Blinking her eyes, she regarded him thoughtfully. Did he truly love her? Or was he mistaking a short-lived infatuation for love? Not that Beatrice herself knew the difference. After all, her own experience was fairly limited and had ended worse than she had ever imagined it might.

Still, she could not bring herself to regret her choice. Indeed, she liked Charles and felt safe with him. He was the kindest, most selfless man she had ever met. And perhaps, one day, she could love him.

In that moment, Beatrice knew what to wish for upon the shooting star Francine had given her.

And so she did.

CHAPTER 16

AWAKENING



As they returned to London, Charles noticed Beatrice's apprehension returning. With each turn of the carriage's wheels, the ease that had grown between them in Scotland slowly slipped away. Her gaze remained fixed out the window, her hands clenched in her lap, her thoughts clearly occupied with something worrisome.

"Do you have regrets?" Charles asked carefully as the carriage turned a corner.

Beatrice blinked, and her gaze moved to meet his. Yet it took another moment for comprehension to light up her eyes. "No, of course not. I..." She swallowed, looking down at her clenched hands.

"Is it my family?" Charles inquired, wondering about this sudden change in her. "Or yours?" When she looked up, he smiled at her tentatively.

Beatrice sighed, and her shoulders relaxed, her hands unclenching. "My parents will be furious," she said with a chuckle, shaking her head as though she still could not believe what she had done. "They were quite..." She heaved a deep breath. "They will be furious." Her gaze held his, and Charles thought to see a question there.

"Mine will not," he told her firmly. "Whatever you might be worried about, my family will not be angry. After all, was it not my mother who arranged for us to be married?"

Smiling, Beatrice nodded. "And what of your father?" She paused, regarding him curiously. "He did not know, did he? In advance, I mean."

Charles shook his head. "He did not. But," he held her gaze, "even if he had, he would not have forbidden us. He might have argued against it." Which he had, Charles had to admit, at least to himself. "But he would not

have taken this choice out of my hands.”

“He can still be angry with you,” Beatrice pointed out. Clearly, she was concerned about how she would be received.

“He is not one to hold a grudge,” Charles replied with a chuckle. “He will glare at me for a moment, shake his head at me and then move past it. You’ll see.” Charles could only hope that he was right; after all, such a situation had never arisen before.

When they finally drew to a halt in front of his family’s townhouse, Beatrice drew in a sharp breath, for Charles’s family was awaiting them on the doorstep. While his parents stood back, their features rather inexpressive, Henry grinned from ear to ear and Lizzie waved at them, her eyes aglow with excitement.

“Everything will be fine,” Charles assured his wife, then he alighted from the carriage and held out his hand to her. “I’ll be by your side. Always.”

A touched smile came to Beatrice’s face, and Charles felt the breath lodge in his throat when her hand settled upon his arm. Indeed, she stayed close to his side as they passed through the small gate and then climbed the stairs toward the front door together, the chill in the air seeming to deepen with every step. It had been several weeks since the first frost of the season and yet, day after day, the sky remained gray and still, without even the tiniest snowflake in sight.

“Welcome home!” Lizzie exclaimed as she gazed up at Beatrice. “I always wanted a sister.”

Caught off guard, Beatrice stilled, her jaw dropping ever so slightly, and a tremble shot up her arm. “Oh. That is...” She swallowed. “I am so delighted to meet you.”

With relief, Charles saw that, while his father did look at him with a touch of disapproval in his gaze, there was a welcoming smile upon his face, nonetheless.

“Come inside,” Charles’s mother exclaimed, rubbing her hands together. “It is too cold to be doing this out here.” She waved them through the door and into the entrance hall. “I’ll ring for tea and biscuits.”

Before long, they were all seated together in the drawing room, a touch of awkwardness lingering upon the chamber. Beatrice did not seem to know where to direct her gaze or what to say. So, she sat with her head bowed, and lifting her gaze every so often, offered a shy smile.

“We’ve readied a chamber for you,” Charles’s mother told his new wife

with a smile. "I hope it is to your liking. But please feel free to make any changes you desire." Her smile deepened and received a bit of a teasing quality. "It won't hurt my feelings."

"Thank you," was all Beatrice managed to say, her hands still clenched in her lap.

Into the brief silence that followed, Henry exclaimed, "There will be a Christmas ball a sennight from today."

Charles jerked around to look at his brother, rather disliking the wicked grin upon his face. "A Christmas ball?"

"Yes," Henry replied with amused enthusiasm, ignoring their mother's chiding look. "In your honor." He chuckled. "Back in England for less than a month, and you're already the talk of the Season." He clapped his hands. "I applaud you, big Brother."

"Will you play with me?" Lizzie asked Beatrice abruptly, her eyes round and admiring.

Again, Beatrice's jaw dropped a little, and Charles could tell that she did not quite know what to say, too overwhelmed was she with this new life. Yet before Charles could interfere, his mother spoke once more.

"There will be time for that later, my dear," she told Lizzie, placing her hand upon her daughter's. "Now, though, I suggest," she turned to look at him and Beatrice, "you go speak to your parents. Better to get that done with soon."

Another shiver gripped Beatrice, and Charles could tell that she dreaded the moment of coming face-to-face with her parents yet again. Still, after another cup of tea, they departed once more. Not a word left Beatrice's lips the whole ride there, and Charles wondered what awaited them.

A butler showed them into the drawing room, where Beatrice immediately began to pace, wringing her hands and casting nervous glances at the door. The moment footsteps echoed to their ears, she stilled, her eyes going wide, and she stared at the door as though she were a deer, sensing a hunter closing in.

And then the door flew open, and for a split second, Charles thought Lady Benton would lash out at her daughter, her face red and outrage blazing in her eyes. The moment she spied Charles, though, she pulled to an abrupt halt. Her husband was a step behind her, an equally stunned expression upon his face. "Good... day, Lord Hawthorne."

"Good day, my lady, my lord." Charles offered a respectful nod, then he

moved to Beatrice's side. She met his gaze and drew closer to him as well.

Charles knew her movements only showed her need for support, for comfort, and yet Charles's heart soared.

"I apologize for the circumstances of our nuptials," Charles began, his voice steady and calm but insistent, the way his parents spoke when they faced opposition in some form and didn't want to give affront but also to remain steadfast in their position. "I admit I ought to have asked for your blessing beforehand. However, sometimes circumstances prevent us from acting on our best intentions."

Lord and Lady Benton listened quietly, their anger slowly subsiding; their expressions, though, remained tense.

Disapproving.

"We came here today to invite you to the Christmas ball my family is holding in our honor a sennight from today," Charles continued, smiling down at his new bride. "My parents are quite taken with Beatrice." His bride's gaze rose to meet his, and he could see doubt there. "They are eager to welcome her into our family. Hence, the ball."

"Ball? What ball?" exclaimed a young voice before the door was pushed open and a blond-haired girl of about five-years of age burst into the drawing room. Her green eyes were round as she stared at him, her features reminding him of her older sister, standing quietly by his side.

"Francine," Lady Benton exclaimed, "mind your manners."

Charles was delighted to see that the girl cared very little for her mother's rebuke. Instead, she danced toward them and threw herself into Beatrice's arms. "You left without saying a word," the girl complained, the tear-choked tone in her voice making it clear that she had missed her sister dearly these past few days.

"I'm sorry, Frannie," Beatrice assured her sister, hugging her tightly to her chest. "I should have said something."

"Yes, you should have," the sisters' mother agreed in a stern voice, her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at Beatrice.

"Can I come to the ball?" Francine asked, once again ignoring her mother, her eyes fixed upon Beatrice.

"Of course not," Lady Benton exclaimed in a huff. "Balls are no place for children."

Charles saw tears come to Francine's eyes, and he kneeled down beside the sisters, meeting the girl's gaze. "But we would love for you to come visit

us any other time,” he told her with a smile, well aware of the relieved expression that came to his wife’s face. “Our door is always open to you.”

Wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, Francine beamed at him, and Charles could not shake the feeling that he had just made a friend. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Charles replied, both sisters’ eyes aglow.

By the time Beatrice and Charles said their goodbyes, the expression upon Beatrice’s face looked far more relaxed. “Would you care for a stroll?” Charles asked as they ventured down the stairs and stepped toward their waiting carriage. He felt the chill of the air in his lungs; the sharpness of winter had arrived. Still, it was invigorating.

Beatrice, too, breathed in deeply of the cold December air, then she smiled at him and nodded. “Yes, I would.”

After instructing the driver to return without them, Charles and Beatrice strolled down the street arm in arm. Indeed, it felt good to be alone with one another again, and for a moment, they simply savored the comfortable silence between them.

“Thank you,” Beatrice exclaimed then, turning to look at him. “Thank you for coming with me today. Thank you for inviting Francine. You made her very happy. Me as well.”

“She is a wonderful girl,” Charles replied, not wishing to be thanked for something that was simply the right thing to do. “So exuberant.”

Beatrice laughed. “She can be quite tiresome in her excitement.”

Together, they strolled down the street, the cold air chilling their cheeks. Beatrice’s hand was warm upon Charles’s arm, and he enjoyed the peaceful way they walked arm in arm, no awkwardness between them.

“Look!” Beatrice suddenly exclaimed. “Snow!”

Charles blinked, and truly there were tiny snowflakes swirling through the air above them. Only a handful and rather far apart; still, it had been a long time since Charles had seen snow.

“Your sister will be delighted, will she not?” Beatrice exclaimed with shining eyes. “Let’s get back.” She pulled on his arm, and Charles allowed himself to be tugged along, a wide smile upon his face.

CHAPTER 17

THE WONDERS OF FRIENDSHIP



After seeing the way Charles had spoken to Francine, Beatrice was suddenly inspired to make the best of everything. Determination surged through her, and she felt hopeful in a way she had not in a long time.

Quick steps carried them back to the Whickertons' townhouse, up the front steps and into the entry hall. "Lizzie!" Charles called, craning his neck, as Beatrice felt her heart hammering with excitement. "Lizzie, there is snow! Lizzie!"

For a moment, no sound could be heard besides their rapid breathing. Then, however, soft footsteps drifted to their ears, and a moment later, Lizzie appeared at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide in awe. "Snow?" she asked, hesitation in her voice as though she did not dare believe them.

"Yes!" Charles exclaimed, waving her forward. "Let's bundle up and head into the garden." He gathered Lizzie's coat, boots and mittens in his arms and rushed toward her, meeting her at the landing.

"Quick!" Lizzie exclaimed, clearly afraid that the snow would disappear before she could see it.

Beatrice felt herself bounce upon her feet, wishing Francine could be here. Hopefully, the coming days would bring her over frequently so that she could get to know the Whickertons alongside Beatrice. Perhaps this would truly be a wonderful new chapter in all their lives.

With Lizzie finally bundled up warmly, they rushed outside.

The garden lay in silence, the air still and drifting in little clouds through the bare tree branches. Tiny snowflakes lingered, swirling here and there, giving the garden an ethereal quality. Even the birds seemed to sense the

quiet as if they had forgotten their usual twitter and chirp.

In the stillness, time seemed to stand still, and Beatrice felt as though she could have remained in this moment forever, entranced by the winter sky, the soft whispers of the wind and the small crystals dancing down from the sky.

Lizzie, though, squealed with delight. “Snow! Look, Charlie, it’s snowing!” Spreading her arms wide, she twirled in circles, her head tilted back, and her eyes lifted to the heavens.

Charles laughed, and Beatrice knew that his heart soared seeing his little sister so carefree and happy. “Come.”

Beatrice blinked and saw Charles holding out his hand to her. “What?”

He nodded toward Lizzie then grasped Beatrice’s hand without warning and tugged her along. Only a moment later, they were twirling around the garden alongside Lizzie, and Beatrice had never felt so free.

It was as though this one moment changed everything. She no longer felt apprehensive or was plagued by doubts. No, instead, she embraced her new life wholeheartedly, and within a matter of days, Beatrice felt at home with the Whickertons.

Lizzie was a delight, and Beatrice loved seeing her and Francine together; and Francine did visit often. Sometimes even twice a day, coming over accompanied by her nursemaid. Although seven years separated the girls, they seemed drawn to one another. While Francine sensed that Lizzie’s body was frailer, Lizzie had a way of imparting her wisdom in a way that made the girls seem like equals.

Henry possessed a certain fondness for poking fun at all those around him, never missing the opportunity to tease his siblings... as well as her and Francine, which made them feel included and gave them even more a feeling of belonging.

Lord and Lady Whickerton—or Jasper and Edith as they insisted Beatrice call them—were quite unlike Beatrice’s own parents in one particular way. They, too, certainly had quite a number of duties to handle; yet they always made time to spend together as a family. Meals were shared, even including the children, and they never had that absent expression on their faces that suggested they wished to be elsewhere. No, when Charles’s parents spent time with their children, they were truly there.

And then, two days before the Christmas ball, Beatrice walked by Jasper’s study and overheard him speaking to Charles. She knew she ought not listen; yet when she heard her name mentioned, she simply could not

walk away.

“I never had any objections against Beatrice,” Jasper insisted, the tone in his voice suggesting that he was choosing his words most carefully. “She is indeed a wonderful, truly kind young woman, and I wish you two all the happiness in the world.”

Beatrice barely breathed, every muscle in her body tensing despite the beautiful words she had just overheard.

“I know,” Charles replied, his voice sounding so close that Beatrice flinched. “I never meant to suggest it. I only meant to ask your opinion of her.”

A chill trailed down Beatrice’s spine because she knew what Charles was asking, and it made her feel awful. Yes, she had settled into this family with an ease that surprised even her. She loved them all, and she felt certain that with time, she would only love them more. But Charles? He was a most wonderful man, and she truly cared for him. But was she *in* love with him? Would she ever be?

As though to echo her thoughts, Jasper said, “The reason I initially objected has not changed. I wish it had. Believe me.” He exhaled a slow breath, and Beatrice could hear regret in his voice. “What worries me is that you are now married to a woman who might never love you back, at least not the way you love her.”

Unable to listen to more, Beatrice silently moved away, her heart feeling heavy again. The lightness of the past few days disappeared, replaced by a most intense pressure to feel something for Charles because if she did not, he would be heartbroken. He deserved love, and more than anything, she wanted to give it. It was not something she could conjure by willpower alone, though. She cared for him, certainly... but love?

Still, Beatrice could not deny that time with Charles had become precious to her. Very precious, indeed. They rode out together, toured the city, walked in the park, and read by the fire. Although he often seemed serious, especially compared to his younger brother, Charles, too, possessed a carefree and almost whimsical side. Beatrice would never forget the way they had twirled and danced in the snow, laughing arm in arm like children, as though they had not a care in the world. Indeed, whenever he was nearby, Beatrice felt somehow lighter. He barely needed more than a few words to make her smile, and she never hesitated to go along when he suggested a midnight walk in the gardens to count the stars or to read a book backwards, starting

with the last page. Oh, how they laughed!

At her childhood home, it had been ages since Beatrice had done anything remotely like these things. After all, she was no longer a child, and it was simply not ladylike. The Whickertons, though, did not seem to mind.

“Are you getting tired?” Charles inquired with a grin as they sat in the library the night before the ball. The fire danced in the hearth, casting its orange-red glow across the tall, vaulted chamber.

Beatrice tried to hide a yawn behind her hand.

Charles chuckled. “Oh no, I saw that.” He rose from where he had sat upon the rug, half-leaning against the settee, and set aside the book he had read to her. “Off to bed with you. After all, tomorrow night’s ball is in our honor; therefore, we should try to attend.”

Beatrice held out her hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. Strangely enough, it no longer felt odd when his fingers grasped hers, skin touching. “Do you enjoy balls?” she inquired, still curious to find out more about him. “Do you dance?”

Instead of replying to her question, Charles suddenly tugged her forward and into his arms, one hand settling upon her waist while the other held onto her hand.

Beatrice held her breath, staring into his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed to be so close. Of course, it was far from indecent—even if they had not been husband and wife. After all, throughout her Season, Beatrice had danced with many gentlemen at many balls. Yet being alone here with Charles in the library, the night surrounding them and the warmth of the flames in the hearth reaching out, the world suddenly seemed a different place.

“Do *you* know how to dance?” Charles challenged, a mischievous grin upon his face, before he hummed a sweet melody and his feet moved.

Easily falling back into the rhythm that had grown between them these past few days, Beatrice smiled at him. “I’m realizing only now that I’ve never heard you sing,” she teased, delighting in the deep smile that came to his face. “Perhaps tomorrow, at the ball, you’ll grant us a small performance.” She arched an eyebrow at him.

Charles laughed. “Believe me, if you *had* heard me sing, you would not have just asked that.” He stilled, as though at a sudden thought. “Though, it might be a sure way to empty the house of guests should we tire of them.”

“It’s a plan then,” Beatrice declared, allowing him to twirl her in a small circle. “It is always good to have a—” All of a sudden, the world began to

sway, and Beatrice blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to get it back into focus.

“Beatrice! Are you all right?” Charles’s voice sounded concerned and strangely far away. Yet when Beatrice felt her knees buckle, his arms grasped her, pulling her against his chest, keeping her safe.

Gently, he settled her upon the soft rug in front of the fireplace, fetching a small pillow to place beneath her head. All the while, he spoke to her, and although Beatrice barely understood a word he was saying, the sound of his voice was soothing. She closed her eyes, one hand clasped in his, and simply breathed.

“Shall I fetch the doctor?”

“No,” Beatrice managed to say. Then she opened her eyes once more, and the world was back in focus. She waited for another heartbeat or two, and when it remained where it was, she smiled up at her husband. “It has passed. It was merely a spell of dizziness. Nothing to worry about.”

Charles’s gaze still held concern. “Are you certain?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am. Please, help me up.”

With great care, Charles assisted her to her feet, his hands never leaving her arms, holding onto her in case she lost her balance once more. “Is the child all right? Do you have any way of knowing?”

Oddly enough, for a brief moment, Beatrice had even forgotten about the child. These past few days, she had felt wonderful, her mind so focused on this new beginning that she had barely thought of the new life growing within her.

Feeling tense, Beatrice looked at her husband. “I do believe it is fine.” Her gaze lingered upon Charles’s face, and as always she feared to see something dark descend upon his features, the child a reminder of what stood between them.

Yet it never did.

His hands held hers, and his eyes looked at her with the same deep concern and utter devotion that were simply his. He did not seem at all burdened by the reminder that she was carrying another man’s child.

“Is there anything you need?”

Beatrice sighed, deeply touched by his care, because everything he had said proved true. “Thank you for being you,” she whispered, tears pricking the backs of her eyes. “Thank you for... your friendship.” Beatrice knew that it was probably not what he wanted to hear; yet it was all she had to give.

No disappointment showed up on his face, though, and the smile that

touched his lips looked utterly genuine. “Always.”

And then Beatrice sank into his arms, resting her head upon his shoulder, and it felt right, as though this spot had been made for her only.

CHAPTER 18

NEVER STOP DANCING



The night of the Christmas ball, Charles and his father stood downstairs, awaiting their wives. Henry, too, was present; he, however, paced rather impatiently. “Why is it that women always take so long to get ready?” he grumbled under his breath, casting an annoyed look up the stairs.

Though not saying a word, their father rolled his eyes at Henry’s flippant remark, and Charles chuckled under his breath. Indeed, he did not mind waiting, knowing the trouble women went through to look their best. According to his new wife, she, too, loathed the time it took to make herself presentable, often wishing it were unnecessary. Only the other day, they had talked at great length about things in life that bothered them, that they wished they could change.

Heaving a deep breath, Charles swept his gaze upward over the enormous staircase, imagining Beatrice standing there. It had been only a week since their wedding day in Scotland, and yet he already felt as though he knew her. Of course, there were still many delightful details to discover about her every day, and yet she was no longer a stranger. And more than that, he thought she felt the same way.

“You look happy,” his father remarked with an amused twinkle in his eyes. “It suits you.”

Charles could not help the smile that came to his face. He had never known he could smile as much as he had over the past week. He had always been happy; now, though, what he felt went beyond simply being happy. “I suppose I am,” he murmured, still dumbfounded about how abruptly everything had changed and how unexpectedly these emotions had found him. “Was it the same for you,” he asked his father, “when you met Mother?”

A faraway look came to his father's face. "Yes," he said simply, a deep sigh moving his shoulders. "One moment, I had no notion she even existed, and in the next, she was all I could think about." He grinned at his son. "Is that how you feel about Beatrice?"

Charles nodded. "You know, I always thought it odd whenever people described finding love like taking an arrow to the heart." Frowning, he shook his head, remembering how he had always puzzled over this description. "Now, though, I suppose it is merely a way of describing this... abruptness, for lack of a better word, a change one did not see coming."

His father was about to reply when he stopped and lifted his head, his gaze moving toward the top of the staircase. Charles turned, his eyes traveling upwards as well. There was not only his mother, dressed in her favorite Christmas gown, a deep maroon color with white pearls around her neck, but also Beatrice.

All grace, Beatrice standing at his mother's side, looked resplendent in her shimmering emerald gown. The glistening fabric clung to her body, accentuating her curves and stature while the delicate lace trimmings around the collar and cuffs made her glow as though snowflakes clung to her. Her golden-brown hair had been carefully coiffed into an elegant updo, and her deep blue eyes shone with anticipation... as well as a touch of nervousness.

Charles knew precisely how she felt, for his own heart seemed to trip in his chest the moment he beheld her. She had always been beautiful to him; yet now that one look into her eyes showed him a person he had come to know, now that he could read those subtle signs of her nerves upon her face, Charles thought her breathtaking.

More than ever, he prayed that, with time, he would win her heart.

"You look..." Words failed Charles when Beatrice finally stood before him, lifting her chin to look into his eyes.

"Yes?" she prodded with a teasing smile upon her face.

Charles chuckled. "There is no word to do you justice," he said solemnly, meaning it. "I am so..." He exhaled a deep breath. "Having you here with me tonight, it... it is a dream come true."

The smile faded from Beatrice's face, and he could see a touch of discomfort in her eyes. He knew she cared for him, that she saw a friend in him, and that any reminder that he loved her brought her pain. Charles cursed himself, making a mental note not to speak like this to her again. She needed time, and she would have it.

As the first guests began to arrive for their impromptu Christmas ball, Charles and Beatrice stood alongside his parents and brother, welcoming them all and gracefully accepting their well-wishes and congratulations. Charles was well aware that most people believed theirs to be a love match, and it suited him just fine. He did not wish Beatrice's reputation besmirched, people whispering about her behind her back. No, he wanted her happy and free of any rumors. He wanted the same for their child.

Truthfully, in the very beginning, after learning that Beatrice carried Lord Strumpton's child, there had been a moment when Charles had been uncertain if he could accept the child as his own. At only one-and-twenty years of age, Charles had never spent much time around children, especially young children. He had never even held a baby in his arms. The only child he knew was his sister, and Lizzie was already twelve years old. Yet when he had met Francine, Charles had been instantly dazzled by the little girl, his heart opening to her so easily that all his doubts of being able to love their child had vanished. He had remembered then what his parents had said from the moment he had been born: Love is all that matters.

Charles knew without a doubt that he loved Beatrice, that he would always love her. Now, when he looked at her and thought of the child, he imagined a little boy or girl, with wide eyes, full of trust and eagerness and his to protect, and it warmed Charles's heart immediately.

All would be well. He was certain of it. And not even the slightly disgruntled expression on the faces of Beatrice's parents could dissuade him. Of course, they had come to accept the match. How could they not? Yet they still seemed to hold a bit of a grudge, the smiles upon their faces not quite genuine and the words that fell from their lips as they spoke to their daughter, not quite reflecting their well-wishes.

"If you feel a need for rest," Charles whispered to his wife as he leaned in, "I shall spirit you away."

Instantly, the slightly forlorn expression upon Beatrice's face disappeared, and a dazzling smile appeared... and it made Charles's knees go weak. "Are you my knight in shining armor, then?"

Charles held her gaze, oblivious to all the other people in the room. "I shall be yours if you promise to be mine."

For a moment, she looked surprised; however, the glow in her eyes never dimmed. "I like that," she whispered, shifting upon her feet and moving closer to him. "I've always wanted to be a knight. It always seemed more

preferable than a damsel in distress, wouldn't you agree?"

Charles chuckled, nodding. "Odd that the stories never speak of gentlemen in distress," he remarked with a grin. "Even in my limited experience, gentlemen do get into trouble quite a lot."

Beatrice's eyes danced with laughter. "Do tell."

Together, they endured the long receiving line, and both were breathing a sigh of relief when they could finally step into the ballroom, alive with the cacophony of conversation, music, and laughter. Everywhere they looked, couples danced, flirted, and enjoyed themselves.

"May I have this dance?" Charles asked, holding out his hand to her.

For a moment, Beatrice simply looked into his eyes, and Charles felt his heart tense in apprehension. Was something wrong? Did she not wish to dance? He remembered their dance in the library the other night as well as the way they had twirled through the swirling snowflakes out in the garden. She had been quite enthusiastic then.

"Yes," Beatrice said a breathless touch to her voice. It was only a single word, and yet suddenly it gave Charles pause. It made him look deeper into her eyes, and as he did so, the hope he held in his heart for the future grew in spades. Something more than friendship suddenly shimmered there, and Charles blinked, wondering if he was merely imagining it.

Arm in arm, they drifted onto the dance floor. Charles settled one hand upon Beatrice's waist while the other cradled hers within his own. Their eyes locked, and they moved to the music with ease—spinning and twirling—as though they had been dancing together for years.

When the dance finally ended, Charles held on to her for a moment longer, and he leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Promise me we'll never stop dancing."

"I promise," Beatrice whispered, her warm breath tickling the side of his neck. Then her blue gaze sought his, and Charles found himself mesmerized.

Abrupt applause ripped away the magic of the moment, and they both stepped apart. Her hand, though, remained within his.

"What is going on?" Beatrice asked, the expression in her eyes whispering of shyness once more as she looked around, not quite meeting his gaze.

Charles shrugged before his attention was drawn to a corner of the ballroom where a small crowd had gathered. A handful of guests were pointing upward at a small green branch dangling from the ceiling.

“Mistletoe,” he murmured, suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to pull Beatrice forward and claim a kiss as well. Yet it was too soon for that. He needed to win her heart first, and he would not risk losing what they had simply to steal a kiss.

CHAPTER 19

ONCE UPON A KISS



“Why didn’t you tell me you planned to elope?” Marianne demanded in a rather indignant huff. “You never even spoke to me about Lord Hawthorne. I did not know you were in love.” She crossed her arms over her chest, doing her utmost to glare at Beatrice.

Beatrice chuckled, grasping her friend’s hands. “I apologize,” she replied, grasping for words. After all, what was she to say? Theirs was not a love match, and yet she could not tell Marianne so. Certainly, they were friends and had been for a few years. Only Marianne had never been one to keep secrets, words flowing from her tongue with such speed that she often had trouble keeping confidences.

“And you were married in Gretna Green?” Marianne whispered confidently, linking one arm with Beatrice’s and pulling her toward a quiet corner, all anger suddenly forgotten. “What was that like?”

Beatrice did her best to satisfy her friend’s curiosity; still, she could tell that Marianne was disappointed with Beatrice’s explanations. Indeed, Marianne possessed a deeply romantic heart, as Beatrice supposed many young women did. While not wishing to disappoint her closest friend, Beatrice could also not bring herself to lie. She could not speak of love when there had been none.

“And your wedding night?” Marianne asked in hushed tones, her eyes glittering with curiosity. “What was it like?” Her nose was slightly crinkled, and her brows drawn down into a tentative frown. “Was it as awful as we overheard Lady Torrington say last year? Or was it... wonderful?”

Beatrice cringed. “Well...” Beatrice wished with all her heart that she

could escape this conversation. Only Marianne was determined to have her answer.

Yet as Beatrice thought back to the night of her wedding, a smile came to her face, and she remembered the wonderful supper she and Charles had shared, how they had laughed and spoken of so many things, getting to know one another in a way she had not expected.

Reading Beatrice's expression, Marianne clasped her hands together in joy. "Oh, it was wonderful, wasn't it?"

Beatrice nodded. "It was. He is a wonderful man, and I am so fortunate that he chose me." Her gaze drifted across the ballroom to where Charles was speaking to his brother and a group of gentlemen. Their eyes met, and the smile that came to his face as he looked at her did odd things to Beatrice's heart.

"And... what was it like?" Marianne inquired, her cheeks flushing a tentative red.

Beatrice cringed inwardly, not wishing to discuss these things. After all, she and Charles had not shared a bed. All she had to go on was the night she had made that foolish mistake with Lord Strumpton. His touch had been pleasant enough, and yet it had been rushed as they had feared discovery. Now, roughly two months later, Beatrice barely remembered what they had said to one another or the touch of his lips upon hers. Somehow, the memory was fading, and fading quickly.

And with a bit of shock, Beatrice realized she did not mind.

"Well?" Marianne prompted.

Fortunately, Beatrice was saved from having to fabricate any sort of answer by a young gentleman who bowed low and then asked Marianne onto the dance floor. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Beatrice remained where she was, savoring a moment of peace and quiet, without having to choose her words carefully, simply breathing in and out.

Unfortunately, her moment of quiet ended rather abruptly when Henry suddenly appeared by her side. Indeed, her new brother-in-law had the tendency to show up in moments most inconvenient. "You look as though you could use a drink," he remarked, raising his brows meaningfully and grinning quietly. "Not that I procured you one, mind you."

Beatrice chuckled. "Sometimes you are truly impossible."

"You are too kind to notice," he said in reply, clearly delighted with the chiding expression upon her face. Inhaling a deep breath, he swept his gaze

over the ballroom. "I suppose London is a nice enough place; however," he glanced at her, "I can't imagine staying for too long."

"Charles mentioned your restlessness," Beatrice replied as they began strolling around the ballroom. "Which place is it that captured your heart?"

Henry laughed, handing his empty glass to a footman as he hurried by. "I'm afraid there is no such place. Quite frankly, I never enjoyed staying in one place for too long."

"So, you travel constantly, a new town, a new country every few weeks?" Beatrice could not fathom such a life. It intrigued her, and yet she doubted she would truly enjoy it.

Henry nodded enthusiastically. Then he laughed. "It seems you and my brother are quite suited to one another."

Beatrice frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, he, too, always looks at me with this odd sort of scrunched-up expression whenever I wish to move on." He chuckled. "I think he rather enjoys staying in England, especially now that he found you." He winked at her wickedly.

Overwhelmed, Beatrice averted her gaze and found it colliding with her husband's, a circumstance which immediately sent her heart into a little gallop. It was the oddest thing! Indeed, her heart seemed to pick up even more speed when Charles turned away from the group of gentlemen he had been conversing with and came toward them, a somewhat disconcerted expression upon his face as he eyed his brother.

"Ah, speak of the devil," Henry exclaimed when Charles reached their side, "and he shall appear."

Charles's forehead furrowed harder. "You spoke of me?" he inquired, and his gaze moved to Beatrice.

"We only—" Beatrice began, but she was cut off when Henry said, "All bad things, I assure you." He grinned at Charles.

To Beatrice's relief, Charles shook his head at his brother good-naturedly. "I would have expected nothing less," he retorted in kind, humor dancing in his eyes, before he once more turned to Beatrice. "If he annoys you, you must tell him so to his face. Otherwise, he will not understand. He seems to possess no intuition when it comes to these things."

Beatrice chuckled, feeling herself relax once more. "I shall try," she promised, wondering if she would have the chance, considering that Henry planned on leaving England again soon.

“Would you mind stepping over here?” Henry inquired, gesturing them forward. “There is something I must show you.”

Beatrice frowned and exchanged a confused look with her husband. “What is it?” she asked as Charles offered her his arm and she took it.

“Something marvelous,” Henry insisted, yet the grin upon his face put a rather suspicious-looking expression upon Charles’s face.

Taking two steps forward, they looked at Henry expectantly. Still grinning, he then pointed toward the ceiling. “Look up.”

The very moment Beatrice spotted the mistletoe dangling above their heads, another round of applause went up, making it very clear that they were not the only ones to have discovered it.

“Henry,” Charles growled under his breath, his eyes hard and accusing as he glared at his brother.

“What?” Henry asked with an innocent and yet smug expression. “You ought to thank me.” Then he stepped back, joining the ranks of the surrounding onlookers.

As her heart beat unsteadily in her chest, Beatrice looked up at her husband, surprised to see an almost tortured expression upon his face. “Is something wrong?”

He sighed, casting a furtive glance at the cheering crowd around them. “We don’t have to do this,” he whispered, his hand still holding hers, his own trembling as much as her own. “My brother should never have—”

“No,” Beatrice interrupted him, placing a hand upon his chest. “It’s all right.” She nodded, giving her permission for him to kiss her, unable to say the words. Indeed, at his suggestion that they need not kiss, Beatrice had felt a sudden surge of disappointment.

It seemed she wanted to kiss him. Only she had not realized it until this very moment.

Although they had only met a fortnight ago, the time they had had together had been indescribable, and Beatrice found her curiosity piqued, wondering what else could be between them.

“Are you certain?” Charles whispered as he pulled her closer, the expression upon his face hesitant. Still, eagerness shone in his eyes, mingling with devotion and desire alike. The space between them dissipated as he stepped closer, and an inaudible sigh escaped his lips. He reached for her and Beatrice, without a moment’s hesitation, nodded. This would not be her first kiss, and yet somehow, oddly enough, it felt as though it were.

Gently, Charles cradled her face in his hands, his eyes never leaving hers. He leaned in, slowly and steadily, until his lips were inches away from hers. Then, finally, they both closed their eyes and their lips met.

The kiss was sweet and gentle, but it was also full of promise. Beatrice had not expected this. A mistletoe kiss was nothing more than a tradition fulfilled, a quick peck that was over almost before it had begun.

Their kiss, however, did not. It did not seem to end, and Beatrice realized she did not want it to. Each second felt like a lifetime, and with each passing one, Beatrice felt a little more of her heart stringing together with his. Charles, too, seemed lost in the moment, for he lingered, his lips upon hers, teasing and asking and revealing how deeply he cared for her.

When they finally parted, they were breathless, and Beatrice could barely manage to open her eyes, her heart in an uproar. Never had Eugene's kiss made her feel so unhinged, so cared for, so utterly bewitched. What on earth did this mean?

Overwhelmed, Beatrice stared at her husband as the crowd around them cheered with delight, her lips still tingling from his kiss.

"Are you all right?" Charles asked, concern upon his face.

Swallowing, Beatrice nodded. "I'm sorry. I..." She backed away. "I need a moment alone." Then she turned and fled the ballroom.

CHAPTER 20

TO KNOW ONE'S HEART



Shocked, Charles stared after his wife as quick steps carried her out of the ballroom. People were still cheering and then slowly drifted back onto the dance floor or toward the refreshment table. The moment Beatrice disappeared from sight, Charles spun around and glared at his brother. “What were you thinking?”

At least a hint of contrition showed upon Henry’s face. “I thought it would be good for my brother to kiss his wife.”

Charles felt a sudden overwhelming desire to plant his little brother a facer. “Thank you. What a wonderful plan,” he snarled in mock gratitude, knowing that in truth he was the one to blame. Had he merely placed a chaste kiss upon Beatrice’s lips, none of this would have happened. “You did see her run off, did you not?” Raking a hand through his hair, Charles contemplated what to do. Ought he go after her? Or did she wish to be alone?

“Yes, I did see her run off,” Henry interjected, grasping Charles’s arm and pulling him around so they faced one another. “Yet neither one of us knows why.” His right eyebrow rose meaningfully.

Charles stilled, puzzled by the expression upon his brother’s face. “She did not wish—” His lips pressed into a tight line as he gritted his teeth. “It was not your place to interfere. You—”

“Admit it,” Henry dared him in a hushed tone. “You wanted to kiss her.”

Charles glared at his brother. “Of course I did,” he snapped, surprised by his own words. He heaved a deep breath. “Yet she clearly did not.”

Henry chuckled. “Nothing is clear. You don’t know why she ran away.”

“Is it not obvious?”

Before Charles could say more, Henry interrupted once again. “No, it is

not. Perhaps love made you blind. Perhaps you did not see the way she looked at you tonight.”

Charles stared at his brother, terrified of the small blossoms of hope that grew in his heart. Part of him wanted to know precisely what his brother meant while another feared the answer. Just when he had gathered the courage to ask, movement beyond his brother’s shoulder caught his attention. There, by the entrance to the ballroom, stood Lord Strumpton.

“What is it?” Henry inquired, turning to look at what Charles was staring. “Isn’t he—?”

“How dare you?” Charles growled, claspng his brother’s arm. “Did you do this?” He nodded in Lord Strumpton’s direction. “Did you invite him here tonight?”

His brother scoffed. “Why would I do that? Yes, I like to tease you from time to time, but I would never do anything to...” He exhaled slowly. “Charles, you are my brother and I want you to be happy.”

Charles felt dizzy from the way his pulse pounded in his veins. Yet his brother’s words made it through the fog that engulfed his head. “I know,” he murmured, then he loosened his grip upon his brother’s arm. “Then what is he doing here?”

Henry shrugged. “Let’s go find out.”

Together, the two brothers strode toward Lord Strumpton, and Charles realized how grateful he was to have his brother by his side, to know that he did not stand alone. “Lord Strumpton,” he addressed the other man, “what brings you here tonight?”

At the icy tone in Charles’s voice, Lord Strumpton’s eyes narrowed. “Why, I was invited,” he replied with a rather pleased expression upon his face. “I’m here tonight to congratulate you on your recent nuptials.” The grin upon the man’s face stretched even farther. “My best wishes to you and the new Lady Hawthorne.” Charles could see that the superior expression upon the other man’s face rose from Lord Strumpton’s belief that Charles knew nothing of what had happened between his new wife and the man across from him.

Gritting his teeth, Charles met his brother’s gaze, his brows rising questioningly.

As he had expected, Henry slowly shook his head, confirming that he was not the one who had invited Lord Strumpton. Who then?

Near the orchestra, Charles spotted his parents, whispered words passing

between them, and without an explanation to Lord Strumpton, he set off toward them, Henry upon his heels.

“You do not truly think that...?” Henry inquired behind him, his half-finished question followed by an amused chuckle. “Of course, I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Did you invite Lord Strumpton?” Charles demanded without preamble the moment he had reached his parents’ side.

His father frowned at him. “Lord Strumpton?” He glanced past Charles’s shoulder. “No, I did not.” His frown deepened. “Is he not the man who...?”

Charles nodded, every muscle in his body tense to the point of breaking. What on earth was going on here?

“Mother?” he inquired then, wondering why she had aided him before, only to betray him now. Did she not wish for him to be happy with Beatrice?

An amused chuckle rumbled in his father’s throat, and he looked at his wife with questioning eyes. “You did this, did you not, my dear?”

Smiling, Charles’s mother nodded. “I did, yes.” As Charles’s jaw dropped in shock, his mother stepped toward him, her hands settling upon his chest as her pale eyes looked into his. “Listen to me, Charles.”

Shaking his head, Charles stared at her. “How could you do this? I thought you were on our side.”

“I am on your side,” his mother insisted, the expression in her eyes growing in intensity. “Always.”

“Listen to her,” his father urged as he moved to stand by his wife’s side. “If she invited Lord Strumpton, she had her reasons.”

The deep conviction in his father’s voice gave Charles pause, and he turned to his mother, nodding for her to continue.

“Sometimes it is not easy to start over,” his mother whispered softly, her words only meant for his ears, “to know one’s heart. Sometimes, a little help is needed.”

Charles frowned. “How does this help? Why would you bring him here?”

Her mother regarded him for a long moment. Then she asked, “Are you jealous? Do you believe Beatrice is still in love with Lord Strumpton?”

Charles heaved a heavy breath, all his fears once again crowding around him. “I do not know,” he finally admitted.

“Don’t you wish you knew?” His mother inquired, the expression upon her face gentle and caring. “Or would you prefer to be left wondering?”

Charles bowed his head, knowing that his mother was not wrong. Of

course, she was not. Yet he feared the answer he might receive, remembering how heartbroken Beatrice had looked when he had first seen her a fortnight ago. Was it possible for a heart to change within so short a time? Ought he not be more patient? Yet again, his own heart had known instantly.

“You better go find your wife,” his mother said all of a sudden, urgency in her voice now. “Lord Strumpton seems to have disappeared from the ballroom.” Her gaze held his, and Charles needed to hear no more to understand.

Without a moment of hesitation, he darted off in the direction that Beatrice had left, wondering what intentions Lord Strumpton might have, what had brought him here tonight. After all, he could have refused the invitation.

Yet he had not.

CHAPTER 21

IN THE LIBRARY



Beleatedly, Beatrice realized her feet had carried her to the library, the very place where she had read and danced with Charles. Her mind still circled around the kiss they had just shared, her heart overwhelmed by the deep emotions that seemed to pulse through every cell of her body. Almost from the first, Beatrice had liked Charles. She had come to care for him so quickly, so easily, and yet she had always only considered him a friend, worried that she could not love him. Had she been wrong?

Beatrice wished she could share her confusion with someone who might advise her. What did it feel like to be kissed by someone one loved? All Beatrice knew was that Charles's kiss had been different from Eugene's... yet in a good way. Was there anything more than love? Or was the only conclusion that she had never truly loved Eugene? Had she merely been in love with the idea of being in love, being courted by a dashing gentleman? Had she been even more of a fool than she had first thought?

As her head began to spin in circles, Beatrice strode up and down the length of the library, willing her limbs to cease trembling and her mind to clear. After all, she needed to return to the ballroom. This night was held in her honor, and she simply could not disappear. More than that, what was Charles thinking right now? He had kissed her so sweetly, and then she had dashed away.

A groan slipped from Beatrice's lips, and she closed her eyes, willing a deep breath into her lungs. "What am I to do?"

"Good evening, my dear."

At Lord Strumpton's voice, Beatrice whirled around. Oddly enough, she had not even contemplated the idea of seeing him here tonight. Perhaps that

had been reasonable after all, for she doubted that Charles's family would invite the man whose child she carried. Then what was he doing here? Here at the ball... and now here in the library?

Closing the door behind himself, Lord Strumpton moved toward her, an easy smile upon his lips. Only now, it failed to make Beatrice's heart trip and stumble in her chest. "My lady, allow me to congratulate you on your wedding." His grin widened. "I admit I never expected you to be so... resourceful in procuring a husband. How did you do it?"

Beatrice could do little else but stare at him, for the moment did not quite strike her as real, more like a nightmare one imagined on a gloomy day.

Coming to stand in front of her, Lord Strumpton met her eyes. "If it is possible, you've grown even more beautiful," he whispered, an honest touch of awe in his voice. "I've missed you."

Not long ago, Beatrice would have given anything to hear him say these words. Now, though, she felt not even a quiver of excitement at hearing them. Instead, his presence here in the library made her feel threatened. "You need to leave," she told him, taking a step backward. "You're not supposed to be here."

Yet Lord Strumpton remained. "You cannot mean that," he replied, looking hurt. "Only a fortnight ago, you spoke of love, and now you wish to send me away?" He shook his head, disappointment showing upon his features. The emotion did not reach his eyes, though.

Beatrice laughed. She could not help it, for his words struck her as ridiculous. "You cannot mean what you just said," she told him boldly, lifting her chin and meeting his eyes without flinching. "As I recall, *you* were the one to send me away first. You sent me away when I needed you the most." She shook her head at him, finally realizing the kind of man he was. "You betrayed me. You promised me the world, and then you left me alone."

"I am here now," Lord Strumpton said simply, clearly unconcerned with anything he might have said before. "Perhaps this is a sign. Since you are now safely married, there is no reason for us to remain apart any longer."

Aghast, Beatrice stared at him, uncertain how she had ever thought herself in love with him. How could she not have seen the cold selfishness in his gaze? "I want you to leave and never return," Beatrice told him in a hard voice, not wanting there to be any doubt.

Unfortunately, Lord Strumpton remained unimpressed. "Do you truly think it wise to speak to me like this?" he inquired, cocking one eyebrow, a

rather disconcerting grin coming to his face. “After all, your husband would be most disappointed to learn of your... misconduct, would he not?” The grin upon his face stretched into a deeply smug smile, heavy with self-importance and superiority that made Beatrice wonder how she could ever have cared for him.

“My husband knows,” Beatrice said slowly and calmly, enjoying the way Lord Strumpton’s expression froze before his smug smile slowly evaporated, replaced by something that resembled not merely surprise but rather stunned shock and perhaps a little concern. “I told him. I would never have married him otherwise.”

Lord Strumpton’s eyes bulged. “You told him before—?” He raked a hand through his hair, still staring at her as though she had suddenly sprouted wings. Clearly, in his world, he could not conceive why any man would marry a woman carrying another man’s child.

He loves me, Beatrice thought to herself, realizing only in that very moment what it truly meant. *He truly and honestly loves me*. What had Charles said? That to love meant to put another first? Indeed, he had every moment of every day. “My husband is a most honorable man,” Beatrice told Lord Strumpton, her voice heavy with accusation. “It is such a shame that so few true gentlemen remain these days.”

The look upon Lord Strumpton’s face suggested that her accusation had not escaped him, for his expression darkened, and for a moment, Beatrice doubted whether it had been wise to taunt him like this.

Fortunately, only a heartbeat later, Charles abruptly crashed through the library doors, his broad shoulders filling the frame. His eyes widened when they spotted Beatrice, and he lunged toward her with long strides. Lord Strumpton hastily stepped aside to let him pass, and Charles shot him a threatening stare before embracing Beatrice in a tight hug, the tension of the moment evident. Yet there was also a sense of pure relief on Charles’s face.

Overwhelmed, Beatrice clung to her husband, returning his almost desperate embrace. The way his arms wrapped around her made her feel safe, and she understood from the relief she had seen upon his face that he had been truly afraid for her. Clearly, he had somehow noted that Lord Strumpton had gone after her, and yet his thoughts had never strayed into the direction of betrayal. He had not doubted her, her loyalty to him.

Not even for a moment.

“Are you well?” Charles asked almost frantically, his eyes searching her

face, his hands tight upon her arms as though he feared she could slip away.

“I am,” Beatrice replied in a trembling voice. “Truly, I am.” She sniffled as emotions tightened her throat, her gaze seeking his. “What are you doing here?”

Charles looked as though he were about to speak. Then, however, he closed his eyes, briefly shook his head and then straightened. When he looked at her once more, the expression in his eyes no longer burned with desperate concern, with emotions barely held in check. No, he had slipped on a mask, shielding himself from her gaze. “I noticed his absence from the ballroom,” he told her with a glare in Lord Strumpton’s direction, “and... and I was concerned for you.” He took a step back, and involuntarily, Beatrice’s hands grasped his, staying his retreat.

A look of utter confusion came to Charles’s face, and yet there was hope there as well.

CHAPTER 22

HOME



All the way from the ballroom to the library, checking rooms left and right despite his sense of certainty where Beatrice would have retreated, Charles had reminded himself that it would not serve him to lash out at Lord Strumpton. If Beatrice still cared for him, he needed to tread carefully. Still, Lord Strumpton's intentions could not be good, and it was paramount that Charles rid them of this so-called gentleman.

Finding them together in the library momentarily knocked the air from Charles's lungs, fear rising in his heart that hers might be in peril once more. As much as he hated seeing her with Strumpton, Charles could simply not bear to see her in pain. Her heartbreak had been his, and although he wished to send Strumpton to the ends of the earth, he knew he could not do so if she begged him to refrain.

And then he had embraced her, his arms pressing her against his chest. He held her so tightly that he had felt her heart beat against his own, loath to release her. It had been an impulsive act, like their mistletoe kiss. He had never meant to hold her so tightly or for so long, yet he could not help himself.

And then, only belatedly, Charles had realized that she clung to him as well.

Instantly, his heart soared and hope flared to life in such a way that it terrified him. As much as he loved her, he needed to guard his heart until such a moment that her affection for him might deepen. And so, he reeled in his emotions, his mind focused on removing Lord Strumpton from their lives.

"I noticed his absence from the ballroom," Charles growled under his breath, casting a hateful glare in Strumpton's direction. "And... And I was

concerned for you.” He took a step back, determined to face Strumpton here and now, when he felt Beatrice’s hands tighten upon his, holding him back.

Tears shimmered in her eyes, and yet the smile that touched her lips made him go weak in the knees. Again, hope flared, and Charles eyed her curiously, wondering what it was he was seeing, wondering if perhaps he was dreaming.

It was the sound of Lord Strumpton shifting upon his feet that drew Charles’s attention back to the other man in the room. One hand remained clasped in Beatrice’s as he turned to face his rival for his wife’s heart. “You’re a fool,” he told Lord Strumpton with a wide smile, noting the man’s surprise with satisfaction. “You lost her. You had your chance, and you wasted it.” His hand tightened possessively upon Beatrice’s, and to his utter surprise, she squeezed his in return. Yet Charles did not dare turn his head, his gaze fixed upon Lord Strumpton. “Now, she’s mine. Mine alone.” Oh, to speak so was boastful of him and petty and probably not very wise. Yet Charles could not help himself.

Lord Strumpton regarded him with an odd expression in his gaze. Then, a slow, almost devilish smile spread across his face. “The child she carries is mine, though,” he taunted Charles.

Behind him, Charles heard Beatrice draw in a sharp breath. He could feel her hand tremble and knew that she still blamed herself for what had happened. In truth, though, Charles wondered where they would be today if he had not come upon her in that heartbreaking moment, if it had never happened.

Holding Lord Strumpton’s gaze, Charles had never felt so certain in his life. “This child,” he told the other man, “is ours. Beatrice’s and mine. I will be his or her father, and if it is a boy, then he will be my heir, not yours.” A deep smile claimed his face, and he knew he did not regret a single word he had spoken.

Aghast, Lord Strumpton stared at him, clearly not having expected this.

“Leave,” Charles insisted, nodding toward the door. “Now.”

The red of humiliation darkened Lord Strumpton’s cheeks, and he straightened his shoulders. “But I was invited,” he replied foolishly.

“I am revoking the invitation,” Charles snarled then once more nodded toward the door, exhaling a sigh of relief when Lord Strumpton turned upon his heel and stormed out, huffing and puffing indignantly as he went.

Then, slowly, Charles turned back around to face his wife. Tears still

shimmered in her eyes, and the expression upon her face made him hope that...

“Did you truly mean what you said?” Beatrice asked, her voice trembling as she tapped a finger to the corner of her eye, catching a tear that spilled over. “About my child? About... our child?”

Charles nodded. “Yes, I did.” His hands wrapped tightly around hers.

“Listen,” Beatrice began, her gaze unsteady, “about before, about the... kiss,” she bit her lower lip. “I need to tell you that—”

Charles lifted a hand to stop her. “There is no need,” he assured her, worried about what she might say. She did not look offended or about to chide him for taking such liberties; yet Charles knew he had overstepped a line. “I apologize for what happened,” he said a bit sheepishly. “I never meant to... kiss you like that, but I was swept away in the moment, I suppose.”

Beatrice chuckled, her face transforming into an image of utter joy. Her hands slipped from his and grasped the sides of his face as she pushed closer, looking up into his eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize,” she whispered against his lips, brushing her mouth against his ever so softly. “I was swept away as well. I did not expect it, and it confused me. That’s why I rushed off. I’m sorry I did, but I needed a moment to myself.”

Thunderstruck, Charles stared at her, barely aware of how his hands settled upon her waist, drawing her ever closer.

“You’re a good man,” she told him, and inwardly, Charles cringed. “You’ve become the most wonderful friend to me.” Indeed, this was not what he wanted to hear. “Yet only when you kissed me did I realize how deeply I’ve come to care for you.” Disbelief lingered in her eyes. “I never even considered it after so short a time, after thinking my heart lost to another.” Her hands upon his face tightened. “Now, though, I realize that my heart only ever beat for you.”

Still staring at his wife, Charles knew not what to say. He could barely blink or breathe, let alone form any sort of coherent thought. Her words echoed through his mind, and yet he did not dare to believe them. Joy surged through him, and yet he willed it to back down, afraid to lose again what now seemed within arm’s reach. “There is no need,” Charles finally said, needing to be absolutely certain, “to pretend. I care for you, and I shall always care for you even if you cannot—”

“Did you not hear what I said?” Beatrice exclaimed, a touch of annoyance

in her gaze now. "I love you, Charles. Can you hear the words I'm saying?"

Charles laughed. He could not help it. "Yes, I can. Only I'm afraid to believe them." He exhaled slowly then rested his forehead against hers, both their eyes closing for a moment of peace. "Tell me what it is you want."

"I want you," Beatrice replied instantly, her voice strong and determined. "I want a life with you. I want what we had this past week. I want to laugh with you and dance with you in the snow or in the library. I want to be a family. All of us. I want everyone we love close by and never far apart. I want our child to be loved, truly loved, and find love one day as well."

Charles chuckled. "Well, perhaps I haven't told you yet," he lifted his head and met her gaze, "however, it is a Whickerton family tradition to marry for love and nothing else."

Beatrice loved the sound of that. "Truly?" she teased, remembering when he had first told her, remembering how awful she had felt to have robbed him of his own chance for love. "A tradition, you say? For how long?"

"Well, let me think." His gaze shifted sideways as though he were calculating a rather complicated mathematical equation. "We are now the second generation to do so." He grinned at her.

Beatrice laughed. "Already the second? That is quite an impressive record, I must say."

Charles sighed, his gaze sobering. "You know I love you as well, but this, is this truly what you want?"

Beatrice nodded. "As long as you promise that we'll never stop dancing in the snow, I'll agree to anything." She hugged him tightly, her arms slung around his neck, feeling the wonderful sensation of his heart beat in tandem with her own. "I might have another request, though."

Charles's brows rose in question, and Beatrice thought a smile teasing his lips suited him quite wonderfully.

"Will you kiss me again?" she asked, worrying her lower lip despite knowing that he would not deny her. "And again tomorrow? And the day after that? And a year from now?"

"Did I not promise to make you smile again?" Charles whispered against her lips. "To make you happy?"

"I do recall something of the kind, yes."

"Well, then..." Charles kissed her gently, cradling her in his arms with infinite care. He tasted her lips as she closed her eyes, surrendering to the pleasure of his embrace. She felt the warmth of his body against hers, and the

electricity of his touch coursing through her veins. He pulled her closer, their hearts beating in unison, and the world around them melted away. Nothing else mattered except them and this moment.

Their first.

She held him tightly, savoring the gentle caress of his fingertips, and the love that seemed to flow between them. She felt safe in his arms and finally allowed herself to simply *be*. Her spirit felt soothed, and the walls that encased her heart melted away. She was home.

EPILOGUE



Whickerton Grove, England, August 1772 (or a variation thereof)

Seven months later

Exhausted, Beatrice sank back into the pillows as her child's cries filled the chamber. Charles was at her side, placing a kiss upon her forehead, his pale face bathed in warm sunlight. "Are you all right?" His eyes searched her face before he craned his neck to look toward the doctor. "Is she all right?"

His voice was tight with concern, and Beatrice gathered her strength to reassure him. "I am fine. Merely... tired. So very tired." A chuckle drifted from her lips as she forced her eyes open once more. "Where's my child?" Indeed, she had never heard anything more wonderful than the soft wailing that drifted through their chamber.

With the babe bundled up warmly, the midwife stepped toward them, a wide smile upon her face as she looked from Beatrice to her husband. "It's a boy," she announced, beaming, no doubt certain that a boy was always most welcome to any peer of the realm. Of course, the midwife could not know the circumstances that had brought their family together, and months ago, Beatrice would have flinched at the thought that her child would be a boy.

Now, though, everything was different.

Gently, Charles took their son from the midwife's arms, his eyes aglow and fixed upon the boy's little face. As much as Beatrice longed to hold her child, she was utterly mesmerized by the sight before her eyes. Indeed,

Charles looked like a father through and through, pride in his gaze and tears streaming down his cheeks.

Seating himself on the bed beside her, Charles handed her their son. “Here,” he whispered, awe tinging his voice. “Go to Mama.” He scooted closer, wrapping an arm around them both.

Beatrice cursed under her breath as tears streamed down her face, blurring her vision and all but hiding her son’s precious little face from her.

“He’s perfect,” Charles whispered beside her. “We are a family now.” He smiled down at her and placed a kiss upon her forehead.

Gently, Beatrice traced a finger down her son’s cheek and across his chin. She softly tapped it to his little nose, absolutely mesmerized to hold him in her arms, to look into his eyes and have him look back at her. These were his first moments, and she vowed she would do everything within her power to ensure that all the ones that came after were as happy as possible. “What shall we name him?” she whispered; her voice choked with tears as she looked up at her husband. “Any ideas?”

Charles sighed and thought for a moment. “What do you think of Troy?” he asked tentatively. “It is my father’s middle name.”

Beatrice nodded, deeply touched. “It sounds perfect.” Indeed, Troy was a wonderful name, and it proved beyond any doubt that Charles was Troy’s father in every way that mattered. Life truly could be perfect.

“I’m so grateful,” Beatrice murmured, seeking her husband’s gaze, “that you did not leave me alone that night at the ball when I told you to go.” She shook her head, unable to imagine what might have been if he had. “Thank you for being so adamant.”

Charles grinned at her wickedly. “I shall remind you of this the next time you call me stubborn.”

Beatrice laughed when a knock came on the door, and Lady Whickerton poked her head in only a second later. “May we come in?” she asked with a wide smile.

“You made it!” Charles exclaimed, waving them forward.

In the next instant, the door flew open, allowing in not only Lord and Lady Whickerton but also Lizzie following upon their heels. “Where’s the baby?” the girl exclaimed, bouncing as she walked.

“We’ve come to meet the next generation of Whickertons,” Jasper exclaimed, one arm wrapped around his wife, “and welcome him or her to the family.”

The three of them moved closer, peering expectantly at the little bundle in Beatrice's arms.

"It's a boy," Charles told them proudly, and stepped aside to grant his little sister a better view. "We've named him Troy."

Edith smiled while Jasper seemed a bit taken aback, his eyes suddenly misting with tears. "He's beautiful," Lizzie exclaimed. "May I hold him?" she asked pleadingly, her hands clasped together.

Beatrice nodded then gently laid her son into his aunt's arms as the rest of the family crowded around them, every single face lit up with joy.

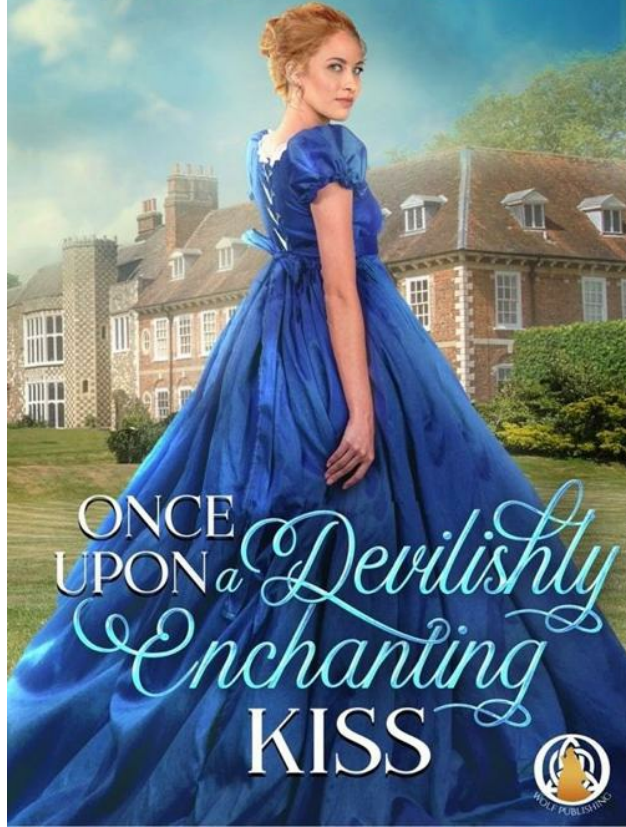
Indeed, the future was a bright one, and Beatrice could hardly wait.

THE END

Thank you for reading *Once Upon a Not at All Innocent Kiss* by Bree Wolf!

Have you read the Whickerton saga yet? Of course, this is not the last time Lady Whickerton meddles to ensure her family's happiness. There are many more loves to be found in the *Whickertons in Love* series! Start with book 1, [Only Upon a Devilishly Enchanting Kiss](#).

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Prequel to the series: [Once Upon A Kiss Gone Horribly Wrong](#)

Christmas prequel: [Once Upon an Aggravatingly Heroic Kiss](#)

The Whickertons in Love



ABOUT BREE

USA Today bestselling and award-winning author, Bree Wolf has always been a language enthusiast (though not a grammarian!) and is rarely found without a book in her hand or her fingers glued to a keyboard. Trying to find her way, she has taught English as a second language, traveled abroad and worked at a translation agency as well as a law firm in Ireland. She also spent loooong years obtaining a BA in English and Education and an MA in Specialized Translation while wishing she could simply be a writer. Although there is nothing simple about being a writer, her dreams have finally come true.

“A big thanks to my fairy godmother!”

Currently, Bree has found her new home in the historical romance genre, writing Regency novels and novellas. Enjoying the mix of fact and fiction, she occasionally feels like a puppet master (or mistress? Although that sounds weird!), forcing her characters into ever-new situations that will put their strength, their beliefs, their love to the test, hoping that in the end they will triumph and get the happily-ever-after we are all looking for.

If you're an avid reader, [sign up for Bree's newsletter](#) on www.breewolf.com as she has the tendency to simply give books away. Find out about freebies, giveaways as well as occasional advance reader copies and read before the book is even on the shelves!

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THE DARING DEBUTANTE

A DUCHESS SOCIETY NOVELLA

TRACY SUMNER



The Daring Debutante by Tracy Sumner

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“Love sought is good but given unsought is better.”
~William Shakespeare

CHAPTER I

WHERE CHILDHOOD COMBATANTS AGREE TO
DISAGREE



*A gaming hell on the Limehouse docks
London, 1846*

A rock striking the windowpane pulled Nigel Streeter from sleep. A deep one, when he didn't sleep deeply. He reached for the side of the bed typically occupied by his lazy effort at contentment before recalling his latest paramour, Delilah, hadn't been happy about the reports—erroneous but believable—that he was bedding a Drury Lane actress.

Or an opera singer. Or a widowed countess.

Nigel couldn't recall which narrative he'd been given by the scandal rags this time.

Delilah had vowed to never speak to him again—and this he believed as much as she had the rumors.

When another ping rattled the glass, he groaned and stumbled to his feet. His Bainbridge timepiece was on the dresser across the room, but the muted moonlight creeping in around the velvet drapes placed the time at a few hours before dawn. He and his factotum, Jerkins, had closed the gambling den at half past midnight, after sending a dozen nobs scurrying into the night with less in their pockets than when they'd entered.

The Devil's Lair was, as planned when it opened twenty years before, a destination among destinations. Once a rotting Limehouse warehouse, membership was now more coveted than an appointment with the Queen.

Grumbling beneath his breath, Nigel muscled into his shirt and danced into a pair of trousers in the near darkness. He couldn't hang out the window without a stitch of clothing on, now could he? It was probably that foxed

baron he'd banished, returning to recoup the blunt he'd misplaced at the faro tables. His father's closest friend and business partner, Xander Macauley, had trained him to manage the Devil's Lair with shrewdness *and* compassion. They weren't going to make their fortunes from the *misfortune* of others. One day, the baron would thank him for saving his inheritance.

Although gaming hells dealt in desperation. And Nigel was the last man in England to discount what a desperate soul would do.

Cursing as he recalled his dreaded past when it was ages *in* the past, he stomped to the window, opened the squeaky casement, and leaned into the night. A night not unlike the cold, misty one when Tobias Streeter found him shivering beneath an overturned cart, his body racked with the effects of scurvy.

He squinted as a headache settled behind his eyes. *Ah, hell.* Arabella Macauley was standing in the alley in all her newfound glory. A carriage, having deposited her at his doorstep, was rolling away from her as she waved.

The urge to march down there and wring her neck was nearly overpowering.

Instead, when she looked up at him, he gave her a slashing gesture that meant, *meet me around back*, and strode to the staircase without stopping to yank on his boots. Seconds were of the essence when his employer's only daughter, the apple of his bloody *eye*, was standing in a rookery passage in a cream-colored satin bit without a lick of protection that Nigel could see. The oak banister creaked as he manhandled it on the way down, a repair he added to his running list.

He couldn't wait to hear what calamity she'd created this time.

Actually, he could. Wait, that is. But Arabella blasted Macauley had, for some unearthly reason, come to him. And Nigel owed her father, the man he considered his uncle and his *friend*, more than he could ever repay. For guidance over the years. For patience during his oft-troubled adolescence. For never looking down on him because he'd been born in a gutter, although Xander Macauley had been born in one himself.

So that, he figured, was that.

But he wasn't going to be fucking agreeable about it.

Forget about the neighbors. Forget about her feelings.

Forget about, for *once*, the blessed decorum that had been gently beaten into him. It felt brilliant to act like a brute every once in a while.

Therefore, when he reached the landing, he wrenched open the service door and yelled, "Get in here, you troublesome chit!"

Nigel needn't have worried about offending her. After stepping around him like he was something deceased she'd encountered in the street, Arabella sashayed up the gaming hell stairs like she owned the place.

Which, in a roundabout way, he supposed she did.

With the luck of fate and being adopted by the most incredible man he'd ever known, Nigel did, too.

The gas sconces he'd installed last month flickered as they traversed the corridor, tossing shadowed silhouettes across the Axminster runner. With modest success, Nigel managed to ignore Arabella's bottom swaying in her stylish, form-fitting gown. However, the enticing scent of floral decadence attached to her crawled into his nose, then his brain, before landing in a part of his body that had never been involved before.

Not once. Not with her.

The irritating girl had turned into an irritating woman. A beautiful one.

Her poor parents were all he could think of.

"The gallery," he snapped and motioned her down the first-floor hallway. His bedchamber was on the second, and he damn well wasn't inviting her there.

"I know where it is," she said, her ever-present smile in place. She gave his bare feet a long glance, her lips turning up at the corners. "I'm a Macauley, remember? And you're a Streeter, two names forever linked in this Town."

His temper sparking, he let her, and that shapely arse, get ahead of him, only to find her standing militantly at the gallery's balustrade when he entered the room, pouring whisky into a tumbler he'd not invited her to fill.

He shut the door and leaned against it, watching her with a sense of doom.

Or destiny.

One of those gut reactions a boy raised on the mean streets rarely ignored. His heart raced for the unfathomable span of ten telling seconds before he yanked himself free of his helpless captivation. "What are you doing alone in this part of town in the dead of night without so much as a thin cloak for warmth? I've known you to be reckless but never senseless."

She watched him over the rim of her glass, eyes the color of smoke blazing. So unusual a shade, the *ton* had taken to calling them the Macauley

grays ages ago. She was the only female in her family to own them, and like her father and her uncle, the Earl of Stanford, they carried a devastating presence. “If I had anyone else to ask this small favor, I would. It’s not like you and I have done anything but argue since we were children. Your foul disposition is charming to loads of women, according to the accounts in the newspaper, but it’s not something I miss when I’m away from it.”

He wasn’t buying this admission, not for one *minute*. They weren’t enemies... but they weren’t friends, either. “Your brothers?”

Taking a sip, she shook her head. “Kit’s in Scotland with Dash, acquiring some new mechanism for the distillery. Tate is barely fifteen, and no help to anyone at the moment, including himself. Ryder is in the middle of exams at Cambridge, and if he fails another subject, my father is threatening to let the Duchess Society employ him as an investigator.” She laughed into her wrist, the sound chillingly lovely. He worked hard to disregard the desire that clawed through him. “Can you imagine, a *male* matchmaker? Your mother would love that.”

Nigel brooded from his spot against the door. This chit was a problem—and she’d always been a problem. Mouthy. Too intelligent for her own good. A pretty child with the promise of disastrous beauty. She rode her mount like the wind had taken her and made her own choices when no one was looking. Heedless in the way of the men in the Leighton Cluster, the ridiculous name given to his family of misfits. It was no wonder Arabella Macauley thought she could do anything considering the freedom she’d been given and the liberal views of every woman who’d had a hand in raising her.

Crossing to his troublesome dilemma, Nigel slipped the glass from her hand, and polished off the contents. She didn’t move, but the pulse in her throat burst into rhythm. “What is it you need, imp, on this dark and frosty night? Please recall I’m seldom asked to save the day. I didn’t count on ever having to save one of yours.”

Her gaze skipped over his hand to his face. His temper flamed when he saw a hint of compassion embedded in her silver eyes. To survive, he worked in a tarring house after escaping the orphanage, and the brutal employment left scars on his skin that depicted his past like marks upon a tombstone.

“Out with it,” he murmured, losing patience by the second.

Arabella braced her hip on the balustrade, her blinding smile finally showing signs of defeat. “My companion of several years, Katherine, the only person who managed to endure my stubborn nature and still enjoy being

around me, ran off with Lord Gadsby. They met at his country party last spring, you may recall the event. Remember, it rained for days on end, and we all practically went mad from boredom? In any case, out of respect for true love, I promised her I'd give them enough time to make it to Gretna Green. If I alert my family now, they might be stopped. You know the baron's mother is a horror." She twisted her skirt in her fist and gave it a shake. "We got slightly emotional during our farewell, and I left my cloak and gloves in Gadsby's carriage."

Nigel clenched his jaw, his headache pulsing. "And you had him bring you *here*?"

"I told Gadsby if he breathed a word of my involvement, you'd do to him what you did to that earl at Epsom." Arabella chewed on her bottom lip, a generous one, he hated to admit. She did have the loveliest pair, plump and the pale pink of a rose petal.

"The earl said something unpleasant about my mother and her damned matchmaking."

Arabella tried without success to hide her smile. "I merely need a ride home. With someone who is used to breaking the rules."

Nigel counted to ten, suppressing the urge to pitch his glass to the gaming floor a story below. "I haven't stolen a bloody thing since I was eleven years old, imp. Not one pocket pinched in over twenty years. If you're seeking a dishonest gambit, I'm not your man. I won't lie to your parents after what they've done for me."

Her lovely lips parted in shock. Then she reached out, grasping his wrist. He shook her off, but not before acknowledging her touch flowed through him like water down a fall. "Oh, no, Nigel. *No*. You're my mother's favorite, outside her own sons. You've employed dozens of her rescues from the workhouse at the Devil's Lair. I only meant the times with William and Worth, those escapades with your brothers. And mine. The races down Bond, swimming in the Serpentine. You're family, or close to it, so... here I am."

For some reason, this rationalization didn't suit.

Nigel was a decade older than Arabella Macauley. He was out of her league because of his low birth even if no one discussed it, and she, in some fashion due to lack of experience and age, was out of his.

And they *weren't* family.

He wouldn't want to press his sister back against a marble column and find out if she tasted as good as she looked.

He stared into his glass, morose to admit this sickening development. “I’ll get you home safely before dawn. I can pick any lock put before me. Just remember to avoid the third step going up the servants’ staircase. It creaks loudly enough to wake the house.”

“How do you know this?” she whispered.

He turned away from her, hoping the searing heat racing down his spine was due to the roaring hearth fire. “You’re not the first Macauley I’ve helped out of a catastrophe, imp.”

“We won’t have to lie. But my father won’t have to find out you’re involved, either.”

Nigel yanked on his boots with a silent curse. Because if that happened, friend or no, Xander Macauley would murder him on the spot.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE A HELLION WONDERS HOW TO CHANGE HER
IMAGE



Nigel Streeter wasn't ever going to notice her.
Too young. Too foolish. Too rash. Silly. Senseless. Cheerful.
She'd heard it all.

Bella raised her spoon and stared at her distorted reflection in the polished silver. Perhaps he liked dark hair. That countess he'd bandied about last year had strands the color of coal dust while Bella's was the dull color of wheat. Although it was thick and had the slightest hint of curl to keep things interesting. It was always escaping its confines, and once, when they were children, Nigel had wrapped a muddy strand around his scarred finger and given it a tug.

Sighing, Bella popped the utensil onto her plate, then murmured an apology to the guests assembled around the table. One thing was certain. She hadn't inherited her father's devious streak and her mother's intractability for nothing. She'd been raised on stories about Pippa Darlington fighting for Xander Macauley.

And winning.

The notion of continuing this tradition into the next generation seemed a worthy goal to her.

Her mother held monthly dinners for the Leighton Cluster, as her extended family had been called since, well—Bella gave an internal shrug—forever. Of course, the moniker coming from the close-knit relationship to the Duke of Leighton. The original group, although it was hard to get everyone together at one sitting these days, included two dukes, a viscount's bastard, an earl, her father, Xander Macauley (the earl's half brother), one of the most famous writers in England, and a man rumored to be a former agent for the

Crown. And their wives. And pets.

And now, their children.

Lots and lots of children.

Bella had grown up surrounded by family and friends. Adventures. Frank discussions. Freedom rarely afforded women. Tutors providing a robust, if superfluous, education.

She'd sailed on the Countess of Leighton's ships. Helped her mother, Pippa, liberate young men and women from dismal conditions in rookery workhouses. Gazed through the Earl of Stanford's telescopes on many a starry night. Attended book readings for Dash Campbell, her father's protégé and partner in their whisky distilleries, among other enterprises. She'd sorted igneous rocks with the Duke of Mercer for his collection at the British Museum. Debated with Hildegard Streeter about matrimony and equality. Broken up scuffles—oh, so many brawls—amongst the men.

The one thing she hadn't done was kiss Nigel Streeter.

Bella propped her chin on her fist and drew a circle in her gravy with her pinkie. When he'd snatched her tumbler away in the Devil's Lair gallery, her knees had gone soft as bread fresh from the oven. His moodiness vexed her even as it drew her like a moth to candlelight. The moment had spun out, a fantasy. She'd never realized his eyes were not truly a deep shade of brown but a more molten gold with flecks of amber running throughout.

It had been one week since then, and she'd thought of little else. Dreamed of little else.

After all, it was the closest the man had come to actually *touching* her.

Except for the hair-tugging incident in the summer of 1836.

Her gaze drifted across the dining table and two seats to the left until she located him. Casually, as if it wasn't of the utmost importance that she fulfilled her desire to do so. As usual, Nigel wore a slightly bewildered expression that stated he wasn't sure he belonged in this familial group. Then he laughed at something his brother, Worth, said, his teeth flashing in the chandelier's champagne glow, and her blood sizzled in her veins.

Even if she didn't *like* him some days, he was an incredibly attractive man. Tall, broad of shoulder, lean of hip. A chiseled jaw not unlike one on an ancient Greek. His skin had an olive tone that she thought made him look a little sinister. A pirate or a Romani, like his father, Tobias. Women giggled and made simpering fools of themselves trying to gain his attention, partly because he appeared not to care. She'd seen it happen a hundred times.

Ignored it when she could and punched her pillow into submission the nights she couldn't.

Because, above any arguments she posed with herself, seeing Nigel Streeter made her heart trip. Across a ballroom, a dinner table, a lawn, any brief glance and there went her breath, racing from her lungs. She longed to trace the scars on his hands, and she'd finally noted just this week, the ones on his feet.

More than his good looks, the lingering sadness swirling about him struck her. Every. Blessed. Time.

An aching need to comfort that she couldn't explain.

Not to mention the new sensation that had begun to settle between her thighs, what she could only describe as a raging fever in a *very* private area. Nigel was the lone man to make her feel this way—when she'd been kissed five times with varying degrees of enjoyment.

It was the type of gut reaction a girl raised to think for herself rarely ignored.

“Arabella has another admirer. Woo-hoo, I hear wedding bells!”

Bella glanced down the table at her brother, Tate. He was grinning, a fleck of potato caught in the corner of his mouth. Although she loved him dearly, she couldn't wait for this charming stage of adolescence to end. “Whatever are you going on about, you toad.”

He shoveled in another spoonful of food, laughter bubbling from his throat. He'd gotten their mother's moss-green eyes, and they flashed with amusement. “Did you see the roses in the foyer? Gobs of red and white. That silly nob Ambrose sent them over just before supper.”

“Tate Macauley,” her mother, Pippa, said and rapped his fingers with her butter knife, “you're trying my patience today.”

Tate cradled his hand against his chest. “I didn't mean to break it. The ball got away from me, and that ugly vase was sitting right in its path.”

Her father, Xander, cleared his throat, which meant business. “What's this about flowers? And who the bloody hell is Ambrose?”

“Lord Marcus Ambrose. He's the second son of the Marquess of Derring. Word is he's on a hunt for a fortune to save his estate in Kent. The older son is going through blunt like he's on a royal assignment, as the marquess apparently taught him to. I've had to boot both of them from the gaming hell twice this month.”

All gazes swiveled to Nigel as he rarely voiced anything resembling

gossip.

“My Bell isn’t old enough to be courted,” Xander murmured in a tone that held the lethal edge of a blade. “The dolt should talk to me first before sending gifts. Only proper to get the father’s approval, innit?”

Bella frowned. “Papa, please.”

Her father winked, his tender smile the thing that had made her glow since she was a little girl. “Precious daughter, listen to the wise one at this table.”

Shifting her attention, Bella stared until Nigel had no choice but to catch her eye. And there, deeply embedded amidst shades of gold, was a sliver of... annoyance.

Confused, she sat back until the chair’s flat wooden slates pressed into her spine. Could this be the feminine power her mother had told her about? When a man was interested but didn’t *want* to be? Nigel had seemed plausibly attracted to her at the Devil’s Lair.

Or perhaps that was merely the same exasperation she always generated in him.

She decided to test the theory.

Smoothing her hand down her bodice, she flushed when his gaze tracked the move. “I’m twenty-one, Papa. Twenty-two the day before Christmas. Old enough for a suitor. Or three.”

Nigel lifted his glass to his lips, his expression not altering a whit. “Ambrose tumbled off his mount at Eton. Every damned time he tried. It was sad, actually.” He sipped, his neck pulling as he swallowed. “You know what they say about men who can’t ride.”

Xander laughed and cut into his roasted duck with enough force to crack his plate. “I won’t have a toff who needs funds and can’t ride a bloody horse going after my little girl. Strike that swell off the list.” He held up his knife, staring intently at the utensil. “In fact, burn the list with the bleeding roses. We’ll not need the Duchess Society for this match.”

Her mother, Pippa, glanced between her and Nigel with a reflective hum. Lightly, she kicked Bella’s ankle beneath the table. “Lord Marcus is quite charming in a”—Pippa drew a circle in the air with her fork—“staid, aristocratic sort of manner. He’s rather pedestrian, certainly, but who’s to say what attracts a young lady these days? And darling, Bella is only a year or so younger than I was when—”

“Stop it, luv,” Xander whispered, though his eyes were dewy.

Bella exhaled in a huff. Now, her parents would whisper in their secret language and hold hands underneath the table, then neglect to join the party in the parlor for after-dinner refreshments. Their routine disappearing act.

“Don’t forget, Lord Marcus is only twenty-four or so himself,” Bella added with a sly look sent in Nigel’s direction. “Quite acceptable.”

Nigel’s lips held the beginning of a frown before he tipped his head in acknowledgement of their age disparity. Then the disconnectedness that seemed a part of him settled into place.

Leaving Bella with the stinging sensation she’d overplayed her hand.



Nigel felt his father’s presence before the man the *ton* had once called the Rogue King of Limehouse Basin stepped out of the veranda’s dense shadows and into the frigid moonlit night. Tobias Streeter halted at the balustrade, hip to hip with his son. Digging in his waistcoat pocket, he offered a bamboo toothpick without comment.

With a half shrug, Nigel extinguished his cheroot on the railing’s rough stone. Taking the toothpick, he slipped it between his teeth. “It’s not a habit, Toby. Occasional smoke is all.”

Tobias sighed, his own toothpick bobbing. His black hair had gone completely gray two years ago, but it was as thick as ever, adding a striking elegance to his looks. “Toby, is it? So, we’re there today.” Searching his coat pocket this time, he located his flask. His wife, Hildy, had given it to him on their first anniversary, and he carried it everywhere. Nigel glanced at the dented silver etched with the initial S surrounded by a circle of hearts, thinking it spoke perfectly of his parents’ marriage. “What happened? And may I remind you to never, *ever* call your mother Hildy again. The shawl you gave her did make up for it, but we don’t want a repeat of the tears.”

Properly chastised, Nigel took the metal canister and lifted it to his lips. Among other ventures, his family produced the finest whisky outside Scotland, and it flowed down his throat in a soothing flood. He wanted to say nothing had happened... but his father knew him better than any person on earth. Better some days than he knew himself. “Down by the docks today, I ran into Coop Andrews, a lad from the workhouse.”

“Ah,” Tobias said. Nothing more. Not a push. Just an offer to listen, as

always.

Nigel scrubbed his fist over his lips, hoping to take away the sting that was deep, deep in his heart. “He looked ten years older than me, maybe more. Life lived on the hard road. I was terrified to tell him, when he asked, that I was purchasing a terrace in Belgravia. One that my father designed. That I managed the most successful gaming den in London. Leaving me able to buy a bigger manse than I know what to do with. And another friend from those days, well, they found him washed up on the riverbank last month.” He took another sip, the alcohol blending nicely with the wine he’d consumed at dinner. “That could have been me if not for you. Either of those scenarios if I’d made it this long at all.”

Tobias held his hand out, took the flask, and drank deeply.

Nigel knew his family worried about the difficulty he had escaping his past. He’d grown up with love, siblings, animals, wealth. A fine education. Travel. However, the eleven years before that were burned into his skin like the memories had been branded. Those dismal days were a part of him. Dinners like these, surrounded by happiness and fine china and laughter, made him feel like a stray mutt tossed in for charitable measure. By God, he didn’t know his birthday or even his real name.

Nigel had sounded good to a boy shivering on a damp orphanage mattress in the middle of winter.

Tobias leveled his shoulders, preparing for battle. “Are we going to have this argument again? My family is comprised *completely* of circumstance and fate, Son. Don’t think the slice of blue blood from a viscount, who tossed aside a Romani boy he sired, brings me any higher than you. Because it doesn’t. And your mother’s father, a lofty earl, was a nightmare in every way. He left her with nothing but dismal memories.”

“I don’t think it’s in my future to have what you have with her. I seem to possess a gift for brief associations. Like mist, emotion that evaporates quickly and leaves no trace.”

Tobias tapped the flask against the balustrade. “I wanted Hildy more than I wanted grief or guilt or any of the emotions that would have kept me from taking her. From letting her take me. Because I didn’t belong in a place that she didn’t *want* to belong meant nothing compared to what we gained. If you find someone, don’t let them slip away because of your exclusion from bloody *Debrett’s*.” Tobias laughed, a cunning sound that told Nigel his father thought he knew something that no one else did. “Or age. Don’t let that hold

you up, either.”

“*Christ*, can’t this family leave matchmaking behind for one second?”

Tobias turned to him, stunned. “I’m no bloody matchmaker. That’s your mother.” He extended the flask, giving Nigel the final draught. “The girl gazes at you like Pippa gazed at Xander back in the day. Frightening, the resemblance and the determination. The Macauley grays staring back at you. And you see how that gambit turned out. Wrapped around Pippa’s finger, Xander is. *Still*.”

“They’re not the only ones. You and mother are...” Nigel gestured, not willing to admit what his parents were.

As in love as any couple he’d ever seen, that’s what.

Which was part of his problem, the ideal examples Nigel was up against.

Tobias chewed thoughtfully on his toothpick. “You could do worse, much worse. Arabella is lovely and spirited. Intelligent. A daredevil since she was in leading strings. You’d have to deal with her hellion of a father as yours by marriage, but you already hold him there, in your heart. Thankfully, her mother is wonderful.”

Nigel squinted into the narrow mouth of the flask. “She stopped by the Devil’s Lair last week. In need of rescue.”

Tobias stilled, his exhalation piercing the night. Nigel was thrilled to leave his father speechless for once. “Well, well,” he finally murmured. “Checkmate.”

Nigel recapped the canister and passed it back to his father. “It wasn’t like that. Her companion, that giddy chit with the flaming red hair who talks nonstop, ran off with Gadsby. Arabella was merely giving them enough time to make it to Gretna before alerting anyone. She needed somewhere to hold for the evening, then an escort home.”

Tobias snorted, unconvinced. “And she came to you, did she?”

“Well, yes, but...”

Tobias hummed a response that only served to vex Nigel.

“Her brothers were otherwise engaged, and she couldn’t very well return home without a chaperone. We snuck into the domestics’ entrance—you know that lock isn’t worth shite—and that was that. I didn’t lay so much as a finger on the girl.”

His father chewed on his toothpick to keep from laughing. Nigel recognized this trick.

“I’ll repeat, it isn’t like that.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Tobias agreed, staring at the sky rather than meeting his son’s gaze.

“She smiles all the time, Papa, the most unburdened woman in England. Who could deal with that upon waking every day? A ray of sunshine lighting up the room. And you said not to think of it, but I *am* ten years older.”

“Eleven,” Tobias murmured, his breath fogging the air.

Nigel knocked the toe of his boot against the balustrade, scuffing the pristinely polished leather. “Exactly!”

“You’ve made your own choices, and I let you make them. Even if they ended up being mistakes, I let you. Because that’s what parents do. We make mistakes right along with our children. Someday, you’ll see how hard it is.” He bumped Nigel’s shoulder with his. “Out of all the enterprises we have, the distilleries, steam engine production, shipping, architecture, you chose the gaming piece of it. Since you were a boy, you’ve loved the Devil’s Lair. Fascinated would be the better word. After university, it was your decision to assume management, and you know what? You’ve tripled profits without ruining anyone in the process. We haven’t been blamed for an aristo losing his inheritance in, oh, going on seven years. And it was your idea to start purchasing cork in Tossa de Mar, which saves us thousands of pounds each year with whisky production. You earned that new home of yours, Son. Don’t talk yourself out of your victories. Or the things you deserve.”

Nigel tunneled his hand through his hair and watched a stray moonbeam dance across his arm. “What does this have to do with *her*?”

“Macauley’s little girl isn’t a little girl anymore, Nigel. If she sees something in you, I suppose I’m asking you to trust her judgment. Which I consider incredibly astute myself. What could it hurt to open your mind to the thought of her?” He laughed and finally caught his son’s gaze, and a searing pulse of love rippled through Nigel. “Maybe some of her happiness will rub off on you. Hildy’s did on me. I was almost as bad-tempered as you when I met her.”

He paused just long enough to make it seem as if he hadn’t thought of this himself. “I’ll consider it.” And he would.

Because he’d wanted to kiss her in the gallery last week, his little secret.

Tobias grinned, his toothpick dipping. “Son, you would have made an excellent solicitor.”

“Thank you, but I’d rather take their money at the tables.” Then he glanced at the sky alongside the man who’d given him everything.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE A MAN CONSIDERS OPENING HIS MIND AND HIS
HEART



Nigel wasn't especially surprised when Arabella Macauley showed up on his Belgravia doorstep two days later. Bracing his arm on the doorjamb, he refused to step aside to admit her. They stared as the silence took on its own melody, although he'd give it to her, she didn't back down for a second.

She tilted her head, the velvet ribbons on her bonnet dancing. It was an absurd shade of crimson that looked stunning against her skin. And those startling, smokey eyes.

He wished like hell he could forget about her eyes.

She gestured to the snow falling delicately around her. "Aren't you going to invite me in? It's quite chilly." Her breath sent up little vaporous puffs he imagined would taste like a confection.

Sighing, he stepped back to allow trouble to enter his new abode. "I don't suppose you have a chaperone crammed under that bonnet. One who won't run off to Scotland with an inebriated baron this time."

She laughed and glanced over her shoulder as she crossed his foyer, her rose-pink lips curving delightfully. And he realized with a dull pang that he *was* attracted. That he wanted to drag her upstairs to his partially furnished bedchamber and see if her skin was pink all over.

"I'm not properly staffed for guests," he growled, angry at himself, not her. Though it came out sounding a bit like both. In ragged shirtsleeves and trousers, he was also not *dressed* for guests. "I can offer tea or brandy but little else."

She held up a scuffed leather satchel. "I heard about your accident."

He flexed his hand, the slice on his forearm paining him like the devil,

truth be told. “It’s fine. Jerkins wrapped it up. A tussle with a titled gent who didn’t wish to leave his money behind when he’d spent all night losing it.”

She scrunched her nose, disapproving. “Your assistant? What does he know about medical concerns?”

Nigel closed the door with a snap and followed her down the corridor. Their footsteps echoed in the absence of furnishings. “What do *you* know about them? And Jerkins is the Lair’s factotum. Much more than an assistant, imp. He manages the tables and the security, two key pieces of any gaming enterprise.”

Arabella turned into the first parlor. Luckily, the one containing furniture. And a blazing fire in the hearth. “My apologies.”

Nigel grunted, although he recalled his father’s advice. *Let her in.*

And not simply to your home. This advice he heard in his mother’s loving but firm voice.

No, he replied to both of them.

Before Arabella could do it herself, Nigel was by her side, lifting her damp cloak from her shoulders. “Bloody hell, you must be freezing.”

She placed her satchel on the table and stretched her shoulders. “Actually, I’m not. I love winter. It’s my favorite season. Well, actually I appreciate things about each.” She began to remove her gloves one adorable finger at a time. “Quit frowning, will you? My father’s carriage is waiting just around the corner, so you needn’t worry like a crotchety old woman. Although it’s true, I am unaccompanied, as I have yet to secure a new companion. But the coachman is Billy Dawkins, you know, he’s been with us forever. He can serve as some sort of chaperone, right?”

A sad sort, Nigel thought. Folding her cloak over the armchair near the fire, he tried, *really* tried, not to stare at her breasts straining against her woolen bodice. She had marvelous breasts, and he hated to say he’d known this since she sprouted them five or so years ago.

Family friend or not, no man on earth could miss them.

As Arabella settled on the settee and began to fuss with the items in her bag, he poured tea in mismatched mugs meant for something stronger. It wasn’t the best she’d sample today, but he could make his own. He pressed his lips together when he thought to remind her that he wasn’t prepared for entertaining. *Yet.* Soon, he’d have every widow in Town visiting if he felt like it. Every actress. Every chit who cozied up to him in a ballroom or a dank parlor. They could waltz right up to his front door without a hint of

recrimination.

He didn't need Xander Macauley's wayward daughter tossing wet wood on his fire. Ruining what he considered a fairly good setup.

Because—and he didn't quite understand it himself as he made scant effort, and he was as lowborn as they came—women liked him. He had offers on an extremely regular basis. Many he didn't accept, but when he did, he'd admit to feeling lonelier *after* than before.

A problem he'd not found a solution for.

However, men had needs. He'd learned, to his benefit, that women did as well.

Patiently waiting until his attention circled back to her, his latest conundrum patted the vacant spot on the settee—which Nigel eyed like he would a den of snakes.

Nevertheless, he went, cradling the mugs in his scarred hands and wondering what the hell he was doing hosting Arabella Macauley in a terrace he'd yet to spend a night in. When what he was really doing was thinking about the color of her lips. Her slender fingers gliding over his chest. Wondering how she would taste if he spread her legs and showed her another world. His world.

Because Nigel Streeter knew next to nothing about love... but he knew *lots* about how to make a woman scream.

And he didn't believe in half measures.

Although lovemaking was a gift he wasn't going to share with this chit.

Perching on the edge of the brocade cushion, close to sliding off altogether, he handed her the mug and drank liberally from his own. She'd removed her bonnet, revealing hair the color of straw lit by sunlight. Wispy strands were curling about her jaw in glorious abundance.

Her gaze skipping about the parlor, Arabella sipped with absolutely no censure in her expression. About the chipped cup, the cold tea, his half-furnished calamity of a home. Now that he thought about it, he realized she never made him feel less, browbeaten, crowded (other than physically). As if he were forced to put on a show, a performance he was *always* staging in society. His long-gone, tattered rookery accent even came out now and again when he talked to her, unlocking a chest he'd wrapped chains around to keep it closed.

When he'd cherished pieces of that life, that boy.

In fact, there was a bookcase on the near wall, holding items from that

time which he'd rather not rationalize keeping.

Feeling bared, overexposing the private bits of him scattered about, he started talking to cover it. "You may notice the even finish on the windowpanes, almost no ripples. They were created using the new Fourcault process, which allows for continuous production of sheets of glass. My father's an architect, as you know, and he's suggesting use of them in the terraces he's designing. We're looking into investing in the enterprise, actually."

Her gaze circled back to him. Aside from acceptance, there was fondness shimmering in the dark pewter. She was an annoyance, indeed, but she was also a genuinely kind person—and a beautiful one. "This is your first home, isn't it? Aside from your rooms at the Albany?"

Surprised she knew about his stay at the men's residence in Piccadilly, he eyed her over the rim of his mug, the scent of chamomile and jasmine drifting to him. She smelled feminine and light, like her smiles. It was bloody unnerving when he could still see the wild child there as well. "It is."

"You know Queen Victoria is putting up a tree inside Buckingham Palace. And *decorating* it. One would look lovely, just there." She pointed to a lonesome corner, currently empty as the rest of the manse.

He glanced at the corner, imagining it.

Placing her mug on the crate serving as a side table, she dug into her satchel. "Give me your arm and let me see how your *factotum* did in his temporary role as nurse."

He hesitated, his trusty gut telling him this was going to change things between them. Forget about sex. This muted, gaslit chamber, the plink of rain that had turned to snow bouncing off those new windowpanes, felt more intimate. Disconcertingly so.

She held out her hand, flicking her fingers. *Come, now.*

Nigel sighed and set his mug aside, rolled his sleeve to the elbow, and extended his arm. It was a nasty gash from a jagged shard of a champagne flute that had hit the wall, then sliced right into him. Jerkins had indeed done a poor job bandaging it. The strip of cotton, not terribly clean in the first place, was caked with dried blood and clinging lazily to his forearm. Another scar, he realized, to add to the ones covering his hands and feet.

She gasped, temper sparking her gaze when it met his. "This is dreadful, Nigel. It could get infected, and then where would we be? Your father worries over his brood about as much as my father does over his."

He frowned, unable to argue this point. He grimaced, sucking air through his teeth when she began to remove the binding. When this was done, she uncapped a small bottle of rubbing alcohol and dipped a cotton pad into it.

Her touch was gentle but determined as she cleaned the wound. Pleasure, much stronger than any discomfort, flooded him. His heart turned over, slowly but with definite faithfulness.

Only his mother had touched him like this.

“Was this an excuse to see me?” he asked with a pained exhalation, hoping to change the tone of this encounter. Or make her cagey, at the very least.

She smiled, intent on her task. The ointment she was layering over the wound smelled horrific. “Of course, it was.”

Well, hell, he thought. *This could be deadly for both of us.*

“Nonetheless, look at this disaster in the making. Men,” she whispered as she wrapped a strip of luminous white cotton around his forearm. “I’ve been doctoring the Leighton Cluster’s wounds since I was a child. My mother said I’d make a capable physician, were it an acceptable profession for women. Although my father said if it was my dream, he’d move heaven and earth to make it happen. Why, I’ve never once fainted at the sight of blood, and with our family’s skirmishes, I’ve seen buckets spilled. One word and there you go, scuffling in the dirt.”

Nigel wasn’t the hottest head in the group—that title fully belonged to the Duke of Leighton, with Arabella’s beloved father coming in second—but he’d had his fair share of familial brawls. “Why, then?” He flexed his fingers, relieved the wound was slightly less tender. The tight bandage combined with a proper cleaning seemed to be doing the trick.

Her gaze roved up his arm, lingering around his collarbone, leaving a hot trail behind it. When it finally stuck on his face, he sucked in a shallow breath. There it was—the desire he imagined filling his own eyes. “I would like a kiss as payment for my kind attention. I’ve wondered for years, but now I want to *know*.”

He removed his arm from her grasp, his skin tingling from brow to belly. A certain part of his body was awakening, ready to dive into amorous fun with a completely unsuitable playmate. “Showing you what’s what in this department isn’t my responsibility, imp.”

She snorted softly, repacking her satchel. “I grasp what’s what, Nigel Streeter. I’ll have you know I’ve been kissed five, count it, *five* times!” She

scowled, securing the fastenings with a snap. “And at least two were adequate.”

“Adequate,” he murmured, impressed at the figurative wall she’d pressed his back against. What man could turn down the opportunity to be the best? At anything? Or, to douse the spark of jealousy by winning the race?

An emotion he shouldn’t be feeling, by the by. Not with her.

“Perfectly adequate,” she repeated and dropped her bag on the table by her chipped mug. Damned if his father wasn’t right. She had one of her mother’s dogged expressions stamped on her face. Frightening. “Forget it’s me. Try that. I could be the next in a long line of forgettables. I’m only experimenting with someone safe. It’s not a marital agreement. Goodness, Nigel, this is 1846, after all.”

Safe. He blew out a hushed breath. Shook his head. Balled his fist on the settee cushion to keep from reaching for her. “Your eyes, I can’t forget those.” *Or your lips. Your breasts. Your trim waist. Long legs. Round bottom. The quite gorgeous feet I saw last summer peeking from beneath your skirts. Your dazzling laugh.*

What if she kissed him and released that delicious sound after?

Too, he had no clue what defined *adequate*.

“I can’t change my eye color, so...” She chewed on her bottom lip, leaving him dazed where he sat. “I’ll close them.”

And she did, leaning in, in the event he didn’t choose to gather her close.

Fuck. This was more than he could fight, wasn’t it? A gift like *her* presented to a man like *him*?

One touch, one taste. What could that hurt?

Uncurling his fist, Nigel slid his palm along the brocade, the thready ripples tickling his skin. Her hand was there, delicate fingers spread for purchase, the nails round and healthy with color. It was nothing to cover it, link their fingers, and bring her swaying against his chest.

He realized at first touch that he’d made a mistake discounting this.

Discounting what she would do to him. Hadn’t he learned from the lovesick men in his family? One kiss... and *boom*.

The sound of wood in the hearth splintering was the last thing he heard as he tipped her chin and pressed his mouth to hers.

The nape of her neck was warm. Soft. Her body slender, yet strong. His fingers cupped the back of her head, loosening her chignon as he cradled her. She opened her lips without hesitation and from there... things got hazy. Her

tongue stroked his or his stroked hers. He wasn't sure who moved first. It was quick, the escalation. Too fast to record. Perhaps because they knew each other so well in other arenas, in this one, they knocked down walls in seconds.

It was unlike any first kiss he'd ever had.

Her hand fisting in his shirt. Sliding to his shoulder, fingers knotting in his hair. Guiding each other into the encounter. For better access, deeper penetration. Her waist was shaped perfectly for his grip, where he scooted her until their hips bumped. Lights flashed behind his lids as they clashed, control his, then hers, then his again.

When Arabella shakily rose to her knees and took his jaw in her hands to better align their mouths and their bodies, Nigel let her. Twisted to face her, in fact, to give her everything she asked for. The drumbeat in his ears canceled out the voice telling him this was taking a simple kiss too far.

Frankly, he'd experienced less intimacy with a woman's legs looped over his shoulders.

Considering the acceleration, it seemed a solid next step to grasp her skirt and raise it until she could settle halfway on his lap, where they flowed like two cups of water poured into one vessel. Lips and tongues and teeth. Hands seeking out hidden spots, ones that made her sigh and him moan. Breaths catching, merging, flowing. His hand made its natural way to her pert bottom, tucking her in tight against him.

Heat. Sensation. Chests heaving. Murmurs of indistinguishable nature, meaningless in the assault. His cock was hard as timber, no way to hide it, and when they began an awkward grinding dance, the kiss keeping fairly accurate rhythmic time—when he found himself reaching for the hooks at the back of her gown and thinking to himself the best way to climb atop her on the settee—he wrenched back, out of reach.

A man didn't want a woman he feared, in no short measure, would make him breathless. Desire was one thing, love another.

He wasn't getting near the latter.

The scent of jasmine and smoke and passion wrapped around his neck and squeezed until he felt light-headed. His shaft twitched in his trousers, begging for release.

She blinked woozily and grabbed the scrolled backrest of the settee, as if she'd gone through an entire bottle of her father's whisky. Her eyes were the dark hue of gunmetal, and the ringing in his ears sounded as if she'd

discharged the pistol by his head.

He moved her somewhat forcefully to her own cushion, then palmed his quivering belly.

This felt *different*. A kiss that slayed. He'd heard about those, the stuff of legend.

He'd simply never planned to chance upon one.

CHAPTER 4

WHERE A WOMAN ARGUES HER CASE



Not a surprise, Nigel Streeter was a brooder. Bella studied him from the shadowy corner of the brougham he'd relegated her to, trying to figure him out. At least, he was stunning in his angst. He'd yanked on a greatcoat that fit his body to perfection, highlighting shoulders she'd clung to during their wild ride. His hair was in gross disorder, the black-as-sin strands curling about his jaw and brow. His thigh was flexing as he angrily tapped his boot. Helplessly, her gaze traveled between his legs, although the show wasn't what it had been when she'd been sitting in his lap.

He'd been aroused, more than she'd ever known a man to *be* aroused, when, like a bolt of lightning, he'd backed away. He would have tripped in his urgency to remove himself from the situation—and her—if he'd been standing.

Her cheeks burned, but it wasn't in embarrassment.

It was pure *delight*. And audacity.

Because she'd been *right*.

Nigel was the one. The man she wanted, desired, *needed*. He was intelligent, compassionate, so handsome he made her burn, and *oh*, incredibly, humbly vulnerable. His horrid childhood and his scars, inside and out, were wounds she wanted to soothe for the rest of her life.

Like her mother going after her father—she'd heard the story herself no fewer than a thousand times from her mother—Bella had persistence in matters of love racing through her *blood*.

She truly hoped Nigel wasn't going to waste his time fighting her on this.

When Bella's mind was made up, it was made *up*.

“Quit plotting,” he growled without turning to her. His gaze had been locked on the passing scenery since the moment he settled his long body across from her. The velvet squabs could barely contain him. Truly, he was mouthwateringly handsome in every way.

Making her wonder, *What else could we do in this carriage?*

He cursed and thumped the windowpane with his knuckle. “That isn’t going to happen, imp.”

“Not possible?”

“It’s possible,” he whispered, his voice seven shades of ragged.

Bella swallowed her laughter. *You gorgeous, sweet man.* “I have no idea what you’re referring to, Streeter. I’m merely observing you brood from your gloomy corner of our transport.”

He finally looked at her. And his shaft may have wilted like a blossom plucked from the bush, but desire spilled from his eyes, coloring them a searing gold. “Conversely, I’m sitting here watching you submerge yourself in your customary cloud of happiness. When we’ve gotten ourselves in a blind mess, imp. I hope like hell no one sees me getting out of this carriage with you, no chaperone in sight.”

Flames of fury started to bubble in her belly. “You think our kiss was a *mess?*”

He gave the glass pane a hard enough knock to crack it. “It was glorious. Earth-shattering. The clouds opened up, and angels wept. If it had gone on, I would have embarrassed myself as I haven’t since I was fourteen years old. In ways you can’t understand, ways I’m not about to tell you.”

She slumped against the seat. “Oh...”

“What you don’t grasp is, a kiss like that doesn’t end when the kiss ends, darling girl. We’ll be unsatisfied until we receive more, receive *everything*. You can look forward to nights filled with dreams—scorching, sweaty dreams—while we struggle to find relief. My cock in my hand, yours dallying between your legs.” His eyes were blazing, glowing hotter than the carriage lamp’s flame. “Have you ever done that?”

She nodded, recrossing her legs beneath her skirt to keep the pulse between her thighs under control.

He swore and glanced out the window.

“I never said I wanted it to end,” she stated in the clearest voice she could muster.

He gave the windowpane another pop.

Stubborn oaf. Well, she could be stubborn, too. “The Duke of Markham is holding a winter ball next week before society leaves Town for Christmas. I know you’re invited. How are we going to handle that?”

He fiddled with the beaver hat at his side, avoiding her gaze. “I have to work, so I won’t be there. Friday nights at the Lair are hectic. We had a prince from some minute kingdom there last week, and he nearly lost his crown at the hazard table.”

She huffed a sigh. “So, you’re going to avoid me forever. Is that the plan?”

“Yes, I think it is. We’ll talk again after you’re married with two, no, *three*, children running around.” With a groan, he dropped his head back against the seat. “You’ll be too busy to remember a toe-curling kiss with a boy from the docks.”

Seeing they were close to the mews running alongside her home, she rapped on the carriage roof before he could. She could take care of herself, the arrogant cur. “Don’t you dare use the social disparity argument with me, Nigel Streeter! My father grew up in Limehouse, as you well know. With *your* father. They were and are rookery toughs through and through.”

He reached for her when she went to climb out of the conveyance before it had made a full stop, his hand dusting off her hip. “One fathered by a viscount, the other by an earl, or have you forgotten? Bastards... but high-reaching ones.”

“Oh, *you*,” she seethed and wrenched the door open. It was a short hop to the cobblestones, but they were slippery with slush, and she almost went down on her bottom.

He clamored down behind her, cursing when his polished boot met an ankle-deep puddle. “Wait, before you hurt yourself.”

“I have it, Streeter.”

“You’ve not thought this out, whatever it is you’re scheming. Infatuations fade, imp, like fog on a sunny morning. Not to mention my being eleven years older than you. That’s a lifetime of experience I have and you don’t.”

Bella detested nothing more than suspecting she wasn’t going to get something she genuinely desired. And desired for good reasons, with a full heart. Nigel’s terrace would be lovely if only someone (her) was allowed to turn a bachelor’s residence into a home. It made her queasy to imagine another woman eventually—because of course, he would someday marry—starting a family with him.

And how those children would come to be, nearly dropped her heart to her feet.

She sniffled and wiped her nose on the edge of her cloak.

Nigel caught up to her, hat in hand, his hair damp and curling at the edges. “Blimey, don’t weep. No man can battle tears. If I said I was sorry that I’m too old and too low-born, would it help?”

She sniffed but felt a little better to hear a hint of cockney in his speech. “Sorry you kissed me?”

He stopped before they reached the side garden and the back entrance she used when she snuck in. When she glanced back, it was to find a bewildered man muttering to himself. Tossing her a fiery glance, he laughed and shoved his hat on his head at a crooked angle. “I’m *not* sorry. How about that?”

She dragged the toe of her sodden half boot through the slush. “I’m not, either.”

Holding his greatcoat closed at the neck, he shivered. “Go on now, get inside before we freeze to death,” he instructed as he strode past her, in the direction of the Devil’s Lair. She prayed he wasn’t heading to one of the scores of women begging for his attention after she’d riled him up and left him in a dotty state.

“Streeter,” she called, shoving that horrid thought from her mind, “take my carriage.”

He flicked his hand over his shoulder, unconcerned. “I’ll get there. I have a knife in my boot that I’m utterly willing to use. In this mood, they’d better not test me.”

She couldn’t help but ask, “Will you at least think of me when you kiss someone else?”

Nigel halted, his shoulders dropping with his fierce exhalation. His coattails fluttered in the gust that ripped down the lane. “I’m going to try not to, imp.” Then he disappeared into the winter tempest, he and his blasted cockeyed hat, her heart going with him.

When Bella reached her bedchamber, she let the tears flow.

CHAPTER 5

WHERE A ROOKERY BOY PRESENTS HIS CASE



He should have stayed away.

He'd tried to stay away, Nigel reminded himself as he stared across the Duke of Markham's packed ballroom. Arabella was doing her best to ignore him, as he was doing his best to ignore her. Although she'd flashed a mischievous smile the two times she'd sailed past in some nob's arms. Nigel wasn't gifted at the waltz as he'd not learned how to do it until late in the game, so he wasn't going to pose a challenge of any sort in this arena.

He was merely going to make an appearance to keep his mother happy, get slightly foxed, then spend a restless evening in his bedchamber at the Lair.

Restless, because that damned kiss was keeping him up nights.

Exactly, and he meant *exactly*, as he'd told Arabella it would. Not since he was mired in adolescent sensual angst had he pleased himself this much in one week. The skin on his left hand and his shaft was going to be raw if he kept it up.

In desperation, he'd even tried cornering Lucinda Somersby in a parlor at a demimonde masquerade ball he knew Arabella wouldn't be attending. The effort had gone over like a lead brick, the lady in question, one who'd been hounding him for months and was receptive, left with the impression that Nigel Streeter's reputation was undeserved. The embrace had been a dismal, passionless fiasco.

Nigel grabbed a champagne flute from a passing footman and tossed back the contents. He'd made a mistake that was costing him. Maybe Arabella

hadn't recognized the risk—but he had. His lips had tingled before he'd *touched* them to hers.

That spelled epic trouble, didn't it?

"Another mind-numbing holiday celebration," his brother, Worth, said as he stepped in beside him. He'd grown to look so much like their father that it shocked Nigel every time he saw him. His hair was the exact inky black Tobias's had once been. "One every day until New Year's. I'd be much happier going to the Lair when you decide to flee this social tragedy."

Nigel sipped from the glass Worth handed him. "Nice try, little man."

"I don't know what Mother has against my coming around more often."

Nigel snorted softly, thinking of the fascinating group of females who'd stopped by last night, then left with half his clientele for rooms they had down the lane. Worth knew of such things, of course, but it wasn't the time yet for him to witness them. "I do."

"Someday, though, you're going to let me work there a little." He tapped his temple. "I have a mind for numbers."

Nigel glanced at his brother, love an ever-present tide rippling through him. He would protect his family until his dying breath. And part of that vow meant doing things that would make them happy—and make him worry. "Someday, I will. That's a promise."

Worth smiled, pleased. He might have looked like a replica of Tobias Streeter, once the most dangerous bounder in England, but he had their mother's joyful demeanor in every sense.

"Rumor is, that knave is chasing after Arabella." Worth pointed his flute at the Marquess of Derring's progeny holding court by the sweets table. Ambrose's hawkish gaze was fixed on her and holding, bringing a wave to heat to the back of Nigel's neck. She'd yet to dance with the miscreant, but it was likely coming.

He decided then and there to leave before that occurred.

"Couldn't even keep his seat at Eton. Rode like a chit, truth be told," Nigel murmured. "Bloody pathetic to watch."

Worth grunted. "Not surprising. You should see him in the billiards parlor. Sent his cue through the window at Winthrop's ball last spring. A woeful attempt at play."

"Xander will never let this happen. Ambrose needs a fat dowry, and he can go elsewhere to secure it."

"Not unless Arabella wants him. If she does, Xander will move heaven

and earth, even for that cheerless creature. Because he believes in love, like the rest of the Cluster. The poor fools.” Worth sighed. “I do hope we’re not going to get caught in that legacy.”

Nigel scowled, their incredible kiss roaring through his mind. “She doesn’t want that halfwit. Did you not hear my story about his riding capabilities?”

Worth tilted his head, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “Maybe that adoring stuff skipped a generation. We don’t seem to be mired in this affection-above-all business, the younger set, not a one of us.”

Nigel paused, searching his mind. He’d never been in love, but he *believed* in love. How could he not with the examples he’d been given, true representations placed before him?

“What’s that scuffle going on over there? By the ratafia bowl.”

Nigel turned to look, wedging his flute in the potted palm at his side. Lord Reading’s wife was rumored to have taken a lover in the Marquess of Perth-Alton. The viscount and the marquess were chest-to-chest, fists clenched. Nigel noted what looked to be the butt of a pistol protruding from Perth-Alton’s coat pocket.

And they were standing right next to Arabella.

Nigel turned to his brother. “When I create a diversion, find Markham and tell him Perth-Alton has a pistol and whisky could pull the trigger. I know the menacing stance a man gets before he makes an enormous error in judgment.” He shook Worth when his brother seemed frozen. “Go. Now. I’ll get Arabella. Tell the family she’s with me.”

As Worth circled the perimeter of the room, Nigel braced his shoulder against the palm, which was housed in a ceramic urn the size of a wine cask. The piece was heavy as hell, but with a good grunt and a shove, it tipped and hit the floor with a tremendous boom. Dancers scattered as dirt exploded, the plant sliding in a misshapen lump to the middle of the floor. Conversation halted and erupted again, a cacophony of voices filling the space. Someone along the wallflower wall fainted, and the Countess of Nilling spilled ratafia down her bodice, adding mayhem to the proceedings.

However, Nigel had waited too long.

Perth-Alton was shoving Reading, and the viscount’s entourage stepped in. Someone in the group threw a punch, then all hell broke loose. Men who’d not been involved and shouldn’t be, dove into the melee until it swelled past the confines of the dancefloor, spilling out onto the terrace.

Nigel made it to Arabella before she'd had a chance to safely clear the area. He grasped her elbow and marshaled her against his side. "Come with me."

She glanced over her shoulder as he led her away, skirting dazed couples and clumps of dirt, spilled champagne and chaos. "But the fun is just beginning. This is shaping up to be the ball of the Season!"

Nigel guided her down a darkened corridor and out the kitchen garden's door. He always had his coach parked in the half drive on the western edge of Markham's terrace for speedy exits. "Take it from someone who knows, you don't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This has all the markings of the wrong time."

"I never liked Perth-Alton, anyway. I hope he gets socked right in the teeth! He tried to kiss me during a firework display at Vauxhall last year, when I repeatedly told him 'Thank you, but no.' His breath smelled like onions and brandy."

"Remind me to discuss that with him when I next see him," Nigel muttered, adding it to his running list. "Or, better yet, I'll have your father talk to him. That'll be grand to watch."

Arabella skipped to catch up to him. "Oh, please, no. He's getting too old for brawls with anyone except family. The Leighton Cluster have finally begun to throw softer swings."

Realizing he was sprinting to escape the bedlam, Nigel slowed his stride, but he didn't release her. It was a moment before he grasped that she'd taken his hand, and he'd accepted the invitation, linking his long fingers with her slim ones. Snow was falling, the picturesque kind that made you yearn for winter... before you found yourself praying for spring. He wanted to deny the romance of spirited the woman away who'd been on his mind every second for the last seven days—away in the mist while a skirmish raged behind them—but he could not.

He halted by his carriage and watched, mesmerized, as snowflakes attached themselves to her eyelashes. They were leagues darker than her hair, highlighting insanely beautiful eyes. Feeling as if he should explain since he was once again with her and without a chaperone, he gestured to the house. "I'm not like them, even if I was born in the gutter. They take what they want despite any argument against the confiscation. I don't touch women without their agreement. I've never once taken the word 'no' as meaning anything but 'no.' Force doesn't light my fuse, as it were."

Arabella glanced at their gloved hands, the heat from her skin seeping through kid leather and warming his. He'd never been more comfortable in frigid weather in his life. "You think too much about your pedigree rather than the journey you've taken to become the man you are. A successful entrepreneur. Part of a loving, large, and often raucous family. Weren't you awarded a First Class degree at Cambridge? How many of the dimwits in that ballroom can say the same?"

Nigel stilled, stunned she knew this about him. "It was Second Class Upper Division, actually." He shrugged, his cheeks flushing despite the chill in the air. "I didn't want Toby to be disappointed he'd taken me in, you see. So, I worked harder than anyone. Nights in the university library, surrounded by books from the 15th century, ghosts of students past urging me on. Trust me, I never took any advantage given me for granted. It's part of the reason for the success I've had, I think. I don't mind the struggle. In fact, I anticipate it."

Arabella trailed her finger up his waistcoat, circling buttons along the way. He'd left his overcoat at Markham's, but he absolutely didn't feel cold. "Why did you come to my rescue in there? My father would have eventually made it to me, after he left his hiding place in the duke's study."

Nigel gazed at the sky, a shroud of dense black, not a star in sight. When he looked back, she was waiting patiently, as always, stubbornly sticking to her plan. Even if he had no idea what that plan might be—and doubted if she did. "Why did you come to me after your companion fled to Gretna Green?"

Her smile grew, her puff of laughter misting the air. "Because, except for my father, I trust you more than any man I've ever known. I don't question *why* that is, it simply is. Weren't you the one always telling me to have faith in my instincts?"

His heart raced, the beat sounding in his ears. The scent of jasmine rolled over him, obliterating London's coal-smoke constant. What did this compassionate, beautiful, impulsive woman want from him?

And, more importantly, what did he want from *her*?

He feared he knew.

"Before I escort you home, I need to stop by Belgravia. I was expecting a delivery and—"

"Yes," she whispered and placed her damp slipper on the carriage step.

Yes, he repeated silently, and lifted her into his carriage, hoping he wasn't dooming them both.



Stopping by Belgravia before returning her home made no sense.

Which spoke volumes when coming from the most sensible man she knew.

Bella kept herself from shouting in glee or doing a victory dance, any bit of whimsy might agitate Nigel more than he already was.

After a silent carriage ride, he brought her inside his home, gave her another cup of cold tea, and deposited her by a roaring fire in a room she assumed would be his study. The chamber held an armchair, a massive mahogany desk, and a Chippendale bookcase without a single book. A faded Aubusson rug that she suspected was his parents' castoff completed the haphazard assembly of furniture. When Nigel came back to find her prowling the space, he halted in the doorway like he was a visitor in his own residence.

"What's this?" she asked and held up a toy soldier made of tin. Except for a few patchy streaks of red, its paint was years gone.

He debated for long seconds, that menacing expression she loved so much overtaking his face. He really was the most honorable man. Any time he sketched outside the lines he'd drawn for himself was a cause for angst.

Except she didn't want to be the reason he denied himself—if what he wanted was her.

She wiggled the soldier, reminding him of her question.

Yanking his hand through his hair, he sighed. He'd shed his coat, and his waistcoat was unbuttoned, the ends batting his hips as he crossed to her. He looked savage, impatient, and typically cross. She longed to tangle her fingers in those overlong strands again and make him forget his arguments against her. Have him groan against her mouth, his breath streaking through her. Reveal the mysteries of life beneath her fingertips.

He'd been right. Their kiss had not left her. It was now as much a part of her being as the freckle above her lip. She didn't expect to forget it or the visceral way he'd responded to her. The way her body had changed right before her eyes, melting into his.

Perhaps when she'd repeated it a thousand times with this man, the first time would fade like rose petals cast in sunlight.

That, she hated to tell Nigel Streeter, was her plan.

"Tell me about it," she suggested, placing the toy in its place by his ink blotter.

He wedged his hip on the desk, crossing his feet at the ankle, pretending to be relaxed when he wasn't. "My past? Now there's a story." Scrubbing his shoulder over his chin, he laughed softly beneath his breath. "You require it all, don't you, imp? Cut my vein and have me bleed before you." His accent wobbled, a hint of cockney lacing the practiced vowels she bet he'd worked months to perfect.

She moved gently, appreciating how to tame a nervous stallion. Taking his hand in hers—both sets of gloves drying on the entry table by the front door—the pleasurable shock of touching him rippled through her. "These," she said and traced the scars on his hands, "tell stories. And I want them."

His fingers flexed, his skin drawing tight over his knuckles. His breath shot through his teeth and struck her cheek. He smelled of mint and leather and man—and she desired him to the core of her soul. "I worked in a tarring house after leaving the orphanage. There's no way to keep from getting burned. Toby found me not long after, ill and..."

Removing his hand from hers, he circled the desk, went to his haunches, and ripped a low drawer open. She recognized the label on the bottle he withdrew. *Streeter, Macauley & Campbell*, the finest whisky in England. Rising to his feet, Nigel poured a liberal amount in a tumbler, his golden gaze never leaving her. "There's nothing poetic about poverty, imp. Nothing romantic about desperation. Ask your father. I'm no hero, merely a boy who had an incredibly fortunate win."

Temper rising, she followed him around the desk, where they stood, facing off. A battle she didn't completely understand. Wrestling the glass from him, she took a lingering sip and imagined she tasted him on her tongue. "Do you want me to leave, Streeter, is that it?"

He shook his head and stepped in until his hip brushed hers. "What I want is to toss you over my shoulder, spill you across my bed upstairs, peel your layers off one luscious lick at a time, then tup until we forget what month it is."

"December," she murmured, her body going up in flames at his lewd suggestion.

Knocking the tumbler from her hand to the floor, Nigel backed her two steps into the wall, cupped the nape of her neck, and seized her mouth in a profound display of yearning. He groaned with it, curling his long body over hers, sliding his hand to her jaw, and encouraging her lips to open.

Her heart pounded, the blood rushing through her veins as she followed

his lead.

Bracing his forearm on the wall, he leaned into her, a firm press, his shaft full and hard at her hip. They tumbled, mouths locked, bodies sealed in an impassioned frenzy. Buttons flew when she fisted his shirt and yanked. He moaned against her lips, slanting his head and taking the kiss deeper, telling her he liked it rough.

She didn't want to be polite. Controlled. Decorous. Everything she'd been raised to be.

She was willing to show Nigel her true self, her wild side—suspecting he might understand. That he might have a wild side himself.

They wrestled, murmuring inane nonsense, licking, sucking, caressing. His lips at her jaw, nipping the skin beneath her ear until sparks erupted behind her lids. His hand worked its way beneath her bottom and angled her body until they were almost hip to hip. Grinding against her, the kiss spiraling out of control. His skin was damp beneath her fingertips when she slid her hand under his shirt and along his spine, the triangle of nerve endings between her thighs pulsing a warning that something turbulent was coming.

But it wasn't enough.

He was too tall, she too short. Her legs were trapped by layers of satin and silk. She couldn't touch him as she longed to.

Lastly, he was holding back. Angst, frustration, and *need* roared through her like a train on uneven tracks.

“I want to feel you,” she breathed against his neck. “And I want you to be *you*.”

He swallowed, his throat pulling beneath her lips. “Tell me,” he whispered, “tell me what you've fantasized about.” Pulling back just enough, his molten gaze met hers. Amber lit his eyes like embers in the hearth at their back. “If you've fantasized about anyone else, that cur Ambrose, for instance, I don't want to hear it. *Ever*.”

She laughed into his chest, burying her nose in the crisp hair running between his pectoral muscles. He growled when she gave him a love bite, instinct taking over. “I've imagined you teasing me. Making me feverish with yearning, pleasure I've only dreamed of experiencing. Relief I've tried to find myself but couldn't.”

He kissed along her cheek to the side of her mouth. “Where? Where do I touch you during these visions?”

Taking his hand, she placed it between her legs. “Here.” Then she lifted it

to her breast. “And here.” She moaned when his fingers cupped her and squeezed, his thumb finding the hard dent of her nipple through silk and cotton.

When she sought to touch him, he caught her hand. “Bell, imp... I...”

Bouncing on her toes, she captured his lips while gliding her hand down his chest to his thigh, covering his cock with her palm, then her fingers. He was longer than she’d imagined. And harder. *Oh*, she thought in wonder. *Oh*.

He toppled out of the kiss, his head falling back with a frayed sound. “*There*, right there, Bell.”

As she recorded the shape of him—the rigid shaft, the bulbous crown—he dropped his brow to hers and seemed to melt into her touch. It was an incredible sensation to leave such a formidable man weak and hungry. With a low groan, he skimmed his hand over hers and showed her the motion he liked best. He let her experiment through woolen broadcloth while her body lit like he’d set a match to her skin.

Finally, chest heaving, he stopped her. “If I take you upstairs, our lives change, imp. There’s no going back. Please believe me when I say this.” He nuzzled her temple, his lips hot against her. “I’m not into half measures, not with you.”

She took a moment to think. To imagine life with him—or without. To imagine giving another man what she wanted to give him. Nigel Streeter, the worthiest person in her world.

Backing out of his grasp, she strolled across the study. When she reached the door, she looked back. He had a half-stricken expression on his face, though he hid it as soon as she turned. Holding out her hand, she whispered, “Are you coming?”

He met her in seconds, swept her off her feet, and as he’d said was *his* fantasy, tossed her over his shoulder.

Laughing, she slapped his firm bottom, love cascading through her.

Her little secret.

And the Macauleys were experts at keeping secrets.

CHAPTER 6

WHERE A COUPLE NAVIGATE TENDER FEELINGS



When he reached his bedchamber, Nigel nudged the door open with his boot. Crossing to the center of the room, he gently settled Arabella to the floor. His curtains were fluttering madly in the gusts ripping through the windows. They were a pale, milky white velvet, unlike current fashion dictated, giving the space a hauntingly serene feel.

When she was steady on her feet, he stepped back, allowing her the choice to leave him. To say no. To pick someone *else*. To change her mind about him.

He wasn't noble. She'd created a fictional man in her mind. That silly nitwit Ambrose was closer to her dream than he was. She didn't want to know the things Nigel had done to survive. And he didn't want to tell her.

She trailed her hand up his jaw and tapped his temple. "Stop it, darling man."

Grabbing her wrist, he pressed a kiss to her palm. Bit into the fleshy heel of her hand while wondering what she looked like beneath those pesky layers. "Last chance, Bell." Though he truly wondered if he'd let her leave.

Maybe if she begged.

When he prayed she'd beg for other things.

Releasing an age-old, knowing smile, she turned, presenting her back. The row of hooks and ties holding her gown in place invited his touch. Although his hands were shaking, a novel sensation, he didn't pretend ignorance of the bindings. His experience was what it was. His past was what it was. His feelings for this wondrous woman were what they were.

As he'd been told a thousand times by his father, a man didn't choose.

Love chose *you*.

Unexpectedly, like a blow to the head.

To reclaim a trace of control, he teased her during the process. Ten hair clips, his lips dusting the nape of her neck with the removal of each. A kiss to any exposed patch of skin with each hook released on her gown. One tie, one nibble. Earlobe, shoulder, wrist. Until he was on his knees, her gown puddling around her ankles and flowing over his boots. Then he stood and started again. Eyelets on her corset, drawstrings on her drawers. Caresses followed each advance in her unveiling.

Until she stood swaying, her breath rasping from her lips, her skin littered with goosebumps and a fine sheen of sweat.

In nothing but a gossamer chemise that left little to his imagination.

She was slender and slightly taller than he'd recalled. Shapely, but in the most graceful fashion. He grabbed a handful of her gorgeous, flaxen hair and brought it to his nose. She smelled of lemons and lust.

Leaving Nigel worried he wasn't going to last long enough to pleasure her.

Therefore, he formulated a plan.

Pressing his chest to her back, he filled his hands with her surprisingly plump breasts, her nipples pebbling beneath his thumbs. She curved into him, nestling his cock against her bottom. He held back a groan with every scrap of his strength. "I'm going to make you come before I remove one stitch of my clothing, imp. With my hands and my mouth. Unless you stop me. Do it *soon* if you're going to stop me."

In reply, she issued the supplest moan he'd ever heard.

Not going to stop you, it said.

Glancing around, he realized there were few options in the room. The bed, of course, which he was saving for the moment he slid inside her.

And the desk.

A hulking mammoth of an antique his mother had given him upon his graduation from university. Some said Henry VIII once owned it.

That would do.

Spinning her around, he took her lips in a kiss meant to destroy and backed her toward it.

Christ, she kissed like a lightskirt, he marveled, losing focus for a lengthy second. She held nothing back, nothing.

Sitting Arabella on the desk, Nigel raised her chemise. Thighs, waist,

tummy, breasts—*ah*, her glorious breasts—shoulders, then the wisp of silk fluttered to the floor.

And, saints love her, she didn't bat one eyelash. Flinch or try to cover herself. A Macauley through and through, this girl.

Extending her leg, she drew her toe along the impressive erection tenting his trousers. "What if I make you come first?"

Nigel laughed, bringing his hand to his lips to cover it. When had he enjoyed being with someone as much as he enjoyed being with her? "You could try." Bracing his hands on the desk on either side of her, he leaned in, taking her nipple between his lips. Then his teeth. She hissed out a sharp breath and bowed into the touch. "But I'm a very competitive bloke."

From there, the world dissolved, like the view through a rain-streaked windowpane. The sound of carriage wheels striking cobblestones, the distant clamor of thunder, Arabella's faint cries as he sucked one nipple and moved to the other muted in his mind. The taste of her streaked across his tongue and flowed down his body, where it landed fairly predictably in his cock. Curling his arm around her waist, he scooted her forward until she was open before him, legs spread.

Going to his knees, he gazed up at her, marveling at his wealth. Her back was arched just so, throwing her body forward. Her nipples tight little buds, a dark, dusky pink. Her lips open with the aroused sounds coming from her throat. Groaning, she'd tunneled her fingers in his hair and knocked her knees into his shoulders to urge him to touch her.

What had he done to deserve this lovely, spirited, beautiful young woman?

"Hang on, imp."

She scored her nails across his scalp, sending a shiver through him. "Show me," she whispered, her head thrown back. "You said you would kiss every inch of me. Kiss me here, like you promised."

"It was more of a threat," he murmured and began the assault.

She smelled of the floral fragrance she probably tossed in her bath, he noted, as he trailed his nose along her thigh. He parted her glistening folds when he reached them, playing lightly, tongue, fingers, breath. When he blew on her the second time, she cried out.

Ah, she likes this.

She looped her legs over his shoulders, and he thought, *brilliant idea.*

Then he recorded every twitch, every sigh, every tensing of her fingers—

until he had an excellent read on her stimulation points. It was like watching the gaming tables and observing a gambler's tells. Nigel was the best in the business for spotting them, hence his incredible success.

And Arabella Macauley wasn't even trying to hide hers.

When she was breathless and wholly engaged in what he considered a tentative foray, playfully intent, he slid a finger inside her as he took the swollen nub of her sex between his lips. She tasted divine, her juices coating his tongue and pushing his shaft into a throbbing press against his trouser buttons. Realizing he wasn't going to last long if he delayed, he sucked and stroked while she moaned, rocking into his face.

For an untried woman, she was amazingly responsive. And free. Willing to be who she *was*, in the most private of places, confidence it had taken him years to find.

Images of what he was going to do to her after they made it to the bed sent his head spinning. He had a feeling she'd be keen to try anything. (There were things he *wanted* to do and never had, a long list of them.)

"Streeter, please, *now*." She palmed her hand on the desk and bowed into him. Her hair had come loose, and damp strands were clinging to her neck. Her thighs were rosy from the stubble on his jaw, her sex flushed. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight—and never expected to.

Curling his hand around her hip, he guided her into a rhythm matching the stroke of his tongue, the plunge of his finger. She began to shake, a delicious quiver that started at her feet and raced up her body. Since she was wrapped around him, he was able to record the advancement of her release. Each dazzling second, a first for him. The cries, the trembling, the flood of heat and moisture, her muscles tensing, tensing, then releasing in a deluge of spent energy and dazed arousal.

Gasping, she collapsed to the desk in a side sprawl, catching him in the center of the chest, and almost knocking him off his feet. "Leave me. I'm not going to survive," she panted through the flaxen tangle dangling across her face.

Smiling, grinning actually, he scrubbed his wrist over his lips. She'd come all over him—and that wasn't over, no matter what she believed. They were going to be in utter *ruins* by the time they were through.

Because the bliss was only beginning.

Gathering her tenderly in his arms, he carried her to the bed, and deposited her atop the mattress. Pressing a kiss to her brow, he brushed her

hair from her eyes. “You are goddamn gorgeous, Bell. The finest sight I’ve been invited to witness in all my thirty-three years. I wish it weren’t so many years between us... but there is it.”

She snorted a laugh past the arm she’d draped across her face. “Who gives a shite about eleven insignificant years? I’ve always been more mature than the rest of the Leighton Cluster children. I should be angry about all those silly doxies you’ve trifled with.” She lifted her arm and peered at him, her expression completely dazed but with a spark of fire. “I hate them, the greedy chits, but I *love* what you can do with that wicked mouth and those talented fingers.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “So, I suppose I win in the end.”

Loving her, simply *loving* her, he leaned to kiss her, unleashing the sensual magic swirling between them. She flowered beneath him, eager. He waited until she moaned and lifted her hips, telling him she wasn’t finished, not at all.

Straightening, he moved out of reach. “Patience, imp.”

“Come back,” Arabella whispered from the shadowy spot beneath her arm.

He wrenched his waistcoat free and the shirt she’d destroyed in her earlier frenzy. The remaining bone button hit the floor and rolled beneath the bed. At the sound, she perked up and began to watch the proceedings. Her fingers clenched in the counterpane as she swallowed.

Nigel wasn’t shy, and her hot gaze only provoked.

He fenced, boxed, and swam in the Serpentine several times a week when weather permitted, an activity he and his father had been doing for years in the dead of night. A habit from Toby’s boyhood, when a lake was the only means of bathing.

Gliding his knife from the sheath strapped to his calf, Nigel tossed it to the floor. Tugged one boot free, then the other. Unbuttoned his trousers and slipped them down his legs. When he stood in his drawers, his cock an inspiring display of hunger, he paused, teasingly curving his thumb in his waistband.

She rose to her elbow, her smile crooked. “Are you waiting for my endorsement?”

He recorded the skip in his heartbeat with no small trace of fear. Arabella held him in the palm of her hand, in a way no other woman had. It was alarming and... astounding. Joyous. Like the brief period where he’d been

captivated by opium—a habit Macauley had crushed before it truly began—ecstasy cascaded through his bloodstream.

“Once I climb in that bed, you’re mine, imp. *Mine*. Remember my promise about no half measures.”

She giggled, a girl not acknowledged as silly in any way. “I’m already yours, Nigel Streeter. I always have been.”

Well, then. Ripping off his drawers, he strode across the chamber, the bed dipping with his weight. Before she let nervousness claim her, he took her face in his hands, and kissed her as if life would cease without her. The first touch of his skin to hers with nothing between them tore through him like a rogue wave across the sea.

In that second, he marveled at the realization that he couldn’t survive without her.

Bracing his forearm on the bed to hold off some of his weight, he settled atop her, and they joined in a frenzy, limbs intertwining, hands roaming. He longed to discover every peak and valley of her slender body, every crease, every freckle. Her scattered breath, her sprinting heartbeat, the ragged pulse beneath her skin. She was sunlight, and he was dusk, but it worked, their merger. On some mad level, they balanced each other in ways he’d heard about his entire life.

The Duchess Society, after all, were notorious for finding true love.

Only, Nigel hadn’t chosen Arabella. He hadn’t *known*.

Nonetheless, when he paused to gaze at her, in his bed, slowly creeping into his heart, he thanked the gods she’d found him.

She was soft from her release. Warm, moist, vulnerable. Her skin sleek beneath his fingertips, her teeth bold as they sank into his skin. The sensual moves he usually incorporated, he left behind. Not by choice. Once they were swept into the act, he lost contact with that side of him. The tense negotiator working on the practical exchange.

Nudging her legs open and slipping between them, his rigid cock finding her velvet folds, was the least practical place he’d ever found himself.

“I want—”

“Not yet,” he whispered against the side of her breast. Taking her nipple between his teeth, he went a little rougher, a little deeper, than he had before. Out on the lane, glass shattered against cobblestones, and he’d never cared less what was happening in the world outside this bedchamber.

When she glided her hand over his waist, he lifted his hips, encouraging

her.

“You’re so hard,” she murmured, her fingers circling his cock. “I hadn’t fully imagined. Whispers in parlors from the experienced ladies to the inexperienced ones can’t match actual touch.” She exhaled softly, her breath striking his cheek. “I wonder...”

“I’ll slide right in like you were made for me, imp, never fear.”

His hand covered hers, showing her, this time without cloth between them. Long strokes, her thumb bumping the swollen head. The pulse chimed between his shoulder blades and rolled down his back and into his buttocks. “I warn you,” he whispered, ragged, his breath coming fast. “I won’t last long. Not with the preliminary antics tonight. I’m halfway there already.”

She looped her leg over his and lifted her hips, grinding against him. “That’s what second times are for, darling rookery man.”

Laughing in delight, he took her lips, tangling his tongue with hers. His fingers found her ready, dewy. Sliding a finger inside, then another, they matched rhythms, graceless one moment, faultless the next. Thrusting, fondling. She experimented with relish, discovering new things about him. He *loved* having his nipples sucked, an activity he’d never slowed down long enough to try. And the tiny nips she gave him on a decidedly sensitive spot beneath his collarbone drove him mad. Her hair flowing over his face and chest was an aphrodisiac, like a jolt of liquor firing through his veins.

When he was nearly undone, he took her hand and pinned it by her head, trapping her. Her other was locked at his waist, urging him into a yet-unmet cadence. She was close herself, cheeks flushed, chest heaving, eyes bright silver crescents he wanted to lose himself in. “I desire you more than I’ve desired a damned thing in this life, Arabella Macauley. More than safety, more than my next meal, more than wealth or respect or success.” He tipped her chin, making sure her gaze was on his when he possessed her. “Understand me because this isn’t merely another conquest. There is no one but you. I’ve never had another woman in this bed. This is *us*. Only *us*.”

Before she could speak and conceivably say things he was terrified to hear, he laid his mouth to hers, fit her knee against his hip, and nudged inside. It was a tender, tantalizing, languid glide, inch by delicious inch. Silky skin surrounding his length, her heartbeat striking his chest in a feral tempo. Her fingers tugging his hair, nails scoring his skin, body rising to meet his thrusts. The bed, another cast-off from his family’s coffers, squeaked with the swelling movement. There was a pause of resistance, her muffled cry against

his lips, her shiver, then they were free. Climbing a mountain he'd never scaled.

Making love.

When before, it had simply been sex.

She bit his earlobe and whispered wicked things in his ear, sending his fever higher. Their skin grew moist; the air thickened with their scent. The sounds of pleasure rippled across the chamber. Sighs, moans, bodies meeting.

“Bell, *ah, God*, I want you. You are turning me inside out.”

She trailed her lips down his neck. “You have me, Nigel, you have me.”

From there, they raced to the finish line. Tangled arms and legs, furiously rocking into each other. Bumping, grinding, pulsing. Heat swept over him, prickling his skin. He shouldered a bead of sweat from his temple and realized, *manage this, lad, or you're arriving without her*.

The bud at the top of her sex was swollen, flowering for his touch. He circled the bundle of nerves as he braked his thrusts, giving himself a few seconds. “Come with me, imp. Now, please. *Please*.”

She groaned, her body bending and knocking his hand off target.

Thankfully, she spiraled into bliss, shaking and shivering, pulling him into the most mind-numbing orgasm of his life. Lights flashed behind his sealed lids as his heartbeat exploded in his ears.

They trembled, grasping and groaning, locked together, clutching each other at the end.

Novel in every way.

When they'd quieted, he laid his brow to hers, holding his weight off her as best he could when he couldn't feel his arms. “Am I too heavy?”

She blinked, yanking a strand of hair from her face. “Heavy,” she murmured as if she'd never heard the word.

Laughing weakly, he rolled and took her with him, until they were lying face-to-face on his shaky-arse bed. Now, he could see why the piece had been relegated to his parents' attic.

She nuzzled into his chest, finding an ideal spot. Kissed his neck and danced her fingers through the hair on his chest. A part of him she seemed to like when he'd never given it much consideration past his adolescence—when every hint of maturation had been a gift.

She hugged him, squirming, bumping him from chest to hip to ankle. Her feet were slim and petite and cozying against his.

He hesitated slightly before pulling her in and completing the fit. Rain

plinked off the windowpanes, lulling him into the most peaceful existence of his remembrance. The piquant scent of their lovemaking rode the air, and he breathed it in like nectar.

“Give in to me,” Arabella whispered, amused, her ability to see him fucking terrifying. A dash of moonlight cascaded across her lovely face, and his heart drifted away like a butterfly to her. “There’s no holding back now, Streeter. Not when I’ve seen you at your weakest.”

Nigel hugged her, the first time in ages he fell asleep with his heart absent of loneliness.

And the *very* first time while holding the woman he loved.

CHAPTER 7

WHERE A FATHER AND DAUGHTER COME TO AN
UNDERSTANDING—AND A LOVER MAKES A BLUNDER



Bella glanced at the grandfather clock standing guard in the foyer of Nigel's terrace, knowing the confrontation was coming. She smoothed her hand down her bodice, over her skirt and her hastily constructed chignon, acknowledging she looked a fright—but hoping it wasn't a completely telling portrait.

As in, *I've been rolling around in a squeaky bed for five hours with a notorious scoundrel, a man I love with everything in me.*

Generous, handsome, loving—and adorably *fearful* of loving—Nigel Streeter. Sleeping on his tummy in the bed upstairs, head pillowed sweetly on his arm. He was exhausted, as they'd gone another round after a brief respite. A position—Nigel behind her as they lay curled on the counterpane they'd deposited before the hearth—that had a chance to become a favorite. Afterward, they'd spent an hour sitting by the fire, eating a random assortment of foodstuff he'd had available, moonlit drifting into the window to settle around them like mist.

Between kisses and laughter, shared confidences and easy silences, they'd fallen in love.

The most intimate evening of her life.

And sensual. Primal. Unbelievably, the second time was even better than the first. From behind, he'd been able to caress her while stroking and sucking on her neck and...

Bella was grinning when a violent series of knocks sounded on the front door. She took a tense, tight breath and crossed to the entrance. She'd been waiting for over an hour, and dawn was coloring the sky in a red-gold tide now spilling over Nigel's new parquet floor.

Nerves were justified because her father could be intimidating in his fury. He'd once ruthlessly ruled London's rookery streets but was merely Papa to her. That had been his existence before her mother, Pippa, gave him more to focus upon than winning.

(Since he routinely lost battles with his wife.)

Indeed, Xander Macauley was standing on the portico when she opened the heavy oak door, rain pouring off the brim of his hat to splatter at their feet. She danced out of the way, vexing him more for some reason.

"May I come in?" he growled and ripped the beaver felt from his head. The streaks of gray that had arrived two years ago blazed across his mahogany hair like lightning bolts. Without waiting for an answer, he pushed past her and into the house. She peeked outside, horrified to see Tobias Streeter gazing from the window of the brougham parked at the curb.

Although *he* was smiling.

"You brought his father?" she asked, her own temper firing.

"You bet your troublesome bottom I did, darling daughter. Raced straight to his place when Markham's ludicrous aristo carnival went up in flames, after I was told by his son that Streeter, Jr. had 'rescued you.' Rescue from *what*? A trifling bit Dash and I took care of in less than a minute, once the enjoyment of watching men who can't fight worth a damn dribbled away. It's true, I relished pitching that idiotic marquess in Markham's pond more than I've enjoyed anything this Season. But look at what that fading moment of fun has gotten us. Toby and Hildy were smart enough to beg off, which I wish Pip had let me do because none of us need another bloody ball!"

There was nothing *junior* about Nigel, Bella recalled with a smile.

Her amusement seemed to infuriate her father beyond measure. "Dammit, Bella, what is going on here?"

Silently, Bella imagined how her mother would handle this.

Pippa managed Xander so capably, he raced in loving circles trying to please her and always had. *Appeal to the tender side he hides from everyone but his family*, she heard her mother whisper.

Bella strolled to the staircase, her heart thudding in her chest. When she perched on the bottom step, her father joined her, his broad body curving around her. His arm circled her shoulders and brought her close, much as Nigel's had earlier. Tears pricked her eyes, and she wiggled her damp slippers on the step. "I love him, Papa."

"*Hell's teeth*," he whispered and dusted a kiss over the crown of her head.

“I guess this had to happen sometime. Life is moving faster than I can calculate, even as I try to halt the spin. Kit is in business with me, and Ryder is slowly discovering women. And then you, my heroic warrior. Your way, innit, to announce your future plans in a blaze of glory? Just like your mother, no sedate adventures for this Macauley. Both of my girls fight for what they want whether I like it or not.”

“What *about* Kit, Ryder, and Tate? Don’t they fight for what they want?”

He grunted. “Ah, my boys. They’ve been *given*, no fighting required. They’ll likely find love in a dignified way, as they’ve taken so grandly to aristocratic life, their mother a duke’s sister and all that rubbish. Proper young men, favorites of the Duchess Society. I’m disappointed as hell while your mother is thrilled they’re not racing carriages down Bond. Who would have thought the sons of a brute like me would be bleeding gentlemen?” With a huff, he leaned to scrub off a mark on his boot. “You’re the child I see myself in, which is terrifying since you’re a female.”

“When I marry, there are grandchildren to think of,” she murmured into the drenched fabric of his coat.

“Children *do* quiet the soul. Grandchildren, I estimate, will be nirvana.” He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. “I’m just not sure I’m ready.”

Bella laughed and captured his gaze. Gunmetal gray, like hers. “You know him, Papa.”

He slumped against the stair. “I do. He’s my partner in the gaming hell, a very personal project to me before you were born, when I found I had other things to spend time on. Hell, I’ve been guiding Nigel Streeter since he was a gangling lad about a topic or two that I now wish I hadn’t. That is, I wouldn’t have gone into such detail if I knew he was going to choose you.”

“I chose *him*, Papa. However, he’s finally coming around.”

“In spades, like your mother,” he whispered and yanked his hand through his hair, leaving it in adorable twists about his head. “You’ll have to fight off an aggressive chit here and there, mind you. Nigel’s popular despite the sulking. He had a rough entry into this world, and that makes a man harder to love. Trust me on this. I know of what I speak. There isn’t a pretty way to say it when a man starts his life in the gutter because it complicates everything, darling girl.”

Bella paused to give the conversation time to settle. She picked at a loose thread on her skirt, humming softly. “Would you rather I decided on Lord Marcus Ambrose or that second son of the Earl of Timley who came calling

last year? Except for the horrid mole on his chin, he was quite nice. Amenable to my independent nature, as I believe he called it. There's always the Duchess Society as well, if I need to secure a husband who wasn't born in a rookery." She tapped her slipper against his boot. "If *that's* your issue."

Macauley tossed her a side-glance filled with awe. "Ah, you swindler. Pip couldn't have cornered me any better. I want you with some posh nob about as much as I'd enjoy another bloody feline in the house. Your mother adopted two kittens last week, did I tell you? Found a box in front of the workhouse when she was delivering supplies. Underfoot every morning, along with the rest. Children, animals, and a cheerful wife are my curse, I suppose."

"So, you approve? Of Nigel?" Bella asked, needing this, needing *him*. Because he was the second most important man in her life.

"I love him, too," Macauley whispered in a frayed tone she recognized meant he'd shared more than he wished to. He hugged her against his chest, his heart thumping against her cheek. "But you're my little *girl*."

The footsteps on the passageway above were light and made by bare feet. Bella turned in horror, having been certain he'd sleep through this confrontation. She'd left Nigel in a fatigued slumber in a bed they'd demolished with their erotic capers. Her plan had been to calm her father, leave her lovely man a note, go home, and wait for him to come calling in a proper way.

As if this entire love affair had been his plan all along.

"Be nice," Bella whispered, alarmed to envision keeping the two men she adored most from killing each other. They'd fought before, of course—all the men in the Leighton Cluster got into rows on a regular basis—but not *real* brawling.

Actual fisticuffs they saved for people outside the family.

Men her father called muttonheads.

Nigel was yawning when he hit the turn on the staircase above them, his hair disturbed by what could only be a woman's hands, his shirt unbuttoned and open down the front. His gaze was golden and glazed, part of his awareness still upstairs in their bed. Thankfully, he'd tugged on his trousers but was without his boots.

He has lovely feet, she thought dreamily before the confusion began.

Nigel stumbled to a halt at the sight of them, his heel caught on the stair. "*Shite*," he whispered in a low tone that nonetheless echoed down the hall.

“Indeed, lad, that about sums it up.” Xander patted the empty spot on the stair above. “Come and have a chat, won’t you? I ain’t set to bite,” he added in a tone that sounded like it was exactly what he *wanted* to do.

Nigel fumbled with his shirt buttons, getting most fastened before he reached them. Bella wanted to laugh at his stricken expression. She’d heard a story about him having to flee a second-story window escaping an angry husband—or perhaps that had been her father or another of the Leighton Cluster, she couldn’t quite recall—but he’d never had to face down the man who’d helped raise him. His mentor in the gaming business, among other enterprises.

“I can make tea,” Nigel murmured, stalling, refusing to take the seat beside them. “There might be a lemon scone or two in the kitchen. Jam and an apple. Some cheese, perhaps.”

“Your father is in my carriage, sitting at the curb, as a matter of fact.” Xander buffed his nails on his trousers. “How about we invite him in, and we’ll all partake of apples and tea?”

With a serrated sigh, Nigel dropped his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. Bella marveled that his hunger for her had kept him from recognizing that her father was going to track them down eventually. He’d given them more time than she’d expected—which was *possibly* the workings of her mother or Tobias Streeter.

Which meant they approved of the match.

“No servants, yet, is that it?” Xander asked, glancing around the deserted terrace. “Convenient, innit?”

Nigel’s head snapped up, his gaze flaring. “There’s nothing *convenient* about this.”

“Ah, there’s the temper I’m used to with Streeter, Jr.” Xander braced his hands on his knees and rose to his full, intimidating height. Unfortunately, Nigel was as tall as he was. “Let’s convene to the parlor and have a talk amongst men, shall we? What back in the day I called a chinwag.”

“Papa.” Bella grabbed his arm. “I want to be a part of this discussion.”

Xander shook off her hand. “Not this time, Bell.”

“Imp,” Nigel said, his gaze fixed on her father, “leave us. Go wait in the carriage, I beg of you.”

She rose with the most poise she could muster when her knees were trembling hard enough to send her tumbling. “I won’t.”

Xander exhaled through his teeth. “You asked her to marry you before the

fact, that right, lad?”

Nigel palmed his stomach, his cheeks paling. “Sir, I—”

“*Sir!* When in the hell have you ever called me sir?”

Bella moved in front of her father. “Did you ask Mother to marry you before the fact?”

“Oh, no, you don’t, swindling girl. No more underhanded tactics thrown at the man who invented them. I’m not that stumbling bloke.”

“Of course, we’re getting married, Papa. A proposal which hasn’t occurred that you’re now *ruining*.” She turned to Nigel, her fingers curling around his slick-smooth banister. “Isn’t that right?”

A typical male, Nigel hesitated, a slipup Bella would later recognize was caused by lack of sleep, sexual bliss, and the inexpertly blustery events of the last twenty-four hours, her father’s steely gaze not the least of them. Her mother had told her a little about the dark period that had occurred before her father made it right and asked Pippa to marry him. A choice of signage for a charitable endeavor she believed in that no one else did. And the even more troubling events between Tobias Streeter and his wife, Hildy.

Why, they’d almost never made it to the altar.

The men of the Leighton Cluster, she’d been told, were determined rakes up to the *second* they fell in complete and utter love.

Consequently, she recorded Nigel’s instant of indecision and took it to heart. Furious, she descended the staircase before he had time to determine he’d blundered.

Her father held him back, letting her storm through the door and slam it behind her.



“Ah, *hell*,” Nigel muttered and slumped against the banister. Outside, a carriage bumped against the curb as it pulled away. Bella was going to freeze. Half her undergarments were strewn about his bedchamber, her chemise torn and fit for the rubbish bin. A truth he would rather face a firing squad than admit to the seething man standing next to him.

“Maybe give her a moment.” Xander shrugged, scrubbing his fist over his chin with a hum of remorse. “Works for her mother. You’ll have to design the grandest grand deed in the history of deeds to fix this. I’m sorry to say,

but the Macauleys hold a grudge.”

“Thanks for the assistance, by the by.” Nigel stomped down the stairs and took a sharp turn at the landing, heading for the nearest stash of liquor he could find. “Of course, I was going to ask her. I told her last night, ‘If you stay, you’re mine.’ Clear that’s what I meant, isn’t it?”

“If you stay, you’re mine?” Xander repeated, amusement and disgust lacing his words. “Blazes, lad, is that the best you could do with my darling daughter?”

“She surprised the hell out of me, like a brigand racing out of the fog with her blade glinting. I surrendered before I half knew what I was about. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? I thought I was too old for her, too everything. Too *low*.” Swinging into the parlor, Nigel crossed to the sideboard and ripped the cork from a bottle with his teeth. “I bloody woke up to find you stalking me, a fox to your hound, my head a bit muddled. Apologies, sincerely.” He gulped, choking as whisky flowed down his dry throat. “Forgive me for needing a minute to gather my thoughts. I love her. I want her, but not only do I want her, I *need* her. And that’s the kicker, the piece I didn’t expect to feel about another living soul. You’ll never find anyone who’ll cherish her more. Who’ll put her happiness before his own, always. Every day, every second.” He tossed the cork to the floor. “Are you happy to hear me spilling my heart out before you?”

“You’re not too low, lad. Nor too old. Bell’s mother and I have a bit between us as well. I tried to use that as an excuse, although Pip was having none of it.” Xander stepped in, knocking him aside with a tender shoulder-to-shoulder shove. “You’re as high as they come. I’ve watched you grow into a man I respect more than any in England. More than respect, *love*. But she’s my daughter, a circumstance you’ll someday understand makes you act like a madman. Protecting your children isn’t merely your job, it’s your *life*.”

Nigel blinked back the sting in his eyes. “I’ll protect her with mine, you know that.”

Xander wiggled the bottle from his grasp and lifted it to his lips. “This scares the shite out of me, thinking about Bell growing up, getting married, moving away in life a bit, as you’re supposed to. I remember, you see”—he tapped his temple, then his chest—“how I felt about Pip, the mistakes, the longing, the unholy *fear*. A love I wasn’t able to conquer. The only thing that’s defeated me in this mad world, what I felt for her reducing me to butterfly strength.” He chuckled and swiped his hand across his lips. “Still

does, even now.”

“I don’t believe in half measures,” Nigel whispered. A vision of Arabella in his arms, her glorious eyes dazed with passion, made his heartbeat scatter. “I wouldn’t ask for her hand if I didn’t recognize with every fiber of my being that she’s the only one for me. The *only*. That lonely existence I was living is over if she’ll have me.”

Xander rocked back on his heels. “It might be a bit of a challenge. She looked fairly ferocious tramping out of here.”

“Brilliant,” Nigel said with a dejected grumble.

His future father-in-law slapped him on the back. “If anyone is up to the task with this stubborn chit, it’s you, Nigel. When have you ever given up? Rookery boys never quit.”

Nigel grabbed the bottle and threw back a swallow. “Since you helped get me into this mess, do you have any ideas about this grand deed?”

Xander shared a shrewd smile and the cunning he was known for. “Now that you mention it, lad, I do.”

CHAPTER 8

WHERE A MAN STRUGGLES TO MAKE AMENDS



The Macauley household was preparing for Tate's birthday tomorrow, the day before Christmas. Servants were scurrying about, pine garlands and those red-berried plants loaded in their arms. Cats were underfoot, four by Nigel's hasty count, and a mutt that looked about as lowly bred as he, lounging on the staircase. He heard shouts and singsong calls, the stomp of feet and a dish crashing to the floor somewhere down the corridor, general chaos that spoke of a happy home.

Birthdays saddened him, as he had no clue when his was.

He'd been dropped at the orphanage with a blanket and a dented rattle, age undetermined. A fact no one had *cared* to determine. Tobias and Hildy had tried to hold a celebration a time or two with a date they plucked from mist, but Nigel was too embarrassed by the whole thing, so the effort never took. With the wisdom of age, it was a slice of life he wished he'd simply put up with for the sake of the two people who'd done everything for him.

He tapped his toe on the parquet flagstone in the entryway, hesitant to move one step more into the house when he'd never had to knock before.

The skin on the back of his neck tingled, and he glanced at the top of the staircase—and there she was.

Beautiful, compassionate, determined Arabella Macauley.

A woman who, at the moment, looked as if she wanted to run him over with her carriage.

"You have a lot of nerve," she whispered after looking over her shoulder.

He shook his head, the rush of certainty—when he was already sure—catching him off guard. "No, imp, I'm in love with a chit who has a lot of nerve. I'm merely a man trying to piece it all together."

She sighed deeply, her chest rising and falling with it, and he could see a tiny crack forming in the icy glower on her face. He kept his gaze there, away from the stunning breasts he'd been dreaming about for three days.

A rookery boy snatched what he wanted.

Nigel wanted Arabella Macauley—and he wanted her *now*.

But he'd damn well wait until she said yes. And if she didn't, he'd go and jump off the Stone Bridge.

“Thank you for the note. And the sweets. And the flowers.” She descended a step, clearly unwilling, her hand grasping the oak banister like she was choking it. “I know blooms are hard to come by in the winter, although you have the best shipping contacts in the city. Your father or mine able to find anything one desires. Although so many arrived, we had to start putting them in bedchambers. You should know Tate's angry about his room smelling of lilacs, but he's happy about the Swiss chocolates.”

Nigel shrugged, hiding a smile when she took another begrudging step down. “The woman I desire is currently holding court on a marble staircase. I'm praying for a speedy sentencing that goes in my favor.”

Arabella halted on step number four, shooting him a fierce look that would have crushed another man. “I know my rat of a father is helping you. He told you, *order flowers and trinkets meant to soothe*, and you're buying out all England! At least you didn't try jewelry. Your father once had a dealer who specialized in nothing but tiaras. Before your mother, that is. Then, *poof*, up went the purchase of tiaras when he met Hildy.”

Nigel laughed, unable to contain it. “Xander did help with the flowers. And I'd never stoop to doling out jewels via messenger. I know trinkets, as you call them, aren't the keys to your heart, imp, but I needed time for the other. I didn't want you to think a second had gone by in the past three days where I wasn't thinking about you.” He dusted the toe of his boot along a silver thread in the entry's runner. “I'd hoped the hours and the gifts would cool your temper.”

“You thought wrong.” Though the words were sharp, there was a sliver of warmth, amusement, perhaps *love*, buried beneath the heat.

Nigel leaned against the door, relieved Arabella's mother had cleared the foyer of servants when he arrived. Thankfully, Pippa was rooting for him. An orange tabby, however, decided to pay a visit, doing circles around his ankles. “Are you going to come give me a kiss? You know you want to. I know *I* want you to.”

Halfway to him, she halted, her lips pressing into a hard line. “You arrogant scoundrel, as if I would after you rejected me in front of my *father*.” She flicked her hand, gesturing to the chaos surrounding them. “Plus, I have this blasted birthday party to help arrange.”

Incorporating Xander’s advice, Nigel opened his heart, placing himself on the block for her. Glancing around the space, noting decorations and knickknacks that spelled family, he said, “I don’t know when my birthday is. The spring perhaps. I was left at the orphanage without much information attached to the drop. Perhaps I should pick a day, so my children have something to celebrate with me.”

She paused two paces away, her lips parting on a rough sigh. Tears glistened in her eyes, and she swallowed hard. “*Oh*, you are a skilled player, Nigel Streeter.”

He closed the gap between them, taking her jaw and tilting her gaze to his. Her eyes were the deep gray of burnt ash this morning, the color of his fantasies. “This isn’t a game to me, Bell. If you choose to share your life with me, the stakes are higher than any I’ve faced. And I like to win—I admit to having a gambler’s soul. But this is *life*. I want your devotion, your stories, your stubbornness.”

He captured her mouth when she started to argue. Where they tumbled into the abyss, passion scorching the air around them. His arms were around her, hers around him, colliding. Heat crawled down his body to land quite rightly between his legs, swelling his shaft against her hip. When she wiggled in reply, he lost his breath.

“I adore you,” he whispered brokenly against her lips. “I want you to be my wife, my everything, Bell. And I’m willing to prove my love for as long as you need me to realize I’m a solid bet. To know without one *hint* of hesitation that I’m the man for you. I won’t accept half measures any more than I offer them.”

“Only you and my father call me Bell. Funny, that.” Tilting her head, she gazed at him with the mien of a gamester. His ploy tossed right back at him. “Before I decide the case, what’s the ‘other’ you said you’d planned?”

He unsuccessfully hid his grin, his heart thudding when she grinned in return.

She danced away when he tried to corral her. “Oh, no. No, no, *no*. I want my story, one as outstanding as my mother’s. As *your* mother’s. The men of the Leighton Cluster are known for grand deeds, as my father calls them.”

Turning, Nigel grabbed a cloak from the rack and held it out to her. “Mostly, imp, we’re known for groveling.”

She glanced at the cape and then into his eyes. Hers were clear, determined but tender, unless he missed his guess. “No kissing in the carriage, Streeter. That will only confuse the spit out of me. You on your squab, me on mine.”

“Done,” he whispered and settled the cloak on her slim shoulders.

If pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck was cheating, he simply couldn’t help himself.

And he didn’t promise a damned thing beyond the carriage ride.



He’d kept his word and his hands off her.

Although, Bella realized in amazement, a molten gaze could light a fire inside a girl.

After withstanding that sizzling look for the entire ten-minute trip, her knees were weak when they arrived at his terrace. It was a gorgeous property, she decided, taking in the trim four stories, the tidy marble stairs leading to a bright blue set of doors.

She would be happy here. Glancing at the man fumbling with a set of keys for an existence he was inviting her into, she let love make her decision.

In truth, she didn’t require a grand deed.

There were stories shared about the Macauley and Streeter dinner tables by the females in the family—and Bella wished for hers just to keep up. Nigel had done enough with the peek he’d given her into his past. To her, that was worth more than flowers and sweets.

Her decision was made. Ages ago, or so it seemed, she’d known Nigel was the best bet she’d make in this life. She appreciated his vulnerable quest to prove what a wonderful man he was to her.

When he was the only man for her, the adorable rogue.

However, she wasn’t above watching him grovel, since it was part and parcel of his legacy as a member of their extended family.

“The lock is sticking,” he grouched, giving it a violent twist. “And it’s brand new.”

Elbowing him aside, she held her hand out for the key. *Why...*

Bella stared at him in amazement. His hands were shaking, his cheeks were flushed. While she was merely so delighted that she could barely keep from doing a dance on his front stoop.

“We can pick a birthday for you,” she said and gave the key a delicate turn that had the door swinging open. “Perhaps one in the spring, since you believe it’s close to the real thing.”

“Bell,” he breathed and shoved her inside the manse. Kicking the door closed, he pressed her against it.

Gads, he kissed like a god.

Threw himself in full force, no reluctance. His tongue tangling with hers, his lips gentle and commanding all at once. His broad body trapping her in passion, hunger, *greed*. Lifting her by her bottom, he caged her against the door, bringing her legs half around him in a muddle with her skirts.

“Later, when you promise to be mine, I’m going to make you scream, an echo heard throughout this house, between the two of us, even after we have children racing through the halls.” Nipping a tender patch of skin beneath her jaw, he sucked her earlobe between his teeth until the ground swept out from beneath her. She would have gone down had she been standing. “There are no servants, not yet. We’re going to tup in every room, on every surface, I promise you, before they arrive.”

Then he let her go, steadying her with that wicked smile of his, until she wasn’t shaking. Or not so much that he noticed. What went on beneath a woman’s skirts were her own dealings.

Bella followed him down the corridor, noting what an excellent physique he had. (Because after that kiss, she was in this mood.) Trim bottom, round but not plump. Lean waist. Broad shoulders. His sooty hair—longer than style dictated, a choice she loved—draped over his crisp collar. He rarely went for formal hats or flashy waistcoats. He was a gray-on-gray with the occasional formal blacks man.

She trusted his fashion and his pledges and his heart—and she always would.

Nigel paused at the parlor door, glancing back, finding her gaze lower than it should be. A gleam entered his eyes. Taking the fingertip of his kidskin glove in his teeth, he yanked each finger free while her pulse soared, the part of her body between her thighs that he *owned* melting. “I bought new sheets, as we made quite a tangle of the first. Silk, the finest my ill-gotten blunt could buy.”

Bella laughed, not about to let it be that easy. Shrugging, she strolled into a room redolent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and balsam fir. “Why would your bedding matter to me?”

Then she paused in place. *Oh*, she marveled. She hadn’t imagined she desired a grand deed.

Until she saw one.

An explosion of Christmastide joy filled the room. Boxes of decorations, evergreen garlands, candles, wreaths. Enough for five homes.

Nigel halted beside her, the tail of his greatcoat whipping against his legs. He gestured to the trees standing guard before the bay windows. “I couldn’t decide which one I liked best or which one *you* would like best, so I purchased both. Imported directly from Germany, where this inside-the-house shrub foolishness is becoming quite the holiday tradition. I guess that’s where Victoria got the idea. There are boxes of gewgaws, too, enough for all London.” He scrubbed his shoulder over his chin. “Though I’m not sure we should follow this ritual as the royals are known for absurdity. And insanity.”

Bella crossed to the saplings taking up a large section of the parlor. Both were so tall she had to crane her head to see the spiky tops. She clapped her hands, delighted. “There’s an angel atop one, and something that looks like a devil atop the other.”

Nigel chuckled, seeming to relax as he observed her pleasure. “The devil is me.” He came to stand next to her, his gaze also drawn to the spectacle. “You’re the angel.”

She slipped her hand into his and linked their fingers. The pulse at his wrist was tapping out a lively tune. “You have enough for the entire family.”

He hummed out a half answer and brought her hand to his lips, dusting a kiss across her knuckles. “That’s what my father said, too. He and the Duke of Leighton helped me locate much of it. You know, his wife, the countess, has the shipping enterprise.”

Letting him go, Bella circled the angel tree, bending to retrieve a glass ornament in the shape of a star. After hanging it, she stepped back to have a look. “You’re going to make a home here, Nigel Streeter. A splendid one.”

“*We’re* going to make a home here, Arabella Macauley.”

She peeked at him through the balsam’s branches. His gaze had taken on that honey-gold hue which meant he was deep in thought. Later, she’d make him beg and gasp, his eyes going the color of mahogany.

That she knew these little secrets about him astounded her.

That he'd let her in enough to know them thrilled her.

Love pulsed through her in waves, one after the other until she could hardly catch her breath. She wanted to grow old with him. She wanted to have his children. She wanted this house and this life. She wanted the *us*.

Coming around the tree, he took her hand and led her to the settee that had been jammed in the corner to accommodate the trees. Piled atop it were loads of fabric samples, paint chips, and books on furnishings. Nigel rocked back in his heels, discomfited. "Xander said you'd always wanted to decorate your own house. That you've done most of what I see in their home because Pippa doesn't much care for fashion and such."

He pointed to the stacks, coughed lightly. Again, revealing the vulnerable shyness that floored her. "I don't care what you choose. I don't care what you spend. I've done well, honestly, really, *really* well with the Devil's Lair. I have a gift for gaming, I suppose. Make it yours, this place, is what I'm saying. If you're here and content, I'm happy."

Before she could speak, spill the thousands of dreams and hopes fluttering through her, he brought her close and kissed her, gently, a feather touch. Too soon, he stepped back, reaching into his waistcoat pocket to withdraw a small velvet box. "I don't have a ring with history to give you, imp. A surname beyond the one I was charitably offered when I was eleven years old. I can only offer my heart and my future. My past, if you wish me to share it. This," he said and tapped the box to her heart, then his, "will go to our daughter someday. Or her daughter. That's where it begins, the Streeter legacy of love, kindness, and prosperity. I promise to never take that good fortune for granted."

Bella went to her toes and kissed him, letting everything in her swell and flow into him. Delighted, she giggled and thrust out her hand. "Put it on."

He laughed, his cheeks heating, the darling, darling man. "Is that a yes?"

She wiggled her fingers. "Now, Streeter."

The ring was incredible. A canary-yellow diamond without another jewel to mar its beauty. "It's rare, I'm told. The color and such. I had help with the sizing, from Pippa." He slid it on her finger and beamed at the flawless fit. Turning it this way and that, he tapped the stone with his fingertip. "It's you, the sunshine, the glow. You fill me with near this color, every day, Bell. It's like liquid bliss."

Tears overtook her, and she crumpled against his chest. Love was more powerful than her meager effort to contain it.

“Don’t, Bella.” He wrapped her in his arms. “Ah, darling imp, don’t cry.”

Bella sniffled into his waistcoat, breathing in the scent of leather and spice. When would she ever get used to this remarkable man being *hers*? All hers. “They’re happy tears. I love the ring. I love *you*, more than I’ve ever thought to love anyone.”

Cradling her chin, he pressed his lips to hers. “I don’t want to wait. Please don’t make me do the society dance of a months-long engagement. I’m begging you.”

Bella trailed her finger down his waistcoat buttons, teasing him. What better time to get every little thing she wanted out of this glorious evening? “If you let me watch the festivities from the Devil’s Lair gallery for one full night, not a second less, I’ll marry you tomorrow.”

He leaned back, eyes wide when they met hers. “Truly, you’re negotiating *this*?”

She placed her hand over his chest, his heartbeat kicking beneath her palm. “If I wait, you’ll say it’s not something you want your wife to do. Now... I have power, so I’m going to use it. Give me a moment, and I’ll think of more things forbidden to me before now.”

“Darling imp,” he whispered and pressed his rigid shaft against her hip, “you have power. Please, *please* use it.”

Laughing, she took his hand, guided him out of the parlor and up the stairs.

Where they negotiated all night.

EPILOGUE

WHERE A LOVING COUPLE BECOME GRANDPARENTS



One year later...

Pippa Macauley turned in her husband's arms, finding the tiny nook she'd been nestling in for years. She pressed her ear to his heart, as sated and content as any woman could be.

Thankfully, it had been so long that she couldn't recall a life without him. The man she'd fought for—and won. She pressed a kiss to the spot he loved just beneath his collarbone. “Quit worrying, darling. Bella will be fine. She's strong. A true Macauley.”

“Ah, Pip, I'm not ready to be a grandfather.” Xander sighed and tucked her close. “What if something happens?”

Pippa tilted his chin until his eyes met hers. Silver flames, like her daughter's. “None of that. If her husband hears you, he'll be set for Bedlam. Have you taken a look at Nigel lately? I fear the poor boy's going to pass out and slump across the dinner table. His cheeks are the color of chalk, and I think he's lost weight. While Bella is losing *patience*. Did you know, he wanted to escort her to the modiste yesterday? He hired one of Leighton's footmen, an expert horseman and guard, to drive her carriage down Bond.”

Xander's shoulders slumped in relief. “I knew the lad was going to make the ideal husband. He's too old for her, of course, and has a stronger attachment than even I did to the Devil's Lair, which requires an accepting wife. But other than that, he is damn-near perfect. More like me than anyone she could have chosen. Brilliant, innit?”

“Xander Macauley,” Pippa said and gently slapped his chest. “You've joined him in lunacy if you think this overprotective business is what our

daughter needs.”

“Do you recall how I was when you were expecting Kit? I’ve never felt such astounding joy on top of such blinding fear. The only comparison is when I thought I’d lost you.” He shuddered. “I can’t go through that again, not at this age.”

Pippa smothered a laugh into his flushed skin. “You were never in danger of losing me. I had you in my sights for years before I finally decided enough was enough. I suspect Bella was the same. Oh, if you men would only do what we tell you from the start, how easy would life be?”

“Frightening, my girls,” her husband whispered, his words lost in her tousled hair. They were alone in the house since Tate was spending the night at the Duke of Leighton’s with one of his sons. So, they’d made good use of their time. In the parlor, then the bed.

She liked being able to cry out as loudly as she liked, as often as she liked.

Pippa danced her fingers down his ribs to his waist.

Xander threw his arm over his eyes. “Stop it, luv. I can’t go another round without at least an hour’s sleep. And food. Sustenance would be lovely. Are you trying to starve me? That your plan?”

Pippa elbowed to a half sit. “What if I bring cheese and a loaf of that lovely oat bread we got on the way home. Apples. Wine. I think we even have almonds.” She grinned, imagining a night with her husband without children interfering. There was always the chance of a kitten climbing on the bed, but she would make sure to lock the door.

Lifting his arm, he peeked from beneath it. The slashes of gray in his hair glinted in the gas lamp’s glow, a most magnificent thing when they’d showed up. “Fine. But *I* get to pick the position this time.”

Pippa leaned in to kiss him, amazed after all this time at the rush of love that hit her. “I let you pick the last.”

He grunted and pillowed his arms beneath his head. “Hardly. I wanted to stay in the parlor, remember?”

Pippa crawled from the bed and stooped to grab his shirt from the floor. She wrestled her arms in the sleeves, thrilled when he sat a little higher to catch the show. “We rolled off the settee. I’m going to have a bruise the size of a melon on my bum.”

Xander reached for her, both of them laughing when she danced out of reach.

When she got to the door, she glanced back to find his hot gaze focused on her. “I love you, Xander Macauley.”

He laid his hand over his heart. “Little Darlington, I love you more.”

Blinded by happiness, Pippa nearly tripped over a kitten on her way to the kitchen.

But it was worth the risk.

Because her darling husband let her pick the position.

THE END

Thank you for reading *The Daring Debutante* by Tracy Sumner!

If you're interested in reading about Nigel's father, Tobias Streeter, check out Book 1 in the Duchess Society Series, [The Brazen Bluestocking](#). Tobias is a rookery titan with a secret past who matches wits with a willful bluestocking (and a matchmaker of sorts) in a *steamy*, wild ride. Xander Macauley and Pippa's love story is featured in [The Wicked Wallflower](#), a finalist in the Carolyn, National Excellence in Romantic Fiction, MAGGIE, and Orange County Book Buyers awards!



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ABOUT TRACY SUMNER



USA TODAY bestselling and award-winning author Tracy Sumner’s storytelling career began when she picked up a historical romance on a college beach trip, and she fondly blames LaVyrle Spencer for her obsession with the genre. She’s a recipient of the National Reader’s Choice, and her novels have been translated into Dutch, German, Portuguese and Spanish. She lived in New York, Paris and Taipei before finding her way back to the Lowcountry of South Carolina.

When not writing sizzling love stories about feisty heroines and their temperamental-but-entirely-lovable heroes, Tracy enjoys reading, snowboarding, college football (Go Tigers!), yoga, and travel. She loves to hear from romance readers!

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A YULETIDE TOSS OF THE
DICE

A LADIES OF OPPORTUNITY NOVELLA

COLLETTE CAMERON



A Yuletide Toss of the Dice by Collette Cameron

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ABOUT THE BOOK

**They never realized just how thin the line between hate and love could
be...
until they tumbled over it...**

Aubriella Penford knows she's odd. Her gauche manners and love of science set her *far* apart from other Society bluestockings. So, she was beyond shocked when her brother's best friend—her enemy since childhood—offered to help her overcome her awkwardness at the annual Christmas house party. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that she *accepted*...

Jackson Matherfield is aloof. The time he spent clawing his way out of the poor house to care for his family made sure of that. So, he prefers working and overseeing his business ventures to socializing. There's *no* logical reason why should be suddenly charmed by Aubrie's sarcastic wit and sharp tongue at the holiday party. But he is...

All it takes is a scandalous wager, an unexpected snowstorm, and one daring rescue for Jack and Aubrie to realize they *might* have more in common than they thought possible. But will their temporary truce end in a Yuletide happily ever after, or heartache?

CHAPTER 1



8 December 1818
Gloucester Street, London

I 'm late. Again.

Without waiting for the aging driver to climb down, lower the step, and wrench open the outdated coach door, Aubriella Penford agilely hopped from the conveyance just as it rolled to a stop before the Danforths' unobtrusive townhome in a quasi-fashionable London neighborhood.

The hot coals inside the foot warmer had done little to alleviate the vehicle's chill, yet the frigid air slapping her cheeks upon her descent onto the pavement caused her to inhale sharply. Huddled into her new raspberry-red and black redingote—how Aubriella adored the vibrant shade—she shivered as she waved Mosely back to his seat.

“No need to come down, Mosely.”

The sooner she was inside, the sooner he could find himself a cozy table in Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese pub and enjoy a pint or two while flirting with Widow Waddell.

She darted a swift glance toward the house, unsurprised to see a yellowed lace curtain pushed aside and Roxina Danforth peering onto the lane. A wry smile curving her mouth, she gave Aubriella a brief finger wave before permitting the panel to fall into place once more. Likely so she could tell the others that Aubriella had finally arrived.

Against her will, her attention slid to the equally unremarkable but tidy brick townhouse next door before she jerked it away. The Matherfield brothers lived there. Jackson Matherfield, the eldest and a close friend of her

brother's, had been a sharp, irritating pebble in her shoe for the better part of fifteen years.

Aubriella tightened her jaw, vexed at her lack of self-control as much as her continual lack of punctuality. She loathed making her friends wait, but escaping the house wasn't easy. Mama must be informed and approve of Aubriella's use of the coach.

Seventeen-year-old Jessamine often begged to come along, which simply would not do for weekly meetings with the *Ladies of Opportunities*, as they jokingly referred to themselves.

The group, a secret society, kept a betting book much like White's, but exclusively for females. That prevented women from becoming indebted to male creditors, which might risk their virtue.

Imagine the *haut ton's* shock should the client list ever be revealed or the nature of the numerous wagers. That must *never* happen. Women supplementing their income via secret gambling stakes could expect tarnished reputations or ruin should they be found out.

Believable excuses must be contrived to dissuade Aubriella's social butterfly of a sister from accompanying her, and one could not easily deter Minnie. In all fairness to her mother and sister, Aubriella often lost track of time while researching and studying, which, more than anything, accounted for her perpetual tardiness.

Shutting the door, she cast a pensive glance at the ominous pewter sky as she approached the coach's front, then clapped inside.

Please, please, please snow.

Winter had finally arrived, bringing bitter cold and the possibility of snow.

None too soon, either.

Now, if only a foot or two of white fluff would fall and remain on the ground, preventing her family from attending the Templetons' annual Christmastide house party in Westerham—a fortnight of holiday revelry, tedious parlor games, gambling, impromptu recitals, awful skits, and dancing—all of which she was wholly inept at, except the wagering.

That she had become very adept at, indeed.

Her older and younger sisters had inherited Mama's fair coloring, curves, beauty, gracefulness, and love for all things social. Aubriella took after their father: dark, freckled, thin, and, as Papa was wont to say, "amiably awkward." In other words, kind but clumsy. Genial but gauche.

His good-natured maladroitness was endearing.

Hers?

Nothing short of humiliating.

What was worse, the Templetons believed in the adage, *the more the merrier*, and packed the house to the rafters with revelers. That, along with too much mulled wine, hot toddies, abundant champagne, and the gentlemen imbibing in stronger spirits, provided the perfect opportunity for illicit liaisons.

Last year in an attempt to find a quiet spot to read, she'd stumbled upon no fewer than three amorous couples. That included Jackson Matherfield in a scandalous embrace with that fast, immoral wanton Francine Willoughby in the conservatory.

Even now, the memory caused Aubriella's cheeks to flame with chagrin, and it was freezing outside. She'd pelted back to her shared bedchamber and pleaded a sick headache for the next four and twenty hours.

Never mind that Aubriella didn't suffer from headaches ever.

But what she'd accidentally witnessed made her head throb with the vengeance of Highlander battle drums and proved beyond a doubt that Jackson Matherfield was every bit the rascal and rakehell she'd always believed him to be.

Mindful that her friends awaited her, Aubriella slung her satchel strap over her head and adjusted the bag to hang near her waist. The smooth, dark-brown leather concealed so many secrets. Confidences she and the others she was about to meet with had sworn never to reveal.

Keeping one hand firmly against the sealed bag, she peered up at Mosely.

"Pick me up in three hours." Would that give her enough time to ready herself for dinner? "No, you had better make it two."

Mama had invited guests for supper to celebrate Emmet's birthday, although for the life of her, Aubriella couldn't remember precisely who would help celebrate her brother's birthday.

Had Mama told her?

Probably.

Aubriella pursed her lips, trying to recall. Absorbed with the drawings she'd received from Italy last week, not much else had kept her attention these past few days.

Such magnificent, wondrous, intriguing renderings.

The copies of Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings lay beneath her

mattress.

Just thinking of the intricate and detailed works caused her tummy to tumble with giddiness. She *might've* led her parents to believe the sketches were da Vinci's architectural renderings. Architecture wasn't exactly appropriate for a young lady of quality, but it was certainly not as scandalous as an artist's depictions of human dissections.

Aubriella felt little remorse for deceiving her parents.

If women were permitted to study medicine, she wouldn't have resorted to subterfuge. Until that day came—and she was confident it must—she'd use whatever means necessary to expand her knowledge of the human body.

Regardless, a formal supper meant Aubriella must dress appropriately. Her usual casual attire of whatever she wore while studying her specimens would not do, sans her stained laboratory apron, of course.

No, tonight would require a fashionable gown, stays, intricately coiffured hair, jewelry, and perfume. And her best manners, decorum, and *hours* of insipid small talk. She'd be hard put not to roll her eyes, yawn, or make a less-than-charitable remark.

So help her God, if anyone mentioned the weather, fashion, or shared a snippet of gossip, she'd eschew propriety and suggest where they might shove said exchange.

Since at four and twenty, she was too old to banish to her room, and restricting her social outings merely brought her relief, her parents had no notion what to do with their middle daughter when she decided to blurt something blush-worthy or indecorous. Which, truth be told, occurred more often than Aubriella cared to admit.

Nevertheless, the skills that came easily to her sisters seemed to have skipped her altogether, along with the ability to dance gracefully, sing in tune, and wield a needle with any degree of skill. Although she'd bet her pin money if women were permitted to become surgeons, she'd have managed a needle with considerable aptitude.

Yes, tonight would be another painful reminder of everything Aubriella was and was not. She was plain, solidly on the shelf, and had nothing to look forward to except caring for her parents in their dotage and sneaking around, trying to learn as much about anatomy as possible.

A sparrow amongst doves.

For certain, she would say something stupid, knock over her wine glass, clink her fork or spoon against her plate, or any number of other miniature

calamities tonight. One could wager on it. Her stomach cramped at the thought, but she forced a smile to her suddenly stiff lips.

“Please tell Widow Waddell hello for me, Mosely.”

For the past year, since entering into the clandestine *business venture*, she’d visited Roxina almost weekly. Mosely and the widow had grown quite cozy, and Aubriella hoped he’d propose soon.

“Yes, Miss Penford. I shall.” He nodded, giving her a grateful smile, fondness creasing the corners of his kind, nut-brown eyes and wrinkling his weathered face. “I’ll just watch until you’ve entered the house.”

He took his duties to deliver Aubriella home unharmed seriously. That meant he was on duty until the door closed behind her. Bracing against the wintry wind buffeting her, she bent her head as she turned and plowed straight into a tall, hard, masculine form.

“Careful there, Miss Penford.”

CHAPTER 2



Still outside Roxina Danforth's House

B *last and bunions.*
Humor deepened the man's baritone, laced with the merest hint of mockery.

Aubriella knew *that* voice.

Bracing herself, she raised her gaze to meet Jackson Matherfield's sinfully beautiful hazel eyes, ringed with dark blue and fringed with ebony lashes. No man should possess eyes that stunning. It wasn't right. If she were a typical female, she might've been jealous or ensnared by their beauty.

Except she recognized the rakish cynicism glinting in his eyes that most other ladies missed in their mutton-headed ogling. Jackson Matherfield viewed life through sardonic lenses, was seldom serious, and was a *roué* from his charmingly mussed hair to his highly polished Hessians.

Furthermore, this man liked nothing better than to tease and taunt her.

"Mr. Matherfield."

He gave a dramatic sigh as he steadied her, his grip firm yet gentle.

"How many times must I ask you to address me as Jack?" Then the bouncer dared to wink as if they were close acquaintances or intimate friends. "We've known each other most of our lives."

True, but that didn't mean she had forgiven the cad for tormenting her.

Well, he'd intended annoyance when, in truth, he'd done her a great favor. A smile tried to twist her mouth upward, but Aubriella wrestled her mirth under control.

Jack mustn't think he amused her.

Gads, he was intolerably arrogant as it was. He would be impossible if he believed she felt anything but disdain toward him. She was positive his teasing would increase exponentially.

In truth, the frogs, bugs, snakes, and even the occasional fossil, animal bone, or skull he presented her as a child hadn't frightened her or caused her to cry, shriek, or run away. Instead, she'd examined each one with the diligence of a trained scientist until, at last, he'd come to recognize she enjoyed the opportunity to study the creatures that were otherwise off-limits to little girls of genteel breeding.

Not only did Jackson Matherfield live next door to the house she was about to enter, but he was also a bosom chum of her brother, Emmet. Aubriella had known Jack for over fifteen years, and he still vexed her to no end.

He skimmed that gorgeous gaze over her new redingote.

“That berry shade suits you, Aubrie.”

Only *he* had ever called her that.

Those closest to her addressed her as Elli.

Irritation and impatience stirred in her belly whenever he murmured the name in that seductive purr. It had always been thus between them. They were as different as oil and water, sugar and vinegar, and would never mix well.

“That’s not my name, and I’ll thank you not to address me as such.” She, who didn’t give a goose’s hind end about convention most of the time, taking the handsome devil to task screamed with irony.

His skewing upward of his nicely—fine, *perfectly*—shaped lips revealed he thought as much, too. Those lips locked on Francine’s perfect rosebud of a mouth popped into her mind. Any sensual musings she might’ve indulged plummeted to her half boots encasing her rather cold toes.

“Visiting Miss Danforth?” he asked conversationally, the breeze teasing the midnight hair brushing the back of his collar.

Must the man smell so blasted divine?

If temptation had an aroma, Jackson Matherfield had doused himself in the essence and was devilishly enticing even to a firmly-on-the-shelf spinster such as herself.

Quirking an eyebrow, she stepped away.

“Obviously.” Her droll reply was as dry as desert sand. “Don’t you have someplace you need to be? Overseeing one of your establishments?”

He and his brother owned four clubs. He called them restaurants, but she'd heard titillating whispers that they were something much less reputable.

“Wagering on something ridiculous at White’s?” Was he a member of White’s? “Flirting with a debutante?”

Debutantes. Duchesses. Widows. Wallflowers. Elderly Dames. Maids...

The man was a consummate charmer, and women flocked to him like ants to spilled honey. He pressed a black-gloved hand to his broad chest, mischief and merriment dancing in his eyes.

Oh, the bounder.

“You wound me, Aubrie, love. You know I *never* flirt with anyone but you.”

A snort worthy of a stallion escaped her.

A more susceptible woman might've been taken in by his pretty words and even more alluring, seductive smile. Fortunately, Aubriella lacked most feminine weaknesses and merely found his bedevilment bothersome.

She fashioned a sweetly demure smile in imitation of those she'd seen the diamonds of the first water bestow upon gentlemen. A gratified thrill zipped along her pulse when the corners of his eyes flexed the merest bit.

Tit for tat.

Feeling particularly bold and naughty, she leaned toward him, and his nostrils flared.

Hmm. Interesting and unexpected.

“Bollocks to that drivel, *Jack.*”

As she stomped up the stairs, his laughter rang in her ears.

“I’m looking forward to continuing this intriguing conversation at supper tonight,” he said.

What?

One foot on the landing, she pivoted halfway around. “I beg your pardon?”

A little warning bell sounded.

Aubriella vaguely recalled Mama mentioning Emmet’s friends would attend. *Blister and blast.* She should've paid more attention. Adjusting her satchel, she sent the driver a swift glance.

Mosley watched the conversation with undisguised amusement. No point in telling him he could leave because he wouldn't budge an inch until she was inside.

“*Sup-per.*” Did satisfaction gleam in Jack’s eyes, the cad? “You know,

where people gather, eat, drink, and converse? Sometimes play cards or dance afterward? We've done so numerous times over the years."

"You are dining with us tonight?" Aubriella sounded like a simpleton to her ears.

Of course, Jack was; God save her. It was Emmet's birthday celebration. Mama had better not seat the scoundrel at the same end of the table as Aubriella, or any wine she spilled would be on purpose.

Straight into his virile lap.

"Indeed. I hope we are seated near each other." Jack lifted the brim of his hat and gave a short bow. "I'm most curious to learn why you think me flirting with you is drivel."

Refusing to respond to his intentional goading, Aubriella slipped inside, shutting the door a mite firmer than necessary.

"I apologize for my tardiness." Untying her bonnet ribbons, she offered the other women on the club's board a contrite smile. "I do try to be on time."

Waving her apology away, Georgine Thackerly grinned. "We saw who detained you, Elli. Jack's such a handsome devil. Too bad he's a rake."

Of course, they had seen, but Aubriella wouldn't discuss the pest next door.

"Come, have a cup of tea and warm yourself," Roxina invited as she poured tea into a cup with a dab of milk before adding a lump of sugar. "Claire has a wager for us to consider."

Though they guarded the club's existence with extreme care, women covertly spread the word to others interested in placing a wager who needed to supplement their income. Truth be told, that qualified most females.

The *Ladies of Opportunity* kept a percentage of each bet and, like the women they assisted, could put money aside, keeping them from relying solely on men for financial support. Each potential wager must be unanimously agreed upon and couldn't be cruel or dishonorable in intent, or it wasn't accepted.

Settling onto the outdated beige and black brocade settee, Aubriella nudged aside an equally bedraggled tasseled tapestry pillow before accepting the teacup from Roxina and raising an inquisitive eyebrow toward Claire. Widowed at eight and twenty, Claire Granlund held the dubious honor of being the eldest of their little troupe of spinsters and misfits.

Claire tilted her golden blonde head, mischief fairly dancing in her whisky brown eyes. "Lady Lovegrove approached me last evening and asked

if the society would consider accepting a wager for two hundred pounds.”

Georgine gasped, her sapphire blue eyes widening with excitement.

“*Two hundred?*” She glanced between Aubriella and Roxina. “Is that the largest yet?”

“It is.” Expression contemplative, Roxina nodded. “I would guess her ladyship has access to information that makes her certain she shall win. I’ll wager that is every cent she has to her name.”

“What is the wager, Claire?” Aubriella took a sip of tea, savoring the flavor and warmth. Roxina never skimped on tea, though her circumstances required economizing.

“She insists on anonymity for the bet.” Claire selected a ginger biscuit, holding it midway to her mouth. “However, she vows Francine Willoughby shall announce her betrothal within a month. She’s very likely *enceinte*.”

She whispered the last word as if the walls might overhear the scandalous tidbit, and the wind would carry the tattle throughout London.

Aubriella choked on her tea. “*Francine? Pregnant?*”

As Francine’s paternal aunt, Lady Lovegrove had little liking for the conceited, unkind girl who poked fun at the dowdy, plump widow at every opportunity. One couldn’t blame her for jumping at the opportunity to profit from her niece’s misfortune.

For three Seasons, the promiscuous chit had held out for an earl or duke while sharing her favors with abandon with handsome rogues. What man would marry her when he could get her favors for free?

“I wonder who the father is?” Georgine mused, her forefinger on her chin as she squinted at the ceiling needing paint.

Aubriella suddenly felt quite ill, her stomach toppling over like it had the one time she’d boarded a ship.

Jack? Could he have fathered the child?

“Could be any of a dozen chaps.” Claire rolled a delicate shoulder. “We all know Francine hasn’t exactly been, er, discriminating. It’s a wonder she hasn’t been *caught* before now.”

That was true.

Nevertheless, Aubriella felt a pang of compassion for the foolish girl.

“The wager must be about Francine’s expedited wedding, not her delicate condition.” Aubriella set her cup down, far more composed outwardly than inwardly.

Jack would be miserable with Francine. Perhaps it was what he deserved

for dallying with the tart, but a lifetime of unhappiness seemed a cruel fate.

“We are not in the business of ruining lives,” Aubriella reiterated.

Though should someone’s poor choices lead to their destruction, while providing a few coins in their purses, sometimes could not be helped.

“I pity the unfortunate chap forced to wed the harpy.” Unlike Aubriella, Roxina typically had little compassion for anyone who made stupid decisions. “It won’t likely be the real father, but a man Viscount Willoughby thinks he can blackmail, buy, or manipulate into conceding.”

Jack wouldn’t easily acquiesce, but then again, he might not be the babe’s father.

But if he was, Aubriella had no doubt he’d do the honorable thing.

And why that made her want to cry defied explanation.

CHAPTER 3



Penfords' House
May Fair – London
Half eight that evening

Hiding a smile, Jack slid into the seat beside Aubriella. He snapped his serviette open and smoothed it across his black pantaloons. Likely miffed at the seating arrangements, she refused to acknowledge his presence.

She'd come around, eventually.

He knew how to draw her out, though it usually involved her temper flaring. Meanwhile, he would surreptitiously look his fill at the lovely young woman she'd transformed into for dinner.

The candles cast a golden glow on her pretty sable-brown hair and caused the pearls encircling her slender ivory neck and dangling from her shell-like ears to gleam. Her cream muslin gown, with its sea-foam green overskirt and embroidered flowers at the hem and around the sleeves, enhanced the fern-green in her hazel eyes.

Unlike her sisters, Aubriella would never be considered a beauty by society's limited and warped standards. Jessamine and Lenora were lovely—roses or peonies in full bloom. But tall and slender, Aubriella was a delphinium or gladiolus.

He hid a grin behind his wine glass.

She'd loathe the comparison.

Where most women adored flowers, she'd always preferred medicinal plants, herbs, or even weeds. Yes, Aubriella Kendra Larkspur Penford was remarkably unique.

Jack's interest in her wasn't romantic.

After all, she was his good friend's sister, and he'd known Aubriella for so long that they were practically family. He supposed his fascination with her stemmed from him appreciating a challenge, and she was the most provoking woman he'd ever met. Her disdain and dislike of him had puzzled him for years, and try as he might, he couldn't recall what he'd done to earn her disfavor.

He glanced across the table to where his and Emmet Penford's longtime friend, Shelby Telling, regarded Roxina Danforth, halfway down the table, with barely concealed mockery. Roxina's brother, Mitchel, seated at Aubriella's right, was Telling's best friend.

It was a peculiar coupling as Telling was several years younger and an upright chap, though a tad temperamental and serious. On the other hand, Mitchel Danforth was a wastrel and fop, and those were his good qualities.

He treated his sister abominably, and she openly held in contempt anyone who called themselves Mitchel's friends. Thus, she and Telling were constantly at odds.

In truth, they were rather like Jack and Aubriella, although for entirely different reasons.

"That gown is very becoming." Jack sipped his wine, awaiting Aubriella's response.

None came.

So, she meant to play that game, did she?

Give him the silent treatment?

Hadn't she learned by now he knew exactly how to maneuver past her bastions?

Servants cleared the artichoke soup, replacing it with fish seasoned with fennel and mint. The Penfords, like the others seated at the table, weren't aristocrats, though some present had aristocratic relations, such as himself. These were genteel people, hovering on the fringes of *le beau monde* and considered vulgar by the *haut ton* because they earned a living.

"Are you going to ignore me the entire evening?" Jack whispered near Aubriella's ear, inhaling her subtle perfume—light and citrusy with a hint of jasmine. She'd gone all out for her brother's birthday, which showed how

much she adored Emmet.

She stiffened so slightly that no one else noticed and pasted a false smile on her face.

“I’m *not* ignoring you.”

Bugger me if she isn’t.

“You are, Aubrie, but I’m at a loss as to why.”

A moment later, Jack’s thigh burned with sharp pain.

She’d pinched him.

The vixen actually pinched him.

“My name is not Aubrie.”

A chuckle throttled up his throat.

He swept his gaze across the table.

Georgine Thackerly, another of Aubriella’s good friends, watched him, three neat lines furrowing her forehead. Her astute gaze traveled back and forth between him and Aubriella before, and with a small indefinable smile, she inclined her head to listen to something Robyn Fitzlloyd said.

Jack shifted his attention back to Aubriella.

That had been the case more and more this past year or so.

Whenever she was near, he couldn’t seem to pull his focus away. Maybe it was because he felt sorry for her. She’d wanted to become a physician or a surgeon, but women were forbidden in the profession.

She was practically invisible to her parents, and with diamond of the first water sisters who always drew the lion’s share of attention, she’d resigned herself to spinsterhood and studying her science specimens.

What a colossal waste of womanhood and wit.

Head tilted, Aubriella listened to Mitchel Danforth ramble on. At least she pretended to listen. From the faraway look in her eyes, her thoughts were elsewhere.

Jack couldn’t fault her for her inattentiveness.

Danforth, the long-winded sot, could blather on for ages without saying anything remotely intelligent or interesting. Add his boasting and self-important prattling to the one-sided conversation, and even the staunchest adherer to decorum’s mind would’ve wandered.

Why had the Penfords invited that rotter to Emmet’s birthday celebration?

Jack glanced up and down both sides of the table.

Likely to even out the males and females.

Heaven forbid that there be one man or one woman too many.

The stars might fall from the sky, or the tides cease to turn.

In all, fourteen people sat at the table.

The Penfords and Lenora and Stephen Langford accounted for seven. The Danforths, Georgine Thackerly, and Jack made eleven. Friends of Jack's and Emmet's, Shelby Telling and his cousins Robyn and Matilda Fitzlloyd, completed the guests.

How often had these same people, sans Mitchel Danforth, gathered over the years?

Too many to count, and in truth, they were more like family than Jack's kin, except for his younger brother, who couldn't attend tonight because Duncan was away on business.

Aubriella lifted her attention from the fish Danforth had unceremoniously plopped upon her plate moments before and caught Jack staring at her. Instead of averting his gaze, he winked, and her hazel-green eyes widened the merest bit before she presented her profile again.

Sighing inwardly at the polite coolness she generally directed toward him, Jack leveled Danforth a contemplative glance.

The man was an ignorant buffoon.

Though acceptable for a gentleman to serve the ladies nearest him, said gentleman might inquire whether the lady desired fish. Anyone who knew Aubriella at all knew she didn't eat fish.

It gave her hives.

So did strawberries.

Having known her since she was a curious, tousle-haired nine-year-old with eyes too large for her thin face, Jack knew those and a hundred other inconsequential details about her.

Danforth's fawning attention raised Jack's hackles.

Since when had the libertine shown an interest in Aubriella?

Was he at home when she visited Roxina?

It was none of Jack's business, but the notion rankled, particularly given Danforth's unsavory reputation. Maybe he ought to have a private word with Emmet or Mr. Penford regarding the matter.

Not that independent and fiery Aubriella would listen to her brother or father.

"What are you currently studying?" Jack speared a piece of flaky fish. "I believe Emmet mentioned something about da Vinci's drawings?"

The most intelligent woman Jack had ever met, Aubriella eyed him as if she wasn't sure if he jested or was serious. "Yes, I recently acquired a few copies. They are quite interesting."

Her standoffish demeanor did nothing to dissuade him.

"I'd love to see them." He truly would.

Da Vinci was a genius, his work inspiring.

Aubriella's face drained of color before she recovered and cleared her throat. "I'm sure they'd bore you."

Eyes slightly narrowed, Jack regarded her. Red apples had formed on her cheeks, waxen but seconds before. If he had to guess, he'd suspect she was nervous and hiding something.

Just what were the drawings she'd attained?

"I'd wager one of my restaurants that you're not studying his inventions." He cocked an eyebrow in challenge.

She shook her head, the curls left to frame her face, swaying with the motion. "No, they're—"

"Will you and your brother join us at the Templetons' again this year, Jack?" Mrs. Penford asked with her fork poised halfway to her mouth, thereby saving Aubriella from answering.

From beneath his lashes, Jack cast her a swift glance.

Hand halfway to her wine glass, she froze and turned those magnificent eyes upon him.

She silently asked, "*Will you?*"

Until this moment, he'd been undecided. He nodded. "If Duncan and I can get away, we shall, Mrs. Penford."

Did Aubriella's mouth turn downward the merest bit?

Why was she so averse to him?

Jack took a deep sip of wine, savoring the flavor before the liquid slid down his throat.

Since she turned fourteen or fifteen, she'd been far more reserved than she had as a child when he'd brought her all sorts of interesting things to examine. But this past year, she'd become positively frigid in his presence. It was as if he'd offended her, but he didn't know how.

"Robyn and I are attending as well." Miss Fitzlloyd smiled at her older brother, and he kicked his mouth upward into an affectionate grin.

"As if you gave me any choice, minx. She's been talking about naught else for weeks now." He dabbed his mouth with his napkin and glanced

around the table. “Does anyone else intend to make the trip?”

Westerham lay just over twenty miles away.

Like Jack, many of the other guests tonight were parentless, and the kindhearted Templetons had begun inviting the orphans for holidays years ago. Mrs. Templeton was Mrs. Penford’s bosom girlhood friend and cousin, so the families usually spent the holiday together.

“I hope it snows from now until next week.” Aubriella’s heated statement, mumbled beneath her breath, yanked Jack’s attention back to her. She stared at her plate, an aura of defeat about her.

“Why?” He cut a piece of mackerel. “Don’t you want to attend the Templetons’ house party?”

“No. I do not.” She snapped each clipped syllable under her breath.

“Why not?” Jack believed she enjoyed the annual gathering, though he’d usually been too busy celebrating and making merry to notice whether Aubriella did or didn’t. Guilt kicked him in the ribs.

She licked her lower lip and, after casting a swift glance toward her mother, leaned toward him. Once more, her fragrance tickled his senses.

“You know I’m hopeless at those sorts of gatherings, Jack. I stick out like a lame goose among graceful swans. I never know what to say or do and inevitably embarrass myself.”

Trying not to appear too smug because she’d addressed him by his given name and because she’d confided in him, Jack gave the back of her hand a fleeting, comforting touch even as his ribs cramped with compassion.

He hated how she depreciated herself.

“What if I promise to stay by your side the entire time?” The words formed of their own volition before passing through his mind. Now he’d have to make sure he attended.

“Surely, not the *entire* time.” Mirth twinkled in Aubriella’s eyes. She rarely indulged in witticisms, but he took her meaning.

“Yes. Quite,” Jack agreed with an answering upward sweep of his mouth.

A servant interrupted to refill their wine glasses, and Jack continued once he’d stepped away. “I meant that I shan’t leave you alone during any planned events or public gatherings. You can depend on me to help you through every situation.”

Wonder and suspicion shadowed her mesmerizing hazel eyes. “Why would you do that?”

Why, indeed?

“Because that’s what friends do.” Jack had never had female friends, so he wasn’t certain that was entirely true. Oh, he flirted and bantered incessantly.

What harm was there in making a woman feel pretty or appreciated?

He’d even pried an ardent female or several off his person, but the truth was, Jack was a virgin. A wholly unpopular state amongst his randy peers and a secret no one but his brother knew, and he meant to keep it that way.

A small furrow appeared on Aubriella’s forehead as she skated her glance over his face.

Laughter rang out from the head of the table, momentarily gaining Jack’s attention.

“*Friends.*” She murmured the word as if she had tasted something foreign for the first time. “You and me, *friends.*”

“Is that such a hard prospect to consider?” he asked.

Once more, servants collected their plates, forcing him to wait as they placed the wild game and meats on the pristine linen. Across the table, Robyn Fitzlloyd caught his eye and raised a hawkish eyebrow in silent question when he swung his focus to Danforth.

Ah, he also wondered why the bounder dined with them.

Hopefully, Danforth wouldn’t attend the house party. His presence was as unwelcome as maggots and would surely put a damper on the festivities as well as put every woman under sixty at risk of ruin.

“It won’t inconvenience you?” Aubriella’s softly spoken question brought Jack back to the present. “Keep you from other more exciting and invigorating—ah—activities?”

Jack almost choked on his mouthful.

Surely she didn’t imply...?

He raised his shoulder an inch in response. “No, it’s not an inconvenience.”

Jack’s pulse accelerated at the prospect of spending amiable time with Aubriella without conflict, barbed and cutting ripostes, and darkling looks. It would also spare him the unwanted and unsolicited attention of devious vixens such as Francine Willoughby and her ilk.

“I should count it a great honor, Aubrie.” Giving her a naughty grin, he wiggled his eyebrows. “Imagine the tongue wagging it will cause. The speculation.”

As he’d expected, Aubriella rolled her eyes ceilingward and bent her full

mouth into a droll smile. “I don’t relish being the object of gossip, and you shouldn’t either, though I’m certain you’re quite accustomed to it.”

Jack canted his head. There was an unspoken message, but bugger him if he had any idea what it was. “I try to refrain from activities that give chinwags fuel for fodder.”

“*Hmph.*” Distinct disbelief weighted Aubriella’s unladylike grunt.

“You don’t believe me.” It was a statement, not a question.

Why did she doubt him?

Had she heard rumors?

Was that what caused her coolness?

“Have you heard something I should know, Aubrie?”

Once more, she looked positively ill but shook her dark head, causing her earrings to swing back and forth. Nevertheless, when she met his eyes, distrust and uncertainty lingered in the depths of hers, the color of a forest at twilight.

She filled her lungs, causing her bosom to swell temptingly, then released the air in a rush. “Oh, very well. Though I’m positive I shall regret the impulse, I accept your offer.”

“Excellent.” Jack barely suppressed a jubilant grin. “And I promise you *shan’t* regret it.” He had every intention of assuring Aubriella had nothing to repine upon and much to celebrate for trusting him.

This was his one chance to prove himself to her, and by thunder, he’d not muck it up.

CHAPTER 4



*Stockworth Manor – Templetons’ estate,
Westerham, England
19 December 1818
Breakfast*

God had not dumped several feet of snow on London and answered Aubriella’s fervent prayers that she might be spared the Templetons’ Christmas house party. The day after Emmet’s birthday dinner, she’d awoken to a mere dusting, as disappointingly light as confectioners’ sugar sprinkled on almond cake.

Regardless, the holiday gathering mightn’t be a complete loss. With just over thirty people in attendance, half of which were women, there could be multiple opportunities for placing discreet wagers and bets.

Taking a sip of cocoa, she surreptitiously swept her gaze around the Templetons’ expensive but tastefully decorated dining room. Only a few of the more intrepid guests had arisen early and ventured below to break their fasts.

Most of the ladies—and *potential clients*—either remained snugly asleep or had ordered trays in their chambers like Mama usually did. Jessamine never rose a minute before ten, and Papa had probably already ridden out with other men for an early morning constitutional.

At Mama’s insistence, Aubriella had only packed her newest gowns, outerwear, and slippers. She’d been forbidden to wear her faded work frocks and apron.

Dear Mama still held an unrealistic hope that Aubriella might find herself

a suitable husband. It escaped her what gentleman her mother thought would attend the Templetons' party that Aubriella didn't already know and would show an interest in her.

For the most part, men looked past her as one did an urn in the foyer or a statue in the garden. One knew something was there, but the object wasn't riveting or intriguing enough to garner one's full attention.

She was unremarkable. Ordinary.

And above all, a realist.

It was as unlikely as jewels falling from the sky for an unattached man Aubriella might find striking to find her attractive, too.

"You cannot be seen in those rags, my dear. What man would consider you if you don't take care with your appearance?" Mama had patted her cheek and given her an indulgent smile. "You might not have mine and your sisters' fair coloring, Elli, but you are not unattractive."

Mama had intended to encourage Aubriella, but the backhanded compliment fell short of the mark. Mama loved her. Aubriella didn't doubt her affection. But the truth was, her mother didn't understand her middle daughter.

Mama wished to talk of fashion and soirees and to share gossip, recipes, and scandal. All of which Aubriella had no interest in. Should her parents ever learn of the outrageous da Vinci drawings hidden in her bedchamber...

Lord, Aubriella didn't want to consider what her mild-mannered parents would do. Even they possessed boundaries, and she'd crossed those marks ages ago.

When she'd dressed as a man and sneaked into the biology laboratory at university seven years ago, her parents had expressed their disappointment in the calmest tones. They'd sent her to her prissy spinster aunt's outside of London for the summer.

They'd undoubtedly prayed Aunt Astrid's prim, proper, and boring-as-Hades decorum would rub off on Aubriella. It had not. After Aubriella volunteered to assist the local doctor in setting an unfortunate lad's badly broken leg—really, the blood didn't make her the least faint, but poor Aunt Astrid *had* swooned—she'd been sent home as incorrigible.

In an odd twist, however, Aunt Astrid had left Aubriella her small house. Possibly because she believed her irredeemable, unmarriageable niece might find herself in need of a home someday.

If it hadn't been for Jackson Matherfield, Aubriella felt certain her

subterfuge would've worked—another reason to dislike the rotter.

How was she to know he was in that class?

Fate must, indeed, have something against her.

Despite what she believed to be a remarkably good disguise, he'd recognized her immediately. She still hadn't forgiven him, though instead of revealing her to the professor and other students, he had let her escape with her reputation intact.

He had, however, told her parents, the rotter.

Had he wanted to, he might've ruined her that day.

Women were strictly prohibited from such courses.

Another stupid rule made by men.

Since marrying had never been at the forefront of Aubriella's desires, her disappointment in her continued spinsterhood was less significant than Mama's discontent.

To appease her mother, Aubriella wore a long-sleeved navy-blue velvet day gown trimmed in black today. The pretty gown complemented her coloring and lithe figure, bolstering her confidence by a small degree. Nevertheless, she felt as out of place as a dull river rock among glittering, polished gems.

This morning, Roxina sat beside Aubriella with Matilda Fitzlloyd across from them. Aubriella hadn't met the two couples babbling away like magpies at the foot of the table, nor the pair of indolent gentlemen halfway down the large rectangle engaged in low conversation with Emmet and Quinten Honeybrook.

No doubt, Mama and Mabel Templeton would play matchmaker and devise a scheme or several to throw Aubriella into the company of the newcomers. She couldn't help but suspect the cousins had plotted together toward that very end.

Three days ago, Aubriella's family had rumbled up the circular drive to the Templetons' grand estate. As always, they were the first guests to arrive so that Mama and Cousin Mabel might enjoy a short, intimate visit before the other invitees descended upon the estate.

At least Aubriella had Jack's promise that he'd help her through the next two weeks.

If he came.

How peculiar that she should anticipate seeing him when she normally went out of her way to avoid him. His presence was less objectionable than

making a fool of herself—that was what she'd been telling herself since she'd impulsively accepted his offer.

So far, he and his brother remained absent, and something between disappointment and lack of surprise sat heavy and dull in Aubriella's belly. As she'd descended the stairs for breakfast, she told herself she didn't need him to manage the festivities. After all, she'd endured these annual gatherings her entire life. Another fortnight shouldn't be so unbearable.

Even as she tried to convince herself, doubts lingered.

Why this year should be different, she didn't know.

If only Jack hadn't raised her hopes that she might be saved from indignity and humiliation this holiday season.

So stupid of her to have trusted him.

Although to be fair, he had said he'd attend if he could get away from his business obligations. Aubriella imagined there must be many responsibilities with four successful ventures. Regardless, she shouldn't have counted on him, and annoyance at herself for doing so chafed her pride.

Aubriella squared her shoulders as she picked up a triangle of toast.

She'd simply do as she'd always done at these assemblies.

Find an out-of-the-way spot to retreat to whenever possible, and when she couldn't escape, paint a benign expression on her face and pretend she didn't care that she was a dismal failure. She'd laugh at her maladroitness with the others, and no one but her dearest friends or family would know she suffered keenly.

"Do you suppose they are without family, and Mrs. Templeton has taken them beneath her wing?" Roxina nudged her chin toward the babbling foursome. "If she keeps it up, we'll be four to a chamber."

As it was, everyone shared their chamber with at least one person and, in some cases, with two others. Aubriella didn't mind. At Blenstock & Handcastle Academy for Young Ladies, Aubriella, Matilda, Roxina, and Georgine had shared a bedchamber. Nonetheless, an orphan herself, Mabel Templeton's soft heart knew no bounds, and she'd continue to take in waifs as long as her house could hold them.

Aubriella shrugged as she chewed her toast and then swallowed. "More than likely, though I do not know where she finds them since she rarely visits Town."

"They're like stray cats." Matilda gave a sage nod. "Start feeding one and soon a dozen will expect a meal."

She just might be correct.

Roxina gave a cursory glance around the dining room. “Do you suppose the Templetons invited the Willoughbys? I haven’t seen Lord Willoughby or Francine, though I confess, I’m relieved to have been spared their foul company.”

Aubriella’s stomach soured, curdling the hot chocolate.

She’d wondered that very thing but refrained from inquiring. And, truth be told, she had convinced herself that if Francine didn’t come this year, that meant Jack was off the matrimonial hook.

Most of the guests had arrived and settled into their respective bedchambers. Surely if Francine were in the family way, she’d be intent on finding a husband, even if the Willoughbys were George Templeton’s relations.

Francine’s absence also bespoke Jackson’s innocence, and Aubriella breathed a trifle easier. Though why she should fret about the consequences of his actions wasn’t the least logical.

The house party activities officially began with archery and sketching this morning, decorating greenery to festoon the mansion this afternoon, and gambling and charades this evening.

A schedule chock full of daily activities culminated in a grand ball on Christmas Eve where Aubriella was sure to forget a step or trod upon her partners’ feet—if anyone partnered her.

Last year, only Papa, Emmet, and Lenora’s husband, Stephen Langford, had done so, much to Aubriella’s chagrin. This year, she’d intended to find a cozy alcove to read in until midnight when supper was served.

It did rather wear on one’s pride being relegated to the status of an undesirable.

The exuberant quartet burst into laughter, and several guests, including Aubriella, glanced in their direction. Oblivious to the attention they’d drawn, they rose from the table and departed the dining room, the women arm in arm and the gentlemen with their heads together.

Were they related?

“I must work on my charades clue.” Matilda rested her elbow on the table, her chin on her fist. “I don’t want to make it too easy.”

For variety, Mabel insisted each guest create at least one clue per game.

Aubriella loathed charades.

All that ridiculous posturing and gesturing, not to mention the

preposterous clues.

How did one contrive such absurd rhyming riddles and conundrums?

For certain, she'd never been able to compose anything remotely clever and had long since stopped trying. Jessamine had written a riddle for Aubriella's topics for the past three years, and they'd been ghastly.

Hives. Sleepwalking. Gout.

She still shuddered at the memories.

Hopeless at everything but sketching, Aubriella had already decided to hide away in the library's loft. Over the years, she'd learned her presence was rarely missed except sometimes by her family and dearest friends, who understood her desire to remain elusive.

That unfortunate truth ought to sting more than it did, but always pragmatic, she refused to sulk or pout over what she couldn't control.

She had hoped that with Jack's help, this yuletide might be different. She might look forward to the caroling, games, decorations, stirring the Christmas pudding, and mayhap a sleigh ride.

Foolish ninny. Goose.

A tiny sigh escaped her, earning her a sharp look from Roxina, who knew her better than any other living soul since their days in finishing school together.

"Are you quite well, Aubriella?" Roxina asked. "You seem a trifle preoccupied."

"Fit as a fiddle. Content as a cat." Aubriella fashioned what she hoped was a bright smile. "And looking forward to today's activities."

Liar.

Sable eyebrows high on her forehead, Roxina snorted in disbelief.

"Now I know you're either ailing or touched in the head." Suspicion narrowed her chestnut-brown eyes. "I'd wager you'd rather eat slugs than participate in today's events. Or the activities scheduled for the entire fortnight."

"You're wrong, Roxina, and you'd lose that bet." Aubriella widened her smile to such a degree her face might crack. "I've determined to enjoy myself this year."

She leaned near her friend. "We might even add a few wagers to our books. There's always something worth betting on at an extended house party."

Matilda and Roxina exchanged a she's-blathering-like-a-madwoman

glance.

“And what makes this year different?” Skepticism riddled Roxina’s question. But then again, Roxina was the most sardonic woman Aubriella had ever known. She trusted few women and men not at all.

That was her brother’s doing as well.

“May I join you?”

Glancing over her shoulder, Aubriella barely suppressed her astonished gasp.

Jack.

CHAPTER 5



The dining room
A dozen fluttery heartbeats later

Jack had come.
And what was more, he'd sought Aubriella out first thing this morning. Two weeks ago, his attention would've infuriated her, but today?

Today, he'd become her rescuer. Her savior. Her hero.

Giddiness replaced the leaden weight in her tummy.

Because the truth of it was, she *did* mind being a maladroit laughingstock and the last grudgingly chosen for games. She *did* notice the pitying glances and quickly shushed whispers about her ineptness.

Not so hushed gasps sometimes, too.

For instance, when Aubriella sent the pall mall ball sailing across the lawn, the wooden sphere smacked Lord Bradrawy in his prominent nose.

Or when someone had bumped her during her turn at Snapdragon. Aubriella had tipped the bowl of flaming raisins and almonds over. She still wasn't positive Francine Willoughby hadn't shoved her on purpose.

No one, not even a woman dedicated to science and logic, enjoyed constantly being the brunt of others' jokes. If success this yuletide meant swallowing her pride and accepting her nemesis's assistance, then Aubriella would choke on her pride.

Especially if said adversary was dastardly handsome and suave in a striking charcoal-gray coat, irritatingly skilled at all she was not, and a favorite among the usual guests.

Just this once, Aubriella wanted to fit in. Now that Jack was here, and if he fulfilled his promise, mayhap this yuletide gathering would be bearable, if not enjoyable, after all.

Jack set a full plate on the table before pulling out the vacant chair to her left. Without waiting for her reply, he sank his tall, lean form onto the green velvet cushion. Freshly shaved, his raven hair still slightly damp, and cologne wafting from his much too masculine form, he appeared at ease.

He always had.

She couldn't recall a time when he'd been anything but nonchalant. Not indolent, just entirely at ease with himself. Something Aubriella still struggled with because she didn't meet her family's or society's expectations.

How the devil did Jack manage such insouciance?

As if he neither noticed nor didn't give a fig what others thought of him.

In truth, he probably didn't.

From down the table, Emmet nodded a greeting, which Jack returned with a half smile and jaunty wave. Quentin Honeybrook also dipped his chin in a brief greeting.

"Duncan will be along shortly." After snapping his napkin open, Jack placed the linen across his lap. Aubriella tried not to notice how well his muscled thighs filled his buff-colored pantaloons. "We arrived well past midnight, and he was reluctant to leave his mattress this morn."

"Good morning, Mr. Matherfield." Matilda bobbed her head, the unruly riot of bright red curls held in place by a green ribbon wrapped around her head and tied beneath her chignon threatening to spring loose at the motion. "We weren't certain you'd be able to tear yourself away from London."

"I have excellent managers, Miss Fitzlloyd, who I trust implicitly." Jack veered his gaze toward Roxina. "Miss Danforth. No brother?"

He didn't seem disappointed by Mitchel Danforth's absence.

No one did. Not even Roxina.

Roxina sat back in her tufted chair and crossed her arms across her remade gown. A gesture Aubriella had learned years ago was as much a protective measure as a deterrent. "No. My brother had other plans for the holiday."

Plans which never included Roxina, and that was why she always came with the Penfords. It was either that or spend the holiday alone since her parents died when she was thirteen.

A light eater content with toast and cocoa, Aubriella eyed Jack's

overflowing plate. “Hungry this morning, Mr. Matherfield?”

“Ravenous.” He speared a sausage with his fork and grinned before taking a generous bite. He swallowed and took a sip of black coffee.

“So, what are we undertaking this morning, Aubrie?” Jack applied himself to his breakfast with admirable gusto.

So happy he’d actually come, Aubriella didn’t scold him for addressing her so informally in front of her friends. Nor did she give Roxina and Matilda the gimlet eye for the smug smile they shared.

“It’s either archery or sketching this morning,” she said.

He patted his mouth—such a nicely shaped mouth for a man. “I presume you’d prefer sketching?”

Her one strength.

A Corinthian, he’d opt for archery, of course.

“As my previous attempts at archery resulted in me nearly impaling a footman and Lady Brummelstroot’s beloved poodle, your presumption is correct.”

It had taken an hour to calm Lady Brummelstroot. To this day, she glowered at Aubriella whenever their paths crossed, which, thank goodness, wasn’t often.

Matilda sent Aubriella an apologetic glance. “Elli is truly awful at archery.”

“Thank you, Tillie.” It was true, but Matilda needn’t expound upon Aubriella’s lack of prowess. On the other hand, Matilda could send an arrow to the center of the target with seemingly little effort.

“Dearest, you know I mean no offense.” Matilda waved at Georgine as she entered. “Excuse me, please. Georgine wanted to speak with me this morning.”

Roxina pushed back her chair and rose. Smoothing a long-fingered hand down her out-of-fashion emerald green gown, she scooted her gaze from person to person.

“I promised Mrs. Templeton I’d help with the skit preparations.” She wrinkled her pert nose. “This year, it’s about the angels visiting the shepherd in their fields.”

Cousin Mabel believed her skits quite clever.

Her guests did not share her enthusiasm.

Roxina cast an exasperated glance upward. “Pray tell me how I am to recruit a cast for that?” She pinned Jack with a direct look. “I’m sure I can

count on you to play the part of a shepherd?”

“Indeed.” He flashed her one of his disarming grins. “Unless you need an archangel?”

“Hmm, I’ll consider it.” She turned her attention to Aubriella. “I’ll need you to be part of the angelic chorus.”

Oh, no.

“Zina, I don’t think—” Before Aubriella could finish refusing, Jack accepted on her behalf.

“She’d love to.”

The bothersome scoundrel knows I cannot sing.

“Excellent.” Roxina glided across the room, attracting more than one interested male’s gaze. She ignored them.

“Why did you do that?” Aubriella poked Jack’s arm and hissed, “You know I cannot sing.”

“I’ll be right there, and I *can* sing. Just follow me.” He winked, and her pulse fluttered.

“Easier said than done,” Aubriella muttered, still confused at the strange physical response he’d invoked.

“My dear Aubrie, when will you learn to trust me?”

His eyes darkened to sooty hazel blue, then he touched the back of her hand as he had done at dinner the other night. Such an innocent gesture, so why did tingles zip up her arm?

Aubriella tilted her head. “I’ve spent so long distrusting you, Jack, that I find it hard to lower my ramparts.”

Rather than mock her as was his wont, he gave a slow nod, his expression grave. “Let’s declare a truce for the house party. I shan’t tease you, and you won’t shut me out.”

It sounded so simple. Innocent. And logical, given he’d promised to help her.

So why did alarm bells toll in the back of her mind?

Regardless, what choice did she have?

“Agreed. But only for the house party’s duration, Jack. I cannot promise more.”

“That’s all the time I need.” His grin was positively feline as he dove into his breakfast once more.

What the devil did he mean by that?

It’s all the time he needs.

For what?

CHAPTER 6



Stockworth Manor
After supper that evening

“Let’s go through to the ladies, gentlemen.” George Templeton rose, his rotund belly bumping the table and rattling a few crystal tumblers. “My missus has delightful entertainment planned for the evening.”

Finally.

Jack had promised not to leave Aubriella’s side, but he couldn’t conceive of an excuse for not partaking in spirits and cigars with the men and joining the women instead.

Wouldn’t that cause the rumor mills to spin?

Normally, the hour after supper passed quickly with discussions about politics, horses, trade, and ribald jokes. However, aware Aubriella fended for herself, he’d checked the timepiece with increasing impatience every few minutes.

Twice, he’d glanced up to see Baron Spencer Willoughby observing him with a strange expression on his dissipated countenance. Though kin to George Templeton—second or third cousins?—Jack had never cared for the Willoughbys. Not only did they put on haughty airs and treat those without a title like underlings, but they were also a slimy lot.

Jack couldn’t count the times Francine, as wanton as a dockside harlot, had invited him to bed her these past three years. Last December, she’d followed him to the conservatory, and it had been all he could do to pry her off him. This year, he’d ensure he was occupied and was never alone with her, and Aubriella provided that insurance.

Ugly rumors also circulated that old man Willoughby possessed an unnatural appetite for young boys. It was a wonder anyone included them in their social circles, but then all manner of excuses were made for wealthy aristocrats' behavior.

Jack wasted no time departing the dining room. Eager to keep his promise to Aubriella that he'd stay by her side, he'd made it halfway down the corridor when Lord Willoughby waylaid him.

"I would have a word with you, Matherfield."

"Now?" Jack stepped aside to permit the other gentlemen to pass. "Can it not wait?"

"No. It cannot." Willoughby shook his head, his fleshy jowls jiggling back and forth like a hound's on the hunt. Once the last man had turned the corner and was out of earshot, Willoughby puffed out his substantial chest. "Francine is pregnant. You shall marry her within a fortnight."

"I beg your pardon?" Jack barely refrained from putting a finger in his ears to make sure he'd heard Lord Willoughby correctly.

Surely he hadn't.

"Whether your daughter is with child is not my concern. I have never been intimate with her." *Or any other female, for that matter.* "She's shared her favors far and wide. I sincerely doubt *she* knows who the father is."

Willoughby's face turned an astonishing shade of purplish-red.

"Be that as it may," he sputtered in outraged offense, "she has chosen *you*."

Jack leaned against the wall, arms folded, a ruse against the feral urge to seize Willoughby by his fat throat and shake him to within an inch of his miserable life.

"And Francine always gets what she wants?" A smarter man than Lord Willoughby would've been warned by Jack's silky timbre. Shaking his head, Jack bared his teeth, no longer caring to act the part of a gentleman. "She won't this time. I shall not marry the chit."

His face contorting in fury, Willoughby stomped forward. Shaking with ire, he lifted a fisted hand. "I can ruin you, Matherfield."

"You can try." Jack straightened, looking down at the older man and letting the rage tunneling through his veins manifest in his gravelly voice. "But I can produce at *least* a half dozen men—some in this house, in truth—who haven't a qualm about revealing they've bedded your daughter."

"You... you wouldn't dare." Willoughby had worked himself into such a

state that spittle formed on the side of his mouth. “No gentleman would denounce a lady so cravenly.”

“Despite your title, Willoughby, your daughter is *no* lady.” Jack hadn’t finished taking the man down several pegs. “All of London is aware of her loose morals.” He leaned forward. “Do you know she’s called *Fickle Francine*?”

And a few other crude terms Jack refused to let pass his lips.

Willoughby made a choking-growling sound deep in his throat and raised his hand as if to strike Jack.

“I wouldn’t, Willoughby, because as you’ve said I’m no gentleman. I shan’t hesitate to lay you out like a rug despite the difference in our ages.”

Jack shook his head and stepped around the infuriated older man. “I suggest you take her back to London and find a doddering old fool who doesn’t mind claiming another man’s child. I’m sure if the price is right, you’ll have more than one offer. But you’d better make haste. You’ll not be able to hide her condition indefinitely.”

Jack presented his back and, seething with black rage, strode down the corridor.

Francine, the little tramp, thought she’d entrap him?

Snap her manicured fingers, and Papa would make everything right?

Willoughby erroneously believed he could use his position to blackmail Jack.

That showed how little either he or his daughter knew him.

Jack hadn’t become the success he had by allowing others to manipulate or take advantage of him. And by damn, no high-born trollop with the morals of an alley cat would ever become Mrs. Jackson Matherfield.

Outside the drawing room, he closed his eyes and filled his lungs with calming air. Storming into the room would only stir the pot. No one need know what had transpired between him and Willoughby unless the sod was an imbecile and blathered about the matter.

“There you are.” Duncan, wearing his perpetual grin, his dark blue eyes twinkling, emerged from the card room. At once, his genial expression faded.

“What has happened, Jack?” He glanced down the corridor toward the dining room. “I saw Willoughby corner you but thought nothing of it.”

Jack cupped his tense neck where several stones seemed to have taken up residence. “He thought he could force me to wed his pregnant daughter, and I refused. Most adamantly.”

Duncan whistled as he slowly shook his dark head. “That explains why Miss Willoughby keeps flitting from room to room as if looking for someone. Thrice, she asked me if I knew where you were. Given I know how much you dislike her, I should’ve suspected something untoward was afoot.”

“Would you be a good chap and make sure Willoughby is preparing to depart this evening?” Jack slapped his brother’s shoulder. “I’m reluctant to divulge his attempt at blackmail to our hosts and put a damper on the festivities.” Especially since he’d promised Aubriella she’d enjoy herself this year. “But if he refuses to take his daughter and make for London straightaway, I shall.”

“I’d be happy to send the boulder on his way.” Thunder in his eyes and outrage causing a muscle in his jaw to tick, Duncan swore softly. “I never liked either of them. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say. I’ll find you when they’ve left.”

After watching his brother until he disappeared from sight and once more in control of his emotions, Jack ambled into the tastefully decorated drawing room. Though wealthy, the Templetons didn’t feel the need to brandish their prosperity. He snatched two flutes from a passing servant’s tray and then searched the room.

Thank God Francine wasn’t present, but Aubriella was.

Holding the glasses of sparkling wine, Jack wended through the guests toward Aubriella, perched like a nervous cat at the end of a settee. Surrounded by a half dozen chattering women, she appeared regal in her champagne and ecru lace gown. Only the tautness of her delicate jaw and the occasional flick of her tongue over her lower lip betrayed her unease.

When had she become so accomplished at hiding her feelings?

“Mr. Matherfield.” Mabel motioned him forward with a wave of her plump, beringed hand. “My husband tells me you are considering investing in the spice and textile trades.”

Of course, Templeton had.

Aubriella’s hazel gaze swept to Jack’s face.

“I’m considering several ventures right now.” He had made no commitments and, in truth, wasn’t certain he wanted to take on additional undertakings. He passed Aubriella a glass of wine. “Your father asked me to deliver this to you.”

Mr. Penford hadn’t, but the little white lie protected her from the curious glances speared in her direction at his kindness. It took little to stir the

gossipmongers into a frenzy of speculation, and White's betting book overflowed with nonsensical conjecture.

Having worked for every cent he'd acquired, Jack had no use for gambling and even less respect for those who wasted funds on frivolous wagers. Men lost fortunes on everything from horse races to the tumbling of dice and bets as ludicrous as whether a rat would escape with a crust of bread or a lady would drop her handkerchief for a certain gentleman.

The women were little better and, in many cases, worse.

Lives ruined, estates impoverished, arranged marriages, and marriages of convenience, all because of a feckless need to win. On the rare occasion Jack indulged in a wager, it never involved money or property. At the end of the night, the most he'd owe was a bottle of brandy or a free meal at one of his restaurants.

His wastrel Uncle Martin, Earl of Marchant, had all but bankrupted the earldom, and his three sons practically prostituted themselves into loveless marriages to heiresses to fill the family's hollow coffers once more. His mother had fallen in love with a gambling sot that had sent the family to the poorhouse for a time.

His parents had died there, leaving him to care for his younger brother.

Jack never intended to be a pauper again, nor would he follow in his rakehell father's footsteps. Toward that end, he eschewed the same temptations, and even though he could've increased his and Duncan's fortunes exponentially by adding gaming rooms to his restaurants or turning them into gaming hells, he refused to do so.

Money dishonorably earned was tainted. Funds gained by hard work, shrewdness, or others' ineptness, on the other hand...

"Thank you." Aubriella angled her long neck to meet his gaze as she sipped. "Papa is *most* considerate."

She knew as well as Jack did that he fibbed.

Mrs. Templeton had set aside a separate salon for card and dice games—but only for forfeit prizes. Mrs. Templeton didn't allow gambling for profit in her grand home. Wise lady.

"This afternoon, after I posed for your sketching, you promised me a game of hazard, Miss Penford." That wasn't entirely true. She hadn't asked him to sit for her. Her talent was such that she could quickly sketch a scene, image, or person and had done so while the others labored over a single drawing.

Neither had she promised him a toss of the dice.

“Please excuse me.” She rose and, graceful as a swan, skirted an armchair.

Jack extended his arm, and after the merest hesitation, she slid her gloved hand into the crook. After taking a casual sip of wine, she glanced at him from the corner of her eyes.

“I don’t recall promising you to play hazard,” she said.

He winked as they strolled toward the card room. “It was the only excuse I could think of at the spur of the moment to save you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t need saving.”

“We all need saving at some time or other.” He grinned down at her.

“Jack.” A female titter accompanied the calling of his name. “That is, Mr. Matherfield.”

CHAPTER 7



Still in the corridor

Hell's clanging bells.

Jack stiffened and, with reluctance in every bone and muscle, turned toward Francine Willoughby, lingering near a corner alcove.

Had the wench been lying in wait for him?

Eager to sink her claws into the man she hoped would be her husband?

Not if purple unicorns danced in hell with bells on their painted hooves.

She raked a condescending glance over Aubriella, her cat-like eyes narrowing in poorly hidden jealousy.

“Have you spoken to my father?” Miss Willoughby asked without a hint of chagrin.

Miss Willoughby had gall. Jack would give her that. If she hoped to cause a public scene, she'd better think again.

“I should allow you a moment.” Face pale, Aubriella moved to withdraw her hand from Jack's arm, but he pulled it close to his ribs, preventing her escape.

She should never feel as if she must flee the likes of unremarkable and wholly forgettable Francine Willoughby.

“No need for you to leave.” Jack pinned Francine Willoughby with a contemptuous glare, pointedly lowering his focus to her still-flat belly before meeting her uncertain eyes.

Laughter stretched into the passageway from the cardroom, and someone

ran their fingers over the pianoforte's keys.

Speaking low, he said, "Your vile ploy did not work. Your father is taking you back to London. Tonight."

She gasped, flinging a hand to her throat.

"*London?* Tonight? No. That's not—" Eyes blazing with madness, she shook her head, the dark brown ringlets framing her face bouncing from her vehemence. "Papa said... he promised me that you—"

As if realizing she'd let slip a secret, she cleared her throat and looked around frantically.

"I don't care what *he* promised," Jack snapped, barely keeping his frayed emotional tether in check. "I shall not be coerced, blackmailed, or manipulated into doing anything I do not want to do and assuredly not for something I am *not* responsible for."

Francine's complexion went waxen, but desperate and perhaps slightly dicked in the knob, she persisted. "I'll make a scene. Cause a ruckus the likes of which the *haut ton* has never seen before."

Not likely. She wasn't the first and certainly wouldn't be the last chit to find herself with child outside wedlock.

"No, I don't think you will." Aubriella stepped forward. "Several days ago, someone created a bet that you would wed within a month. People have wagered upon the outcome."

They have?

Just how did she know about this bet?

Her tone kind but firm, Aubriella dropped her attention to Francine's middle before raising her eyes to meet the other woman's. "I am certain you do not want the *reason* for that wager to become public. For your sake, go back to London with your father. Better yet, retire to the country or go abroad for several months or a year."

Francine's mouth worked, but no sound emerged. Posture defiant and murder spewing from her eyes, she spun on her satin heels and stomped down the corridor.

"Somehow, I doubt we've seen the last of her," Aubriella murmured, her eyebrows pulled into a vee across her nose. "She's quite desperate and unwilling to give up easily. Or else she wouldn't be here. I'd guess prospective husbands have been hard to find. She might well have to leave the country for a year and pretend to be widowed when she returns."

There was much truth to her honest but not spiteful observation.

“Tell me, Aubriella. Where did you come by the information regarding the wager about Miss Willoughby’s delicate condition?” Jack steered her into the alcove Francine had vacated and flicked one side of the drapery down, wrapping them into a muted half-light. “And I’ll have the truth, if you please.”

Canting her head, Aubriella narrowed her eyes, astute intelligence gleaming in their depths. “I’ll tell you after our game of hazard. If you win, that is.”

Sly minx.

“And if you win?” She wouldn’t because Jack was a master at probability and numbers and knew precisely when to quit.

She eyed him up and down with provocative intensity, and being the virile man he was, his body responded predictably. And that proved most unexpected and disturbing.

“Should I prevail, Jack, you’ll allow me to draw you, wearing only your pantaloons.”

CHAPTER 8



Still in the alcove

Several shocked seconds later

“**W**hat?” Jack blinked owlishly. Aubriella had flummoxed him. “What?” he repeated, pulling on his earlobe. “Surely I misheard you.”

“You heard me perfectly well, Jackson Matherfield. You will allow me to draw you, front, back, and sides, in various poses and donned only in pantaloons.” Aubriella was quite certain that of all the things she might have chosen as a stake, Jack had never considered such an outrageous and scandalous request.

But how else could she acquire a fit male specimen to compare to da Vinci’s renderings?

Desperate times and all that.

His expression a mixture of horrified mirth and offense, Jack stared so long, Aubriella began to reconsider her impulsiveness. At last he spoke, the usual sardonic man she’d come to expect.

“May I surmise, Aubrie, that your obsession with the human body has not waned over time?”

“It has not, though I wouldn’t call it an obsession but a keen scientific interest.” On the verge of blurting that she possessed da Vinci’s drawings of human anatomy, she bit her lip.

Could she trust Jack with her disreputable secret?

No. Not yet, at least.

After all, he'd revealed Aubriella at university and, just like every other male she knew, had deemed it unfitting for a woman to pursue knowledge of biology and anatomy. As if women weren't capable of knowing their own minds and interests.

"No. I cannot agree, and I shan't apologize for refusing." He shook his head, a shock of ebony hair falling over his forehead. "Emmet would call me out. You'd be ruined. Besides, where in the bloody hell do you think you could sketch me without discovery?"

Jack had a valid point there, but Aubriella refused to concede.

"I suspected you'd refuse." She lifted a shoulder. "I guess you'll never know how I came by the knowledge about Francine Willoughby."

She had no intention of revealing the truth to him. The *Ladies of Opportunity* had sworn a solemn oath to preserve their clients' privacy.

Still, Jack didn't know that.

"Besides, I'm confident you'd lose." She permitted a confident up-sweep of her lips. "I haven't been bested at hazard in years. I'm sure it would bruise your male pride to lose to a mere woman—a gangly bluestocking spinster to boot."

"Don't do that," Jack snapped, censure darkening his features.

Aubriella couldn't prevent her eyes from flying wide at his unexpected terseness. "Do what?"

"Disparage yourself." He raked a hand through his hair, then gently clasped her shoulders. "You are a lovely young woman with a figure any man with eyes in his head would admire. What's more, you are intelligent—the most intelligent woman I am acquainted with. You do not need artifice or pretentiousness, and I have never heard you speak unkindly of anyone nor spread gossip."

He'd painted her a virtual saint.

Nevertheless, Aubriella barely heard the compliments. At his touch, sensation zipped along her arms, and though it made no sense scientifically, her knees went weak, and lightheadedness swept her.

She'd scarcely touched luncheon or dinner.

Surely hunger explained this curious physical response.

"I..." She swallowed, her mouth suddenly gone dry as cold ashes. Rarely at a loss for words, she struggled to gather her scattered wits. "I only repeated what others have said."

“Well, don’t.” Jack squeezed her shoulders and then let loose. “Whoever said such a stupid thing is an idiot and unworthy of your regard. Don’t listen to them.”

“You’ve said those things, Jack.”

And more.

She’d heard him once when he’d been speaking to Emmet.

She’d overheard others as well over the years. At first, the insults and disparagements stung something awful, but in time, she’d grown a thicker skin, and other than an occasional prick now and then, she’d grown almost immune to them.

A stricken expression shadowed the lean contours and planes of his striking face. He searched Aubriella’s face, shame and regret softening the corners of his eyes. “Then *I’m* an idiot. I have no excuse to offer but can only beg your forgiveness.”

He extended his forefinger and, after a moment’s hesitation, grazed the rough pad over her left cheek, then across her upper lip. “You are incomparable. A lily amongst ferns.”

“Lily?” A giggle escaped Aubriella, and she flicked a bit of lint off his jacket. “Jack, you’re waxing poetic. I never thought I’d see the day when the sardonic, cynical Jackson Matherfield concocted nonsensical platitudes.”

A severe scowl lashed his eyebrows together.

“Do not change the subject, Aubrie. You’ve believed yourself undesirable for too long, and you keep others at a distance to protect yourself.”

Aubriella folded her arms and tapped the toes of her right foot. She didn’t know what to do with this new, sensitive, kind Jack. The old Jack, the teasing, taunting rogue she could handle.

But this one?

Jackson Matherfield confused the very devil out of her, and Aubriella didn’t like being perplexed.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, gentlemen haven’t exactly been lining up to court me.” No one ever had eyes for her when her sisters outshone her like the sun to a candle. “I’m four and twenty, Jack. Firmly on the shelf. I appreciate your kindness. I do, but you needn’t flatter me or manufacture compliments. I’m not like other females. I don’t require a man’s approval, nor am I distraught because I’m not desirable and shall never wed.”

Perhaps the tiniest bit troubled that she wasn’t pretty or sought after, but she’d walk on hot coals before admitting that to him.

“Bugger that bloody balderdash.” Before she could scold him for his coarse language—which she didn’t really mind—or comment on his unintended alteration, Jack snaked an iron-like arm around her waist and the other across her shoulders, pulling her tight against him in an unbreakable embrace.

Her pulse accelerated with excitement and anticipation.

“I’ll show you just how desirable you are, Aubrie.”

A second later, his firm mouth covered hers in a smoldering kiss, so scorching and potent she had to clutch his shoulders to remain standing.

Lord have mercy.

Electricity sluiced through her as a headiness she’d never imagined engulfed her from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head.

When his tongue nudged her mouth open and tangled with hers, Aubriella was lost. She gave up trying to make sense of what was happening and let logic, reason, and common sense flit away until all that remained was Jack and a haze of passion, need, and want.

He pressed his powerful body into hers, his muscles flexing beneath her hands. His intoxicating cologne engulfed her. And his mouth. Oh, his magnificent mouth and the magic he wrought with his lips.

Raucous masculine laughter nearby made him lift his head.

Aubriella slowly forced her weighted eyelids open, her gaze meshing with his.

Eyes hooded and heavy with passion, he cupped her face. “Never say you are undesirable again. Never.”

At that moment, Aubriella felt like the most beautiful, alluring woman on earth, and hot tears pricked her eyelids. She hadn’t realized how bereft she was, and now that she’d experienced desire, she didn’t know if she could go on as if nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

In truth, she very much feared Jackson Matherfield had altered her life forever.

Overcome with bashfulness, she curved her mouth into a small, fragile smile. “Will you let me draw you? I shan’t include your face, so no one will know who it is.”

Closing his eyes, he threw his head back, exposing the strong column of his throat, and groaned.

“You will be the death of me, Aubriella Penford.”

Sighing, he set her away from him and straightened her earring. “We’ll leave it to the dice, vixen. If you win, I’ll let you sketch me, though God only knows how we’ll manage it. If I win, you’ll tell me what you know about the mysterious wager regarding Miss Willoughby and how you came to know it. Agreed?”

This might very well be her only chance to see the male form and sketch it. And suddenly, it had become very important that it was Jack that she drew. Aubriella refused to examine the reason behind that newfound need. “Agreed, but no one else can know the stakes. As far as they are concerned, we’re playing for a forfeit.”

“That is wise. Shall we? We have dice to cast unless you’d settle for a game of vingt-et-un instead?” He cocked an eyebrow.

In expectation?

In challenge?

Her mind kept wandering to that blistering kiss.

How was she supposed to concentrate now?

Was that the rogue’s intent all along?

Had he planned to kiss her to disarm her?

Would Jack do something that underhanded?

Aubriella’s gut said no, but what did she really know about men and their ways?

She considered his suggestion. Vingt-et-un was far simpler to play than hazard. She mentally weighed the chances of winning at either game and settled on hazard, although, in all honesty, games of chance were wholly unreliable. “I think we’ll stick with the dice.”

“The game will be a first for us,” he said. “Even though we’ve attended many of the same events, including the Templetons’ annual house party, many times.”

His point?

Jack extended his elbow. “Tonight seems to be fraught with new experiences.”

Would Aubriella remember this yuletide toss of the dice as the moment when her life irrevocably changed? Or had it happened when Jack had kissed her, and for the first time in a very long while, she admitted that she wanted more out of life than studying scientific specimens and drawings.

She wanted passion and love.

And she feared that newfound discovery mightn’t ever be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 9



Templetons' card room

Twenty minutes later

After waiting fifteen minutes for two places to open up at an existing hazard table and realizing that no one seemed inclined to leave, Jack requested a pair of dice from a footman. The fellow cheerfully complied, and Jack pocketed the pieces. Since the wager was between him and Aubriella, they needn't play in the card room.

Any small table—preferably in a quiet nook in a public room—would suffice.

More unsettled by their kiss than he cared to admit, Jack couldn't risk being alone with her again. He'd never intended to kiss her, but something had unfurled inside him once he had. Something dormant had awakened and bludgeoned him with untenable desire.

Emmet might kill him for overstepping, and rightly so.

Aubriella had Jack at sixes and sevens. That was ironic since the expression came from hazard, the very game they intended to engage in shortly.

Kissing Aubriella was a mistake that mustn't happen again.

Nevertheless, he wouldn't embarrass them both by telling her so.

Unfortunately and unpreventable, he suspected she'd assume his reluctance to kiss her again stemmed from him not finding her desirable when the opposite was true. He was at a loss to explain the powerful, potent reaction after all these years they'd known each other.

Jack had kissed women before—one didn't get to be thirty and never

kissed a woman. Many ladies of all stations had wanted to join with him. However, even as a randy youth, he'd held an old-fashioned belief that coupling should involve more than mere physical satisfaction. That notion wasn't popular among any social class, so he kept the belief to himself.

He, a successful business owner and considered a man about town, would be a laughingstock should his secret become known.

That Aubriella should be the woman who tempted him to put aside the stricture guiding his sexual conduct these many years was a monumental conundrum. He'd only intended to prove that she was a desirable woman. Now, he'd become entangled in the web of his own making, and he had no idea how to escape except to avoid her, which he could not do.

Not after he'd vowed to stay by her side.

The next fortnight might prove to be the most troublesome and perplexing of his life, and he suspected his self-control was about to be tested mightily. He grasped her elbow, and she glanced up at him. A freckle to the right of her mouth taunted him, begging him to kiss the speck, and one below her right ear beseeched him to nuzzle her slender neck.

Lord, he was in trouble. Monumental, colossal, overwhelming trouble.

Mayhap he should reconsider his celibate state.

Except the plain, cold truth was, no woman but Aubriella would do. At some point, he'd have to examine that peculiarity but not now. At this moment, he had a wager to win and to discover how she knew of Francine Willoughby's condition when scandalous secrets like that were well guarded.

"Jack?" A cute frown puckered Aubriella's forehead and wrinkled her nose. "Are you well? You look as if you are not feeling quite the thing."

"Yes, quite well." Clearing his throat, Jack cast a hasty glance around the noisy room. Several of his friends, including Shelby Telling and Robyn Fitzlloyd, were engaged in games of whist, piquet, or loo. He vowed that tonight's guests had swelled to well over forty—likely closer to fifty.

Given the Templetons often invited their neighbors for the evening events during the house party, that was a distinct possibility. Duncan had yet to reappear unless he was in the drawing room from whence a male-female duet, accompanied by a pianoforte, filtered forth.

Of the Willoughbys, there was no sign, and hopefully, that portended their unexpected and rapid departure from Stockworth Manor.

"Offhand, do you know where we might play our game that affords us privacy but is within the bounds of propriety?" Jack steered Aubriella toward

the paneled door to the corridor.

She nodded. “The library if we leave the door open? If I recall, there’s a table in the center we could pull chairs near.”

Aubriella smiled as her younger sister in virginal white—flushed with pleasure and seated at a nearby table surrounded by swains—fluttered her fingers toward her before flipping over her card and letting out a delighted squeal.

Dutiful mother and chaperone, Mrs. Penford sat chatting along the wall with two other matrons. No doubt exchanging motherly boasts about their offspring. She gave her youngest an indulgent smile before angling her head to listen to the lady on her left.

Had Mrs. Penford even noticed Aubriella’s entrance and now pending exit?

Something very much like exasperation kicked Jack’s ribs at her oblivious neglect of her middle daughter. Granted, at four and twenty, Aubriella didn’t require constant supervision as Jessamine did, but having observed the family for several years, the Penford’s indifference toward their second daughter bordered on neglect.

No wonder Aubriella had found hobbies to occupy herself. Inappropriate hobbies, to be sure. But then, what did her negligent parents care?

Aubriella might have hidden shocking drawings of nudes in her wardrobe, and the Penfords would’ve remained blissfully unaware. As long as she didn’t cause them any inconvenience or embarrassment, she was all but invisible.

A chorus of congratulations erupted at Miss Jessamine’s table.

At once, three chaps rose and began strutting around the room, flapping their arms, bobbing their heads, and crowing. Easy to discern what that forfeit had been. Jack knew from experience that the forfeitures would become increasingly daring and naughty as the house party progressed.

“The library it is.” The hubbub faded as he and Aubriella strolled toward the back of the house. On his arm, Aubriella relaxed and breathed a little easier with each passing step.

These assemblies truly taxed her.

He’d noticed her distress before but never thought to ask why. He’d always assumed social ineptness kept her to herself. Most of the time, she was nowhere to be found. She disappeared for the majority of the event and reappeared as it drew to an end.

“Why do you dislike gatherings so much, Aubriella?”

Jack slowed his pace as he glanced down at her. The crown of her head just reached his shoulder, and tonight, someone had woven silk ribbons through her shiny, coiffed tresses.

The flickering candles in the brass wall sconces cast shadows across her face when she turned to look up at him.

His breath stalled for a heartbeat.

Why couldn't others see her beauty?

Wide eyes in an oval face, full pink lips, and a slightly upturned nose. The freckles smattering Aubriella's porcelain skin merely added to her allure—particularly that beauty mark near her mouth which would drive him crazy with want from now until forever.

“I don't dislike them, per se. I simply do not fit in. I feel rather like a goat asked to participate in the Ascot horse race. Of course, I can run the track, but my gait is awkward. I'm not a sleek beauty, and I have no chance of winning. My gaucheness causes unintentional amusement, and no one appreciates being laughed at.”

“I told you not to belittle yourself.” Jack turned her toward him and raised her chin with his forefinger instead of pulling her into his protective embrace and kissing her forehead as he yearned to do.

No more kisses, he reminded himself sternly.

Aubriella had disdained herself for so long that she couldn't see her own appeal.

“I shall have to demand a forfeit each time you do.” He winked to soften the words.

A kiss would do nicely.

No. No more kisses.

Twice in as many seconds, Jack had to remind himself of his vow, and that spelled eventual failure.

Perhaps unexpected urgent business required his attention in London.

Which was worse?

Breaking his word or kissing her?

She pulled a face and poked him in the chest. Hard. “You asked, you dolt. I explained the best way I knew how. And if you ever tease me about it, I'll... well, I'll draw you with three nipples.”

CHAPTER 10



Halfway to the Templetons' library

Jack threw back his head and laughed—deep, unfettered amusement at her silly but likely very real threat.

What other female would say such a thing?

“You’ll have to win first, Aubrie.”

“I assure you, Jackson Matherfield. I shall.” Finding her rare confidence amusing and estimable, he almost hoped she would prevail. Almost.

They finished the short trek to the library in silence.

In short order, Jack pulled two comfortably worn burgundy velvet library chairs trimmed in gold braid beside an octagonal marble-topped inlaid table. After lighting the tapers in a gilt brass three-branch candelabra from the low-burning hearth fire, Aubriella set it in the table’s middle.

Giving a satisfied nod and checking to ensure the door stood open, she slipped onto one of the chairs without waiting for him to pull it out. “Shall we begin?”

The ugly-as-sin chinoiserie mantel clock with a blue foo dog top chimed quarter past eleven.

How had it become so late?

“Indeed. The hour grows advanced.” He pulled the ivory dice from his pocket and offered them to her. “Best two out of three?”

It seemed unfair only to give her a single chance when he was certain of the outcome.

“If you think *you* need that many,” she quipped with a mischievous smile. Comfortable silence descended, punctuated by the clock *tick-tocking* on

the carved mahogany mantel, the fire lazily crackling and hissing, and the dice clattering against the marble inlays.

Jack won the first game but not without breaking a sweat. It had been a far closer match than he'd anticipated, as had the second in which Aubriella triumphed. He'd underestimated her.

Her forehead furrowed in concentration as she rolled the dice between her hands.

"I choose seven as my main," she said.

If she rolled a seven—a nicks—on her first toss this third game, it was over.

She won.

Jack would be shedding his clothing for her—God help them both. Not that the idea didn't have merit, but the consequences didn't bear contemplating. Unless he cried off, which was the sensible thing to do.

His honor prohibited him not to keep his word, and his deuced honor also forbade him to pose for her nearly unclothed. She'd managed to back him into a corner. No, his stupidity and cockiness had caused this conundrum.

Grinning, he shook his head. "Neither of us has a throw in on the first roll. The probability is quite low."

"Yes, but a seven has a slightly greater chance." Voices in the corridor made her glance toward the door. "How shall we explain playing in here, rather than the card room, should someone come upon us?"

"We can say you wanted to practice before joining a game in the card room." She didn't need practice, but Jack doubted anyone would question the fabrication.

"I suppose that suffices." Filling her lungs with air, which caused her bosom to swell quite nicely, she closed her eyes and moved her mouth in silent prayer before kissing her fist.

"Please."

"You seem quite desperate to see me unclothed." Jack leaned back in his chair, one arm slung over the back. "I believe I should be scandalized."

"Oh, pish posh." She wrinkled her nose, causing the smattering of freckles to dance. "It takes much more than disrobing to shock you. Besides, any fit man would suffice."

The voices grew louder.

A man and woman argued quite passionately, though they were still too far away to discern their words. Jack jutted his chin toward the entrance. "I

fear we are about to be interrupted.”

Lips pressed tight, Aubriella opened her hand, and the dice tumbled off her fingertips.

The first rolled to a stop.

A six.

She stood little chance of winning, but he still held his breath.

The second tumbled a little farther.

And a one.

Bloody hell.

She'd done it, by Jove.

He ought to be vexed.

Instead, Jack was pleased for her, even if he found himself in a deuced pickle.

“I won,” Aubriella breathed, half in awe and half in delight. She lifted her bright eyes to Jack's. “I won. You have to let me sketch you. And I want to do it while we're here. It will be easier to go unnoticed.”

Bollocks.

He thought he'd have until they returned to London to devise a location or renege. He grunted. “I'll have the why of that strange wager about Miss Willoughby one way or the other.”

“It's nothing. I assure you.” She made a flapping motion with her hand as she collected the dice.

Her too-innocent demeanor didn't fool him. Aubriella was an atrocious actress and a worse liar.

“It's not *nothing* when the chit tried to force me to marry her,” he retorted with more heat than intended.

Aubriella's expression grew shuttered, and if she'd slammed the doors and locked them, she couldn't have been clearer. Their amiable interlude had ended, and she'd retreated to cool aloofness again.

“I saw you together last year, and from what I observed, you weren't exactly impartial to her overtures.” Accusation and censure threaded her tone, now as frigid as the Arctic.

Jack racked his brain.

When could Aubriella have seen him?

That certainly explained her don't-come-near-me-leper-attitude these past months.

Her color high, she slid a glance to the door. “I only interjected earlier

because I dislike anyone being bullied or manipulated. Still, if you are responsible...”

“I am *not* responsible for Francine’s condition. In fact, I’ve avoided her like the plague after she practically accosted me in the conservatory during last year’s Christmastide house party.” He curled his lip in disgust. “Is that where you saw us?”

Jack couldn’t very well tell Aubriella he was a virgin. Not only did he doubt she’d believe him, it was wholly inappropriate.

Expression taut, Aubriella gave a tense dip of her chin. “I left at once, of course.”

“If you’d stayed, you would’ve seen me scold her for her forwardness and made it clear I had no interest in her and never would before—”

Footsteps—rapid, angry tread fall—echoed outside the library door, and Jack had just swiveled to look over his shoulder when Roxina Danforth and Shelby Tellingier plowed in, one after the other.

“Elli?” Miss Danforth came up short, and Tellingier bumped into her, almost sending her to the floor. He grabbed her arm to steady her, but she jerked away.

Her glare would’ve incinerated another man on the spot, but Tellingier merely returned her scowl and stepped around her.

Those two were constantly at odds.

What set them off this evening?

“Are we interrupting?” Tellingier could see blasted well that they were.

Nevertheless, Jack rose and pocketed the dice. “No, we’ve just finished. Miss Penford wanted a private hazard lesson before she undertook a game with others.”

“But, Elli is—” Miss Danforth clamped her mouth shut, giving her friend an I-don’t-know-what-is-going-but-I’m-keeping-my-mouth-shut look.

Jack applauded her loyalty.

Tellingier planted a hand on his hip, his impatience for Jack and Aubriella to leave palpable. “Ah, well then. I wish you luck, Miss Penford.”

“I can stay.” Aubriella touched Miss Danforth’s forearm. “If you wish.”

To her credit, though white lines bracketed her mouth, Miss Danforth didn’t drag her friend into the fray. “Not a bit of it, dearest. Go along. I simply need to disabuse Mr. Tellingier of a misconception.”

Tellingier snorted, barely suppressed ire radiating from him.

“I can stay as well.” Jack wasn’t about to leave a woman alone with a

man as angry as Tellingier.

“Oh, for the love of God.” Tellingier stomped across the room to stand before the waning fire and stare into the coals. “I simply want to know where her profligate brother has skulked off to.”

As up to this moment, Tellingier had been Mitchel Danforth’s closest friend, his hostility toward Danforth came as quite a surprise.

“It’s quite all right, Mr. Matherfield. Aubriella.” The epitome of serenity, Miss Danforth folded her hands across her abdomen, though she couldn’t quite control her timorous smile. “I only need a few moments with Mr. Tellingier. I promise you. I shall join you before I’m missed.”

“I’m not going to harm her,” Tellingier muttered as he faced them. “She’ll be along in five minutes. If not, feel free to return and call me to task.”

Aubriella nibbled her lower lip in indecision. “Are you quite sure, Zina?”

Pursing her lips and casting Tellingier an annoyed glance, Miss Danforth nodded.

As Jack followed Aubriella from the library, Tellingier demanded, “Where is he, Roxina? Where is Mitchel?”

CHAPTER 11



Still in Templetons' library

Several tense tick-tocks of the mantel clock later

Folding her arms tightly to her chest, Roxina pressed her lips together against the unladylike oath she longed to hurl at Shelby Telling. If she were a man, she'd punch his arrogant face and rearrange that perfectly straight nose for calling her a liar.

How dare he humiliate her in front of her dearest friend and Jackson Matherfield?

How odd to come upon Aubriella and Matherfield in the library.

Roxina knew full well that Aubriella had no liking for Jack. And that twaddle about teaching her hazard? Aubriella was a dab hand at the game. She didn't need any instruction or practice.

No, something was too smoky by far.

Regardless, Roxina would deal with that business later.

She eyed Shelby from beneath her lashes.

Right now, she must face Shelby Telling, more infuriated than she'd ever witnessed him before. He'd been his usual standoffish, brooding self this morning. This evening, however, something had happened to send him into a proper froth.

Taking three deep breaths and counting to five with each inhalation and exhalation, as she taught herself when Mitchel was in one of his rages, she brought her racing heart and pulse under control. Raised voices, particularly males, nearly always caused her extreme anxiety. It brought back terrifying memories of her father shouting at Mama.

Mustering her equanimity and forcing calmness to her voice, she met Shelby's infuriated glacial gray eyes.

"I told you, Shelby. I don't know where Mitchel is. You, above all people, are aware he does not include me in his confidence. My brother lives his life, and I live mine. Actually, I'm surprised you don't know where he's off to. I thought you were chums and shared *everything*."

Her sarcasm earned her another eviscerating scowl.

"Mitchel was remarkably closemouthed about his holiday plans. I presume he intended..." Shelby rubbed a long finger beneath his nose because no doubt what he'd intended to say was not meant for delicate ears. "Well, that he wanted seclusion and privacy."

She rested a hip on the sofa's arm. "In other words, Mitchel meant to engage in a season of holiday cheer and whoring?"

He didn't appear shocked at her crude question, so then why pretend it wasn't true?

Mitchel was the worst sort of profligate scoundrel.

Angling her head, she narrowed her eyes. "Or, perhaps, cuckolding some poor fellow."

"I am not his keeper." Tellingier laced his fingers behind his back, but his granite jaw belied his false tranquility. "Neither am I his confessor or conscience."

Roxina had never seen him in such a state. Like a caged lion or panther, ready to spring upon its prey. Perched as she was on the sofa's arm—mostly because her too-small second-hand shoes pinched her toes, and her feet were killing her—he seemed taller than his six feet, two inches as he towered above her.

"Well, I certainly am none of those either," she retorted with equal rancor.

Suddenly weary, she placed a palm against her forehead where a niggling ache portended a migraine if she didn't promptly find her bed. "I think he left around the thirteenth, but I cannot be sure. He rarely sleeps at the Gloucester Street house, and I only see him in passing every couple of weeks or so. I noticed his bedchamber door ajar, and clothing was strewn about as if he'd packed in haste."

"Blast him to Hades." Shelby paced away five steps, then stamped back to glower down at her. "I must find him."

Roxina sighed and permitted her shoulders to slump an inch. "Why?"

What has he done that has caused you, his dearest friend, to turn on him?"

Did she really want to know?

"I am *not* his dearest friend. I watch him closely because he is an untrustworthy blackguard, and that is better done by spending time with him."

"*Oh.*" The breath left Roxina's lungs in a rush.

What did she say to that confession?

"He impersonated me and forged my signature." Shelby released a frustrated huff and scraped a hand through his dark blond hair. "He used my name and character to obtain a thousand-pound loan from a card sharp, which came due the fifteenth. The henchmen came round to collect yesterday. My butler promptly penned me a message."

"Good Lord." Roxina's blood ran cold before she flushed with heat. "Mitchel is selfish and untrustworthy but to betray you in such a fashion..." She spread her hands. "I am truly sorry, Shelby."

A thousand pounds.

A veritable fortune.

Could Shelby afford to pay the loan?

The consequences, if he couldn't, might be dire.

He quirked a hawkish dark blond eyebrow. "I don't suppose he has any funds or valuables at the house?"

She laughed, the sound almost hysterical to her ears.

"If he had, don't you think I would've used them to pay the baker? Butcher? Grocer?" She gestured toward her gown. "Perhaps splurged and bought a couple of yards of fabric to make a new gown? This travesty was my mother's, Shelby, and she's been dead for a decade. I've remade this rag four times, and no one here isn't aware of my reduced circumstances."

If it weren't for the earnings from the *Ladies of Opportunity's* betting book, she'd have starved long ago.

On the verge of tears, she swallowed and blinked rapidly.

I shall not cry in front of him. Not him.

Shelby Telling, who had befriended the monster who tormented Roxina her entire life. Since the moment she came into the world and stripped her fourteen-year-old half brother of his only child status, he'd put every effort into making her life miserable to pay for robbing him of that prestigious position.

Shelby sank onto the sofa and crossed one long leg over the other.

Drumming his fingertips on the brocade arm, he contemplated her with such intensity that Roxina fidgeted and then stood.

“Well, if that is all, I shall excuse myself.” And make straight for her bed. Although, how she would sleep with the news Shelby just imparted, she couldn’t fathom.

“That is not all, Roxina.”

Of course, it wasn’t.

“He’s mortgaged your house to the hilt. I purchased the loan six years ago so you wouldn’t be evicted.”

Oh, my God.

It cannot be true.

But Roxina knew it was.

Her head spun, and she extended a hand to grasp hold of something so she wouldn’t crumple to the floor in a hysterical heap. She did have a smattering of pride left, and to let Shelby Tellingier see her come undone—she couldn’t bear it.

Shelby shot to his feet and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Far gentler than she believed him capable, he guided her to the sofa.

“Sit down, Roxina. You’ve had a terrible shock.”

She licked her lower lip, afraid she might cast up her accounts. “You bought the mortgage?”

Six years ago?

Wasn’t that about the time he and Mitchel had become friends?

He told the truth about their friendship, too.

He gave a terse nod. “I knew he was a spendthrift and wouldn’t make the payments. And I also knew he didn’t give a tinker’s damn if he left you without a home.”

Tears burned behind her eyelids.

She’d been so awful to Shelby, and he proved himself a more decent human than her flesh and blood.

He sat beside her and took her hand in his.

“I shall have to use the house and contents as collateral, Roxina. I don’t have the cash to repay the loan at present. I don’t have time to sell the house either. The type of people Mitchel borrowed from won’t wait until I can raise the funds. Until I can locate your brother and bring charges against him, I have no choice. Even then, it’s not likely I’ll recover any of the money.”

“Use the house as collateral?” She could barely force the words past her

stiff lips. “What will become of me? Where will I go? I have no living relatives.”

“I shall think of something.” For the first time that evening, he directed a genuine smile toward her. “Trust me, Roxina.”

Trust *him*?

A man she’d loathed for years?

He passed her a crisp, neatly folded, and starched handkerchief. “Here.”

So lost in misery and fear, Roxina hadn’t been aware tears trailed down her cheeks. She accepted the cloth—it smelled of sandalwood and cloves and him—and patted her face.

“I suggest you use discretion who you share this information with.” Kindness glinted in his eyes, warming them to a dove-gray shade. “We wouldn’t want to put a pall on the festivities.”

“Of course.” Roxina doubted she’d be able to enjoy the next two weeks. Especially knowing she’d shortly have nowhere to live. But she wouldn’t ruin the occasion for the others.

She stood on wobbly legs, Shelby’s handkerchief wadded in her fist.

“I’ll return your handkerchief after it’s laundered.” She’d wash it herself as she couldn’t afford the vails the other guests paid the servants. Her friends passed the expected coins to the domestics on her behalf.

She wore humiliation and chagrin like a second skin these days.

“It’s of no import.” He also stood, concern pleating the corners of his eyes.

She drew in a ragged breath.

“Thank you. I...” A fresh wave of tears threatened to engulf her, but Roxina swallowed them down. Shelby Tellingier would not see her weep again. “Please excuse me. I have a headache and need to lie down.”

“I am sorry, Roxina. Truly I am.”

Grief clogged her throat, and she could only nod as she fled the library and tore to the bedchamber, praying she didn’t encounter anyone along the way.

All this time, she’d loathed the man who had ensured she had a place to live.

CHAPTER 12



Stockworth Manor conservatory
The next day — afternoon

Aubriella roved her gaze around the large conservatory, seeking an ideal location to sketch Jack. Perhaps over there against the backdrop of potted Ficus and ferns. With enough candles strategically arranged, the lighting should be sufficient.

She'd decided the greenhouse was the most logical place to carry out her daring plan. To draw the various poses she desired, Aubriella estimated she'd need four to six hours, which meant at least two nights, mayhap three, of clandestine sneaking to and fro.

Jack wouldn't be happy, and she fully expected he'd refuse more than a single night. She'd cross that hurdle when it arose. Nevertheless, not only was the solar warm—she didn't want him goose fleshed and shivering—but late at night, it wasn't likely anyone would interrupt them, including Francine.

She and her father had departed Stockworth Manor last evening without bidding their hosts farewell. No great loss there. What was a loss was Roxina's presence. She'd pleaded a headache when Aubriella had retired last night and refused to leave their shared chamber today.

In truth, her friend appeared quite ill, though she refused Aubriella's offer to send for a physician. When Aubriella had peeked in on Roxina an hour ago, she'd been asleep in the darkened chamber. As soon as tea was over, Aubriella intended to check on her again. It wasn't like Roxina to remain abed.

Twice today, Shelby Tellingier approached Aubriella and inquired after Roxina.

That was most peculiar since he usually distanced himself from her. His concern was highly suspicious, and the more Aubriella considered it, the more she became convinced that not only was Roxina hiding in the bedchamber, she was hiding *something*. Something that caused her such distress that the typically stalwart Roxina refused to leave her chamber.

Aubriella meant to have the truth from her dearest friend.

With Jessamine's hand tucked in the crook of her elbow, the sisters and several others strolled the stone pavers, heated from beneath by a system of pipes linked to a wood furnace.

With its orange and lemon trees, pineapple plants, as well as several palms and other sun-loving vegetation, the greenhouse emitted a tropical atmosphere, which is exactly what Mabel had intended for this afternoon's tea. The idyllic scene starkly contrasted with the outdoors, where fluffy, wet snowflakes had begun falling half an hour ago.

"Do you think the snow will stick, Elli?" Peering through the slightly foggy windows, Jessamine pulled her mazarine blue velvet pelisse's collar higher before glancing down at her impractical flared-heel, striped shoes.

"I honestly don't know, Minnie."

Aubriella hoped not.

Wasn't it a mere fortnight ago she prayed for snow and now asked the Good Lord for the opposite?

She didn't relish trudging from the manor house to the conservatory at midnight in a foot of snow. All in the name of science, of course. It didn't hurt that Jack was dreadfully handsome and possessed a Greek god's splendid physique. What else explained the taut fabric across his broad shoulders and long legs?

Jessamine formed a moue with her mouth.

On other girls, the pout seemed petulant, but the small turning down of Jessamine's lips gave her a fragile appearance rather than spoiled. "I shall ruin my new shoes for certain, and so shall you should we have to walk back to the house in the snow."

"Never fear, Miss Jessamine." Will Durham, one of Jessamine's most ardent admirers, sidled closer, not about to let such an opportunity pass. Reed thin and an inch shorter than Aubriella, he puffed out his chest. *An underweight robin or a bantam rooster.* "I shall be honored to carry you."

Aubriella bit her tongue to keep from laughing at the comical image that presented. She would wager Mr. Durham couldn't lift a hay bale, let alone her sister, and Jessamine would find herself headfirst in a snowdrift.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Mr. Durham," Mama interjected before Aubriella or Jessamine could formulate a suitable response. Leave it to Mama to hone in on an over-eager suitor and firmly dissuade his zealous efforts to court Jessamine.

Aubriella slid a glance at the glass panels.

She doubted anyone would make it to the house without sodden footwear and damp hems.

A naughty, rebellious impulse made her shove her pointed-toe shoe outward a couple of inches and wiggle her foot. To test the waters, so to speak.

Would Will Durham notice?

She even cleared her throat. Quite noisily, in fact. A frog with croup would've sounded more ladylike.

Alas, her efforts proved futile.

Eyes only for Jessamine, Mr. Durham didn't extend the same invitation to her. Not that Aubriella would ever allow a man to tote her about like a bag of grain. Besides, no one ever died from cold, wet feet. Well, mayhap they had, but surely, she wouldn't catch the ague on the quarter-mile hike to the manor house. If the need arose.

Even now, Mabel engaged in furtive conversation with several footmen near the conservatory entrance. She was probably making arrangements to ferry the guests back to the house.

Just once, Aubriella would like to have been the object of male attention, not her prettier sisters. It was stupid, silly, and irrational, but it did rather rub one's pride raw to be overlooked and ignored constantly.

Mama took Jessamine's elbow and half-turned away. "Come, dearest. I would like you to sit with me."

Ever the protective mama bear.

"What about Elli, Mama?" Compassion—or was it pity?—softened Jessamine's eyes.

Aubriella didn't like that one jot. No indeed. Accustomed to being disregarded, she'd have found a seat in a quiet corner. However, having her younger self-absorbed sister notice their mother's negligence brought home just how insignificant Aubriella was.

“Elli?” Mama couldn’t quite hide her befuddlement.

Yes, Mama. Your middle daughter. The one you generally deem inconsequential.

Mama swung back to face Aubriella. Seemingly as an afterthought, asked, “Do you wish to sit with us as well?”

She glanced behind her to the nearly full table where Papa, Lenora, and her husband already jabbered on about something or other with other guests.

Only Emmet was missing. Something had spooked his horse this morning when he dismounted, and he’d strained his ankle. Nothing serious, but he thought it wise to allow the swollen appendage to rest.

“I’m not sure there’s room.” Mama blinked, appearing rather flummoxed at what could hardly be considered a conundrum. Dear Mama. Never the brightest candle in the chandelier. “But you are so thin. I suppose we could squeeze in another chair.”

“And *inconvenience* you?” Aubriella shook her head when her sarcasm didn’t register. “I wouldn’t think of it.”

Just as they never thought of her.

She always managed on her own. Pain twinged behind her ribs, but she tamped down the emotion. She wouldn’t wallow in self-pity. So life hadn’t handed her a basket of roses. That didn’t mean she couldn’t be happy.

Out of nowhere, Jack appeared at her side, smelling utterly marvelous, and for the umpteenth time in the past few days, she nearly sighed in relief. It wasn’t wise to depend on him so much, but he had volunteered to keep her company during the yuletide festivities. She hadn’t asked the favor of him.

“With your permission, Mrs. Penford, I shall find seats for Miss Penford and myself.” He flashed his rakish grin, and Aubriella’s heart flip-flopped in her chest.

“There. See, Minnie?” Her relief apparent, Mama patted Jessamine’s arm. “It has all worked out.”

Jessamine mouthed, “I’m sorry,” before permitting their mother to tow her away like a barge.

When had Jessamine grown up and begun to consider others’ feelings?

“Does that happen often?” Jack’s question was too casual, too nonchalant. Aubriella despised his pity.

She slanted him a sharp look.

“What do you think? Surely you’ve observed our familial interactions long enough to know the answer.” She hitched a shoulder as she searched for

a table with room for them. "I'm accustomed to it and do rather well on my own."

She shouldn't have to, but she'd learned to.

He made a harsh sound in the back of his throat that Aubriella couldn't interpret.

Of course, he appeared utterly splendid, tempting masculinity wrapped in a muscle straining bottle-green jacket and black pantaloons. His emerald cravat pin twinkled playfully. She couldn't remember another time he'd worn such an adornment.

In recent days, she'd observed all manner of details about Jackson Hart Callen Matherfield that had previously gone unnoticed.

Why, she could not fathom.

His brother, Duncan, seated with the Fitzlloyds, waved them over. Jack leaned down as they wended through the tables and whispered, "I have to return to London for a couple of days. Something urgent requires my presence."

Jerking her head upward, Aubriella searched his face's hard contours and angles.

Already a trifle trampled, her bruised emotions surged forward with a tsunami's force. Temper unbridled and uncontrolled, she snapped, "So you don't have to model for me? Less than four and twenty hours since I won our bet, and you're breaking your word already?"

Aloofness entered his hazel eyes, turning them flintlike.

Ah, here was the ruthless, sardonic businessman others whispered about who'd clawed and scrambled his way to success and wealth. "That's not the reason, though I confess I am relieved. I should be back in three days, and we'll discuss our arrangement then."

Arrangement?

They had a deal. Aubriella would bet her carefully saved nest egg had she been a man, Jack wouldn't consider breaking his word. Foreign, scorching anger surged through her, heating her blood and temper.

He was no different from her family or most of the people here. Everyone thought she wouldn't mind being disregarded, manipulated, or lied to.

Well, he was wrong.

They were all bloody wrong.

Aware of how easily they might be overheard, she modulated her tone. "Either you are a man of your word, Jackson Matherfield, or you are not. I

won our wager, fair and square.”

He narrowed his eyes as he directed her toward an unoccupied corner behind a trio of huge potted elephant ears.

“And had I won, Aubriella, would you have honored your stake?”

Aubriella averted her gaze. “It’s not that simple.”

“Exactly.” Sarcasm he generally reserved for others lanced her.

She’d been naive to believe anything had changed between them.

“My appetite has flown.” She lifted her chin and retreated a step. Icy politesse replaced their former friendship. “I’m returning to the house.”

“Suit yourself.” Without another word, Jack turned his back and made for his brother’s table.

With an odd aching in her throat and heart, Aubriella slipped out the door. As she turned to latch the handle, she perused the conservatory. Engaged in conversation and tea, not a single person noted her departure.

In truth, she could disappear, and days would pass before anyone noticed her absence.

Never had she felt more alone, and Jack’s impending departure made her realize how much she’d come to rely upon him. She’d been a fool to trust him. A fool to think this Christmas would be different from a dozen others.

That was what came of banking upon others.

Rebellion, mutiny, and disgust burgeoned within her.

She’d had enough.

You are not a feckless female, Aubriella Kendra Larkspur Penford.

If you’re discontent, do something about it.

I shall!

Suddenly resolute, Aubriella marched to the house, relishing the jarring cold snowflakes hitting her face. She didn’t wait for Fredericks, the butler, to open the door but let herself in. Finding the foyer empty, she brushed snow from her cheeks, then stripped off her gloves.

A plump maid humming to herself wandered down the corridor and gave a startled jump when she saw Aubriella. “Did you need something, Miss?”

“Indeed.” Aubriella sucked in a breath, bracing herself for what she was about to do. “Have the Penford coach around in fifteen minutes.”

CHAPTER 13



A half dozen awkward seconds later

Aubriella would switch the conveyance for a mail coach in Westerham, so Mosely didn't have to suffer in the snow. She'd only brought a small purse but would collect her savings from her room in London. As long as the *Ladies of Opportunity* continued their secret betting, she'd have income to rely upon.

"Of course, miss." The maid gave her a puzzled glance but nodded and retreated in the direction she'd come.

After taking the stairs two at a time, Aubriella raced to her bedchamber as if the hounds of hell nipped her heels. The need to escape, to flee, so overwhelmed her that she trembled. Excitement and anticipation dueled with fear and apprehension for what she was about to do—the adventure she was about to embark upon.

It's about time, her soul sang.

No, it was long, *long* overdue.

She'd either gone stark raving mad or finally found the courage to spread her wings.

Shoving her chamber door open, she all but ran inside.

Roxina, sitting in an armchair with her hair spilling around her shoulders, gasped and jerked her head upward.

"Whatever is the matter, Aubriella?"

"Let's leave. Now. I've already ordered the coach brought 'round to take me to the village. From there, I'll hire a mail coach to London." That would also put anyone inclined to follow off her trail.

Not that anyone would notice her absence.

Naturally, Mosely, bless his loyal heart, would feel the need to inform Papa of her abrupt departure.

Who knew what Aubriella's father would do?

Anything?

Aubriella threw the wardrobe open. "What say you, Zina?"

Roxina was on her feet before Aubriella finished speaking.

"Yes, Elli." She gave an eager nod and swiftly began gathering her clothing. She paused, a mended stocking dangling from one hand. "You should know that Tellingier is selling my house—well, not exactly selling it. Using it as collateral against a loan."

Hairbrush midair, Aubriella paused and half-turned. "He's *what*?"

That was why Roxina was in the state she was in.

"Mitchel mortgaged the house to the hilt and defaulted on the loan. Shelby bought the mortgage six years ago so I would have a place to live." She sighed, her shoulders sagging. "But recently, Mitchel impersonated Shelby and borrowed a thousand pounds from nefarious fiends."

"Oh my Lord." Aubriella felt sick for her friend.

Roxina swiped a tendril of dark hair off her pale cheek. "Now Shelby has to use the house as security." She stared blankly out the window, where snow continued to filter from the sky. "I've nowhere to go."

Aubriella dropped her hairbrush into her satchel and unceremoniously plopped the other dressing table contents into the bag with alacrity.

"You do, too. You shall live with me." She grabbed Roxina's hand. "We're going to my Aunt Astrid's. She left her house to me, and it's far past time I took my life into my own hands. I've never fit in with my family. They won't even miss me. In point of fact, I think they'll be relieved to see the last of me."

Sadly, that was true.

"What about the *Ladies of Opportunity*?" Roxina shoved clothing into her small bag before hurrying to the dressing table. She wound her shiny locks into a simple knot, securing it with a few pins. "I confess, I rely upon that income. It is my sole source of funds at present. Mitchel stopped providing household funds months ago. Now I know why."

"The *Ladies of Opportunity* shall continue as we have always done." Aubriella also depended upon the income and would now, more than ever. "Of course, we'll have to find a new location for our meetings and journey to

London to attend them, but it's only ten miles from Aunt Astrid's. Perhaps, we shall expand our ventures. Discreetly, of course."

Roxina pulled her winged brows together. "I'll need to go to my house to pack my personal things."

Aubriella needed to collect a few items herself, including da Vinci's drawings.

Face ravaged with grief, Roxina swallowed and knuckled away a tear. "Shelby's also using the furnishings to repay Mitchel's debt."

"God rot Shelby Telling for an unscrupulous, self-serving cad." Aubriella glanced around, double-checking that she'd packed all her belongings before crossing to the bell pull.

"He had no choice, Aubriella." Roxina fastened the threadbare frogs of her cloak.

Roxina, defending her nemesis, brought Aubriella up short. "How so?"

"Mitchel borrowed money from dangerous men." Roxina slipped her shoes on. "Shelby doesn't have the cash to repay them. He didn't say as much, but I believe they threatened him. He's as much a victim as I am."

Eyebrows arched in disbelief, Aubriella snorted. "*Pshaw*. What tripe. Men are never as desperate as women. Did he mention selling *his* house or using it as collateral?"

Mouth parted, Roxina stared at her. "No. He did not."

"There you have it." Aubriella pursed her lips, still frothing with frustration. "The inarguable truth is, men simply cannot be trusted. I won a wager last night, and Jackson Matherfield has already reneged. Without a jot of compunction or remorse, I might add. Had I been a man, I doubt he would've dared such blatant disregard."

Roxina crossed to her and took her hand. "I trust you'll tell me about this mysterious private wager on the way?"

"I shall." Aubriella gave a distracted nod. "We need to hurry, however. The snow increases, Zina, and we must stop in London before continuing to Aunt Astrid's. Once in Town, I intend to hire a hack to take us the distance, so pack sparingly."

Roxina snorted this time. "Have no fear there. I own little."

Aubriella's heart twinged with sympathy, but Roxina was as proud as Aubriella and despised any show of pity.

Roxina laughed, a sad, hollow-sounding warble, despite her intrepidity.

"Let's swear off men, dear friend." She linked her arm with Aubriella's.

“And vow to remain spinsters. We’ll steer the ships of our lives and disdain the winds of fate, society, and men filling our sails to control us.”

“Indeed.” A wave of sadness sluiced through Aubriella. For a few days, Jack had seen that she hadn’t been treated as an invisible wallflower. He’d even kissed her as if he truly desired her. With a ragged sigh, she shoved her ruminations into a moldering closet and locked the door. “Who needs them, anyway?”

What she experienced this past week would have to be enough. Yet even as she made her way below with Roxina, Aubriella knew it never would be.

CHAPTER 14



*Stockworth Manor – Drawing room
Shortly before supper that evening*

Holding a glass of claret, Jack stood beside the blazing fire and examined the cheerful tableau before him. Festive ribbon-adorned greeneries now festooned the drawing, entry, ballroom, and dining rooms. Laughing guests, swathed in evening finery and dripping with glittering jewels, milled about.

So far, the Templetons' yuletide house party was a rousing success.

The Penfords had entered the drawing room fifteen minutes ago, Lenora Langford and her husband, Stephen, five minutes later. Though Emmet hobbled around with a borrowed cane, he hadn't stopped grinning since arriving.

The only thing missing to complete the evening was Aubriella's pretty face, her ready—often droll—wit, and her perceptive acumen.

Would she remain in her chamber for supper too?

People had commented on her and Roxina Danforth's absence this afternoon.

Jack missed Aubriella's company but understood she needed time to process her disappointment. It wasn't like her to pout, though he knew he'd made her angry. Rather than seek her out to explain there'd been a fire at one of his restaurants, he'd decided to let her temper cool. Though grateful for the temporary respite in having to honor his wager with her, he couldn't help but

worry about the restaurant.

Thank God all the staff and patrons had escaped without harm. According to the letter sent by the manager and delivered by special messenger just before tea today, the staff managed to contain the fire damage to the kitchen. Still, the smoke had permeated and damaged the dining area, too.

He needed to inspect the building to determine if he'd rebuild, move the restaurant to a new location, or abandon the venture altogether. He and Duncan had considered opening a seashore inn and restaurant in Brighton or Bath—mayhap now was the time to do so.

He took a sip of wine and returned Emmet's nod of greeting.

While waiting for the dinner gong to sound, the guests assembled for a pre-dinner drink and conversation. The snow continued to fall outside, although not with the intensity it had earlier today. Five or six inches had accumulated, and as long as it didn't snow heavily overnight, he could leave tomorrow as planned.

He'd ride rather than take a coach. It was faster and easier to maneuver. Deucedly colder, too. If all went well, he should return in three days, just as he promised Aubriella.

A commotion at the door drew his attention.

Fredericks, the Templetons' staid-as-a-corpse butler, crossed the room with such alacrity several guests turned to watch his progress. Without preamble, he spoke near Mr. Penford's ear.

Mr. Penford gawped at the butler, then blinked behind his thick spectacles as if he couldn't comprehend what he'd heard.

Fredericks said something further and discreetly gestured toward the doorway.

Mr. Penford touched his wife's shoulder and whispered in her ear. Her expression confused, Mrs. Penford finally dragged her attention from their youngest child, preening before a trio of young bucks.

One hand linked through her husband's elbow, Mrs. Penford grasped Jessamine's hand and all but hauled her toward the exit.

Noticing something was afoot, Emmet, leaning heavily on his borrowed cane, maneuvered through the crowd toward his parents. His flustered father spoke swiftly and rather frantically as they moved toward the corridor.

Jack set his half-full glass on the mantel.

Across the room, he met Shelby Telling's mystified gaze.

Telling arched an eyebrow as he gave the Penfords and Langfords, now

moving *en masse* toward the exit, a questioning look.

Angling his head and jerking his chin, Jack indicated he meant to follow.

Shelby joined him at the doorway. "Until tonight, I've never seen Clarence Penford anything but sedate and befuddled."

"Neither have I." Jack gave a brief glance over his shoulder as he stepped into the corridor.

Several guests noticed the Penfords' and Langfords' sudden departure, and a buzz of conjecture soon filled the drawing room.

Jack unabashedly followed the family into the dining room.

Mrs. Templeton sat in a chair before the beautifully set table, dabbing her face with a handkerchief while her husband awkwardly patted her shoulder.

"There, there, dumpling," George Templeton soothed. "All will be well."

Would it?

Jack wasn't nearly as confident as Templeton, and he didn't know what was afoot yet.

As Jack approached, remorse and chagrin twisted the coachman's face. "I tried to dissuade Miss Penford," Mosely said. "But she and Miss Danforth were determined to leave immediately. She said they'd walk if I didn't take them into Westerham at once. I couldn't let them walk in the snow or chance them coming upon riffraff."

"This will help steady you." Fredericks shoved a glass of brandy into the trembling servant's hand.

From cold or upset?

Likely both.

"And you didn't think to leave a note, man?" Mr. Penford put forth the logical question, his tone the most heated and firm Jack could ever recall of the timid fellow. This was the first time Jack had seen the renowned solicitor in action.

"There wasn't time." Mosely gulped the tumbler's contents. "You know how stubborn Miss Penford can be when she gets a notion."

Aye, when Aubrie dug in her heels, she became mulish.

Fredericks refilled Mosely's glass.

Jack and Shelby drifted closer, unnoticed by the room's other occupants.

After taking another healthy gulp, Mosely bobbed his wizened head, his ears still glowing red from the cold. "I would've returned hours ago to alert you, but the coach slid off the road a few miles back. The roads are a wreck. No one's traveled over them yet. It took me some time to realize I couldn't

free the coach. I had to unhitch the team and walk back with them.”

“I’ll send a few stout fellows and a new team to retrieve the coach,” Templeton offered while continuing to comfort his distraught wife.

“But where is Aubriella?” Mrs. Penford finally found her voice, sounding genuinely concerned. “I cannot believe my most sensible child would do something so imprudent. I never have to fuss about her.”

“She and Miss Danforth boarded the mail coach to London. I tried to dissuade her.” Mosely hung his head, the picture of dejection and penitence. He swallowed, and unshed tears glistened in his eyes when he raised his gaze. “She was in a right awful state. I’ve never seen her so distraught.”

Jack could imagine the mutinous jutting of her chin, the set angle of her jaw, and the sparks of rebellion shining in her eyes. Something about this afternoon—mayhap him telling her he was leaving—had compelled her to toss her normal common sense to the wind.

“At least she made for London,” Penford interjected. “That was sensible of her.”

Jack glared at the man, the urge to shake some sense into the oblivious fellow so strong he fisted his hands.

Lenora Langford wrapped an arm around her now weeping mother. “Don’t trouble yourself, Mama. Aubriella shall be fine. Don’t you always say that? You needn’t worry about her because she’s the logical, levelheaded child amongst us?”

“Even logical, levelheaded children need their family’s attention and love.” Jack’s thoughts tumbled out his mouth without forethought.

Several appalled gazes riveted on him.

Good.

It was long past time someone spoke directly to the Penfords about their neglect.

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Penford bristled like a cock of the roost. “Are you implying we don’t love Aubriella?”

Jack plowed a hand through his hair. “No. I’m saying you ignore her. Disregard her and are indifferent to her. She’s practically invisible to you.” He met Penford’s confused gaze. “She has said as much to me.”

“That cannot be true.” Mrs. Penford shook her golden head, her ruby earrings swaying with her intensity. “She is... well, she’s Aubriella.” As if that explained everything and nothing more need be said. “She doesn’t need us—”

“You’re wrong, Mama,” Jessamine piped in, drawing the family’s attention.

Brave imp.

“Whatever do you mean, child?” Confusion etched Penford’s thin features.

The man was dense as a turnip—obtuse as a rock.

Aubriella quite obviously didn’t inherit her intelligence from her parents.

Jessamine squared her shoulders and thrust her dainty chin upward. “I’ve seen the hurt in her eyes. We take her for granted. You did it this afternoon at tea.” She made a sweeping motion with her hand to include her entire family. “We all sat together, and you were bothered that you might have to move a chair to accommodate Aubriella. She doesn’t feel loved or that she is part of our family.”

That flighty Jessamine had observed what Jack had, suggested perhaps there was more to the youngest Penford than a pretty face.

“I... I... I didn’t realize.” Mrs. Penford wept freely, a handkerchief pressed to her eyes. “My poor girl.”

Mr. Penford’s throat worked, and he turned away to lift his glasses and dry his eyes.

“You don’t include Elli.” Emmet, his hands thrust into his pockets, paced back and forth. Accusation colored his tone. “I’ve seen it and should have said something sooner. I am just as guilty. How often, Mama and Papa, have you said Aubriella doesn’t need attention and guidance? That she would be all right? That you don’t worry about her?”

“Clearly, Aubriella is *not* all right. Or else she wouldn’t have fled during a snowstorm.” Jack strode forward, guilt at his contribution to her flight making his words terse and gnawing his gut.

It occurred to him that Clarence Penford had no idea what to do.

Someone needed to take charge.

“Exactly how long ago did you leave Miss Penford in Westerham, Mosely?” Jack glanced at the longcase clock situated in a corner. Nearly seven. He’d last seen Aubriella at three. Four hours head start. In this weather, he could overtake a slow-moving coach easily.

“Around half four, Mr. Matherfield,” Mosely said.

He caught Telling’s attention. “Can you be ready to ride in ten minutes?”

“I’ll meet you at the stable.” Telling headed toward the door.

“You have a firearm with you?” Tellingner never traveled unarmed, and he likely had multiple weapons at his disposal.

Tellingner gave a terse nod before leaving the room.

“Jack?” Emmet wobbled forward. “I wish I could accompany you, but I would only slow you down. Please bring my sister back safely.”

“I have every intention of doing so, my friend.” He patted Emmet’s shoulder.

“Mr. Templeton?” Jack mentally calculated the distance they’d need to travel and the route to take. “May I impose upon you to have horses saddled? Sturdy horses. Perhaps a bag with extra blankets, too?”

“Of course.” Templeton waved at Fredericks. “See to it at once.”

“Yes, sir.” Fredericks put aside his usual dignity and departed the room at a sprint.

Jack pivoted to go, his stomach in knots and fear creeping along his spine. Two pretty women traveling alone in this weather...

His stomach roiled so violently he couldn’t finish the thought.

“Jack?” He faced Mr. Penford.

“Yes?”

“Find Aubriella. Please.” Mr. Penford blew his nose noisily.

Mrs. Penford lifted her blotchy face from her saturated hankie. “Yes, Jack. Do. Please. She must know how much we love her. We’ve been remiss, but we must tell her.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt that Aubriella mightn’t be in this perilous predicament if they’d told her sooner how they felt when the truth hit him with the force of a bludgeon to the skull.

His gait faltered, and dizziness befuddled his mind for a second.

Jack *loved* Aubriella.

Oh, God. I love her.

Only he hadn’t recognized the feelings for what they were. He had loved Aubriella for so long it had become second nature. He adored her uniqueness, quiriness, freckles, hazel eyes, long limbs, and intelligence. In truth, he cherished her stubbornness, skepticism, prickliness when he teased her, and everything else about her.

And the sooner he had his arse in the saddle, the sooner he could tell her just that.

Please, Lord. Keep her safe.

He rushed from the room, the desire to find her, to make sure she was

safe, more important than breathing.

I'm coming, my darling. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 15



Boots and Crow Hostelry

*A dismal stretch of road between Westerham and London
Quarter past ten in the evening*

Huddled beside Roxina on a hard, gouged, and scratched wooden bench beneath a grimy, cobweb-strewn window, Aubriella covertly surveyed the Boots and Crow common room. This far from the insipid fire struggling to cast its meager light and heat beyond the soot-entrenched hearth, the cold seeped into her bones from the flimsy wall behind her.

The other mail coach patrons also clustered as near to the insufficient flames as possible, which was to say, several feet away. Other conveyances, two in the last hour, had sought refuge in the small, rundown inn, and those passengers—some quite unsavory—had settled in for the night. The hostelry’s private chambers had long since been let to earlier arrivals by the time the mail coach limped into the slushy courtyard two hours ago.

A broken wheel and lame horse sent the coach drivers to the only nearby lodgings. Once they learned nobody could repair the wheel until tomorrow and neither was there a replacement for the lame horse, they’d comforted themselves with tall mugs of dark ale for the past two hours.

Roxina slipped her hand into Aubriella’s and gave a soft squeeze. Leaning close, she whispered, “I don’t like the way those men are looking at us.”

Aubriella didn’t need to ask which men.

An unkempt, bearded pair repeatedly turned their drunken attention toward the women. God only knew how long they'd been seated at the corner table, downing bottle after bottle of spirits. Boisterous, crude, and inebriated, they harassed the overworked barmaid, mocked the more refined gentlemen, and unabashedly ogled the women.

Their ribald jokes and coarse language brought blushes to more than one woman's cheeks and earned glowers from the men, although no one dared to tell the ruffians to mind their manners or shut their mouths.

Aubriella and Roxina could either take refuge in the crowded and smoky common room, reeking of garlic, boiled cabbage, unwashed bodies, stale ale, and a sweet, foul unidentifiable odor or stay in the coach overnight. At least inside the shambles of a building, she and Roxina were at less risk of freezing to death.

Ravishment, on the other hand?

That might've been a real possibility if there weren't so many other patrons sprawled about the taproom. In truth, Aubriella wasn't certain she and Roxina were safe. Those foul brutes ogling her didn't seem the type to bother with laws. One wretch, sporting a jagged scar from his eye to where it disappeared into his grungy beard, winked at her and smiled, exposing rotten teeth.

Aubriella averted her gaze, and he guffawed.

Swallowing her fright, she took stock of their situation.

They only needed to get through the night, and they'd be on their way first thing in the morning. Westerham was a mere twenty miles from London. Surely, they'd traveled half that distance today. As long as the roads were passable and no other mishaps befell them, she and Roxina should make London tomorrow midmorning.

She flattened her hand over her churning belly. Her reticle formed a lump where she'd pinned it to her chemise before boarding the coach. Thank God she'd had the foresight to do so. Her gown and cloak draped over her redingote hid the bulge, but given the unsavory characters dispersed around the shabby establishment, fear still tiptoed up and down her spine.

In hindsight, she oughtn't to have departed Mabel and George's in such haste. A day or two more wouldn't have made that much difference to her newly hatched scheme for independence.

In truth, staying and secluding herself would have given her time to plan her escape and future. Unlike her carefully thought out and enacted scheme to

sneak into university, for the first time in her life, she'd succumbed to an imprudent, emotional impulse, and now her impetuosity had also endangered her dearest friend.

Lifting her nose and presenting her profile to the obnoxious duo who continued to leer at her and Roxina, she bit her lip. This unexpected and unfortunate delay in their journey not only put them in an untenable situation, it might prevent their escape to Aunt Astrid's.

Mayhap, as Aubriella often vanished for hours at house parties, no one would question her absence tonight or tomorrow.

That still left her to get through the night unaccosted.

She'd refused food and drink because there was no way in Hades that she would reveal she possessed a few coins. She wouldn't put it past the assembled riffraff to rob her in her sleep. Which was why she had no intention of sleeping, or at the very least, she and Roxina would slumber in shifts.

"I'm sorry, Zina."

Despite her exhaustion and anxiety, Roxina gave her a sharp look. "Whatever for?"

"For dragging you into my muddle." Aubriella spread a hand to indicate their surroundings. "For this. For not at least asking the cook for a piece of cheese and bread. An apple or two."

"Fiddlesticks and flimflam." Roxina squeezed her hand again. "I have a mind of my own. No one could've known the weather would wreak havoc on the roads, that the coach wheel would need repairing, or that one of the horses would go lame. Though I'm not surprised, considering the poor beast had to pull the laden coach through thick snow."

Everything she said was true, but that didn't alleviate Aubriella's guilt.

Roxina marshaled a smile and changed the subject. "I bet Jack was fit to be tied when you won the wager."

"I should have known he never intended to honor it." Closing her eyes, Aubriella leaned her head back, the motion pushing her bonnet forward. This unforeseen delay gave her time to ponder her future and the *Ladies of Opportunity*.

And to think about Jack.

His handsome face had invaded her mind the second she'd lowered her eyelids.

When had her feelings transferred from irritation and annoyance to

something much warmer? Much more dangerous to her heart? She'd never had to guard herself against affection before, and perhaps that was why the wily emotion had sneaked up on her.

What she felt for Jack Matherfield most assuredly was not aggravation or exasperation.

But that didn't matter.

Not anymore.

Smelling the odiferous man before he spoke and swallowing a gag, she opened her eyes. He stood a mere two feet in front of her and Roxina. *Lord, above.* When was the last time he'd bathed or donned clean clothing?

A sloppy, drunken grin splitting his unwashed face and bits of food embedded in his crusty beard, he asked, "Would you pretty lad-dees care to join me an' me friend?" He veered his attention to his table where his eager chum regarded them with unconcealed lust. "We couldn't help but notice you 'aven't eaten. We'd be happy t' share our meal."

Hell would freeze over first.

"No, thank you, but your kindness is appreciated." Aubriella kept her tone coolly pleasant as she forced the insincere words past her lips. She fashioned a small smile. Who knew what might set this blighter off? "We're waiting for someone. They've been delayed." She waved her hand toward the dusty window. "The weather, you know."

Taking Aubriella's cue, Roxina nodded and squinted into the darkness beyond the dirty windowpane. Snow pelted the glass, which didn't portend well for an early morning departure. "Indeed. They should have arrived by now."

A sinister sneer replaced his buffoonish grin.

"There ain't no one meetin' you. You were on the mail coach." He loomed over them, hands fisted at his hips. "You think yer too good fer us, uppity wenches?"

Resisting the urge to lick her lower lip, Aubriella scanned the faces of the patrons, nearly all staring in her direction. Not a single person, including the innkeeper, could hold her gaze.

Cowards, the lot.

Heart pounding, Aubriella shrank against the wall as the brute reached for her. Unexpectedly, his eyes rounded in astonishment. He dropped his hand to his side, remaining motionless.

Jack stepped from behind his broad back, a pistol in one hand and a blade

pressed against the cur's bull-like neck. "She told you she was waiting for someone. We've arrived."

Standing in the center of the taproom, apparently not the least bothered that he pointed a pistol at the other infuriated sod, Shelby Telling, winked at the barmaid. "Be a love and bring a pot of tea, bread, cheese, and whatever else you have on hand that's fresh and vermin free."

He waved the pistol toward the other lout. "The Cowen brothers were just leaving, and we'll take their table."

How did Shelby know who they were?

The frazzled barmaid gave a cautious nod before disappearing into the kitchen.

Not a single patron moved, their focus fixated on the scene playing out before them.

"The 'ell we are." The miscreant half-rose, but Shelby pointed the gun at the bounder's face, and he slowly lowered himself into his chair again.

"Did I fail to mention my name.?" A lethal tone Aubriella had never heard laced his voice. "Telling. Shelby Telling."

The transformation in the men, including the blackguard Jack held at knifepoint, would've been comical if Aubriella could have drawn a breath to laugh. Truth be told, terror riveted her to the bench and stalled her breathing. On the other hand, her pulse raced faster than a horse competing in the Royal Ascot.

Evidently, the troublemakers knew something Aubriella did not, for they wasted no time tossing a few coins on the table and skulking from the inn.

Why had the men reacted the way they had to Shelby?

She slid a gaze to Roxina, staring at Shelby as if he had two heads from which sprouted four scarlet horns. Grinning, Shelby sank onto one of the newly vacated chairs and sent his flinty gaze around the common room. He waved a hand. "As you were."

The weary patrons went back to their activities, most behaving as if nothing remarkable had just occurred.

Jack didn't tear his gaze from the duo until the door closed. He crossed his arms and stared at Aubriella, his expression inscrutable. "We are going to warm ourselves and eat, ladies. Then we are leaving. The horses should have rested enough by then. Understood?"

Aubriella opened her mouth to argue, but the thunderous look in his hazel eyes made her snap her mouth shut. He extended his hands and helped them

up. He released Roxina as soon as she stood but held Aubriella immobile as Roxina crossed to the table and sat.

The serving wench returned with a laden platter. She placed a stretcher with sliced brown bread, cheese, and what appeared to be meat pies on the scarred tabletop. A teapot and chipped teacups followed.

Jack turned his back to the curious travelers. “You shall have the entire ride, seated before me on a horse, Aubrie, to explain your idiotic behavior.”

“I owe you no explanation, Jack.” He wasn’t her keeper, even if he had rescued her. “Besides, don’t you have *urgent* business in London that demands your attention?”

“I do, and that is why we are not returning to the Templetons but continuing to London tonight.” Jack flared his nostrils, and his cheekbones stood out as harshness contorted the planes of his face. “I am barely keeping my temper under control. You and Roxina were on the verge of being ravished. Your stupidity not only endangered you, but your friend. For once in your life, do not argue with me, or so help me God, I shall find an empty room and paddle your bottom.”

Aubriella couldn’t prevent her jaw from sagging.

How dare he?

Who did he think he was?

She wasn’t a child he could take to task and spank.

“You wouldn’t dare.” She tilted her chin in defiance. “Besides, there are no vacant rooms.”

He gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Do not push me, Aubriella. I am at the end of my tether.” His expression softened, and he caressed her cheek. “I was terrified for you, and I blamed myself for you leaving. If anything had happened to you...”

He closed his eyes, his features etched in agony—as if he truly cared.

For once, Aubriella didn’t have a cutting riposte. For as long as she lived, she’d remember his face at that moment. And when he opened his eyes, her soul quivered from the desolation shining there.

CHAPTER 16



Outside London
Three hours later
21 December

Jack glanced down at Aubriella, fast asleep in his arms. The snow had stopped half an hour after they departed the inn. Though teeth-cracking cold outside, the journey hadn't been as arduous as he'd expected. That was due, in part, to the Flemish horses Templeton had provided. Larger and stronger than typical horses, their endurance matched their big, gentle hearts.

Unnaturally subdued, Aubriella had eaten, and after he'd made arrangements for the mail coach drivers to deliver her and Miss Danforth's luggage, she'd meekly allowed Jack to lift her onto his mount. His gun at his waist, he climbed into the saddle, then wrapped them both in the extra blankets Templeton had sent.

Across the circular courtyard, Tellingier did the same with Miss Danforth.

Both women had fallen asleep within minutes, and more than once on the trek to London, he'd caught Tellingier watching Miss Danforth just as Jack observed Aubriella.

Were his feelings as transparent as Tellingier's?

Apparently, not to the women they loved, who disdained them at every turn.

In a few minutes, Jack would awaken Aubriella. He had things he needed to say and would have her word that she wouldn't pelt off again without telling him. Skimming his gaze over her winged eyebrows, the delicate flare of her sweet lips, and the slope of her cheeks, his heart swelled with love.

How could he not have known he loved her?

God above, when he'd entered the Boot and Crow and seen that behemoth looming over her, her face waxen and fraught with fright, Jack had wanted to kill the bloody cur. He'd also wanted to spank her for terrifying him by leaving without telling anyone and then kiss her tears away while begging her forgiveness for hurting her.

Instinct told him to tread cautiously when declaring himself to Aubriella. She probably wouldn't believe him. His heart ached for her. She'd erected such a wall of protection around herself that he'd have to use all his wit and skill to tear down the ramparts.

Truth be told, Jack wasn't certain he could, but by thunder, he'd try.

She stirred as if sensing he gazed at her, and her eyelids fluttered open. It was impossible to read her expression in the dark, but he thought a smile might've bent her mouth.

"How long have I slept?" She yawned delicately behind her hand.

"About two hours, I think." The fresh snow had made progress slow. He adjusted her on his lap so she sat more upright and gritted his teeth against the sensual onslaught the movement caused. "We are near London. You can see the lights in the distance. You should be home, tucked into your bed within the hour."

An owl hooted, breaking the night's stillness interrupted only by the plodding horses' footsteps.

"Thank you, Jack." Huskiness tinged her voice. "I don't know what..."

"Shh." *My darling.* "You are safe now." *And I intend that you always shall be.* Somehow, he must convince her of his love, and she must agree to marry him.

"Why did you come after me?" She cupped his jaw with her gloved hand, and his heart swelled to bursting.

He barely resisted the urge to turn his head and press his lips into her palm. On the verge of declaring himself, he swallowed his vows of adoration and love. When he told Aubriella of his love, it wouldn't be while freezing atop a horse in the middle of the night when he couldn't see her reaction.

Instead, he murmured, "With Emmet injured, I was the most logical person. Besides, I had to return to London. No sense disrupting the other house guests' revelries."

"Yes, I suppose you are right." She angled her face away, but Jack would've sworn disappointment leached into her voice. "I'm sorry to be an

inconvenience and to have detained you from your business.”



Stupid, senseless tears stung behind Aubriella’s eyes.

For a few timeless seconds, she’d thought Jack meant to say something entirely different. Lord, she’d wanted him to say something to convince her not to move to Aunt Astrid’s house. To persuade her that what Aubriella felt for him wasn’t one-sided—she wouldn’t live out her days alone and misunderstood. An oddity people whispered about behind hands and fans.

More fool her.

She craned her neck to see how Roxina fared.

Her friend still slept, slumped against Shelby’s chest.

Aubriella narrowed her eyes.

“How did Shelby know who the Cowen brothers were?” She didn’t bother facing Jack since it was impossible to see his face. His heat warmed her back, beckoning her to lean against his solid strength, and his ironlike arm across her waist comforted her.

Jack stiffened for an instant, then exhaling, he relaxed against her. “If I don’t tell you, you’ll simply ask him, won’t you?”

A reluctant grin tipped the corners of her mouth upward.

Jack knew her so well.

Better than anyone else, other than Roxina. “I shall.”

If only he could love her.

“There are many facets about Tellingier that he keeps private.” Jack’s thighs flexed beneath her bottom as the arm around her waist tightened minutely. “One of which is that he is a bounty hunter on occasion. A very good bounty hunter, and that is why the Cowens tucked their tails and fled. He’d likely seen their wanted posters. I’ve little doubt that he would have attempted to bring them in if you and Roxina hadn’t been present.”

“You don’t say?” Aubriella stretched her neck again to catch a glimpse of Shelby speaking in low tones to Roxina. “He doesn’t look like what I imagine a bounty hunter would look like. Not rough and burly and threatening.”

Jack chuckled, the warm resonance causing an answering peal in her heart. “It’s cliché, but appearances can be deceiving.”

“My da Vinci drawings are of human dissections.” Aubriella wasn’t sure why she blurted that secret to Jack. Perhaps to see his reaction. Mayhap because she wanted to share something so important with another person, and he was the only person who might understand her fascination with the human form.

Another chuckle vibrated his chest before he pulled her closer, and this time, she distinctly felt him nuzzle the back of her head through her bonnet.

A tiny seed of hope took root.

“You are the most fascinating, intriguing, remarkable, daring woman.”

She wrinkled her nose. Not the romantic declarations she yearned for. “I’m sure you meant those as compliments, Jack, but they make me sound like an eccentric old tabby.” She grinned at the image of herself, a wrinkled, bespeckled old prune hunched over naughty drawings. “Which I suppose I am.”

“An utterly delightful eccentric.” Amusement accented each syllable. “And assuredly *not* an old tabby.”

Jack had never disdained or disparaged her unusual interests.

The owl hooted again, or perchance it was another answering the first.

A cow, disturbed from her rest by their passing, mooed a low protest in the nearby field. The snow blanketing the fields and covering the houses like icing on pastries gave the landscape a fairytale-like appearance.

“You’ll need to pen a letter to your family to let them know you are all right,” Jack murmured in her ear, his warm breath causing a delicious little shiver to scuttle across her shoulders. “They were quite frantic.”

“That I find hard to believe.” Her sarcasm grated harshly in her ears. “That’s why I’m moving to the house my Aunt Astrid left me before they return. I’m tired of being an outsider—a misunderstood peculiarity—in my own home.”

That plan had not changed, despite the unexpected delay.

After resting for a few hours, Aubriella would pack her most cherished and necessary belongings. If Roxina still wanted to accompany her, they would depart before the sun dipped low on the horizon tomorrow.

“Promise me you won’t do anything until I call upon you.” Jack squeezed her ribs when she didn’t respond. “Please, Aubrie. I must check on the fire damage in one of my restaurants, but as soon as I have done so, I would like to speak with you about an important matter.”

Gasping, she gripped his forearm and twisted to look at him.

“Fire? Oh, Jack, that’s awful. Was anyone hurt?”

He hadn’t been trying to renege on their wager as she’d believed. Nevertheless, the tragedy gave him an excuse to do just that.

“No one was injured, thank God. But I have to evaluate the extent of the damage.” A yawn escaped him. He must be exhausted.

“I don’t think there is any reason for me to delay my plans to move, Jack.” Neck bent, Aubriella stared at the shadowy landscape. “I’ve known for a while that I needed to do something different. Get on with my life. Forge a path for myself.”

It didn’t matter that she didn’t know precisely what her future looked like. But that was fine. She could anticipate the journey.

“We can talk about that when I call.” Jack nudged her chin upward, forcing her to meet his eyes in the darkness. “Please promise me, Aubrie.”

She hunched a shoulder. “I’ll give you until tomorrow afternoon, though I doubt anything you have to say shall change my mind.”

Unless it includes a vow of undying love and a marriage proposal.

If only such a marvelous thing were possible.

However, that was as likely as Mitchel Danforth becoming a monk or Francine Willoughby becoming a nun. And Aubriella was too pragmatic to indulge in fanciful dreams that would only lead to a broken heart.

They’d entered the outskirts of London, and a scraggly cat darted across the street. The city’s familiar stench surrounded them like heavy fog. Traffic had rid most of the street of thick snow, though the pavement was slick in places, and dirty snow mounds paralleled the lane’s sides.

“You have my word, Aubrie. Before the sun sets tomorrow, I shall knock upon your door.”

The horse snorted and swished its long tail—poor beast. It was probably just as weary as they were.

She sighed and fiddled with the horse’s mane. “I release you from your obligation to pose for me, Jack. I never should’ve asked that of you.”

Why did it feel as if Aubriella were saying goodbye to him, even though she’d vowed to wait a day before leaving? The pain impaling her heart hitched her breath, and she blinked away a fresh wave of stinging tears.

Unrequited love did cleave one’s heart in two.

“I still want to know how you came by the information about Francine Willoughby.” No humor colored Jack’s words now. “I suspect I’ll not like the answer.”

“That’s why I shan’t tell you,” she quipped with far more light-heartedness than she felt.

He sighed, his breath tickling her neck.

“You still don’t trust me, Aubrie?”

How Aubriella wanted to, but she couldn’t.

Too much was at stake.

CHAPTER 17



Penfords' House
May Fair – London
Almost half five the next afternoon

Jack brushed a hand over his jacket pocket, where a pearl-cut engagement ring lay tucked inside a crimson velvet box. It had taken longer to conclude his business, follow up on Francine Willoughby, and shop for the ring than anticipated.

Nevertheless, the soft golden glow shining in the Penfords' windows eased the tension in his chest.

Aubriella had kept her word and waited for him.

After Jack's brisk double rap upon the door, Styles, the Penfords' diminutive butler, opened the door. Expression benign and his head barely reaching Jack's shoulder, he stepped aside with the grandeur of a prince. "Mr. Matherfield."

Jack entered, coming up short at the trunks and crates stacked in the foyer on the D'Aremberg patterned parquet floor.

Aubriella had been busy, it seemed.

"Miss Penford's, I presume?" Jack swept his hand toward the stacks.

Alarm mixed with trepidation assailed him.

At least Aubriella hadn't left already, but from the array filling the entry, she fully intended to. And this was no visit. She meant to move for good. That she'd been so unhappy she would leave the bosom of her family made his lungs cramp with empathy for her. She was of age. Legally, there was nothing anyone could do to stop her.

“Indeed, sir.” Styles nodded, his expression folding into concerned creases. “She is most determined to vacate the house today.” He darted a hasty glance down the corridor before stepping nearer. “I’ve taken the liberty of sending a message to her parents, but they won’t return in time to prevent her departure.”

If they returned.

Nonetheless, the Penfords’ sincere reactions two nights ago gave Jack hope they truly cared about Aubriella. Besides, the Penfords needn’t cut their holiday short if all went well. He and Aubriella would return to Stockworth Manor betrothed. There, they’d celebrate the most marvelous Christmas ever.

Jack cupped the butler’s thin shoulder. “I have something that I hope”—*pray*—“will change her mind. Is she in the drawing room or library?”

Quite naturally, she couldn’t receive him in her bedchamber.

Tipping his lips upward a fraction and amusement gleaming in his eyes, Styles said, “The library, sorting through books to take.”

Of course, she was.

“I know the way.” Going over his rehearsed speech one final time, Jack pivoted toward the stairs.

“Shall I request refreshments, Mr. Matherfield?”

Jack paused, then nodded. “Yes, please. Champagne if you have it.”

“*Champagne, sir?*” Styles’ considerably grizzled eyebrows crawled up his forehead and wriggled there like a pair of great hairy caterpillars in the throes of death. “That’s rather celebratory, is it not?”

“I intend to propose to the most remarkable woman alive.” Smiling like a giddy idiot, Jack patted his pocket. “Wish me luck.”

An unfettered grin split Styles’ face. “Champagne it is, and the best of good fortune to you. How long shall I wait?”

Likely, news of Jack’s intentions would spread throughout the house within minutes, and the servants would brazenly eavesdrop outside the library door.

“I shall ring for you.” Jack continued down the corridor, the confident click of his boot heels echoing with each step. How often had he walked this same path, but never for a reason as important as what brought him to Mayfair today?

He hadn’t even considered what he’d do if Aubriella said no to his proposal.

He wouldn't give up. That was for certain.

Persistence and patience.

That was how he'd win her over.

Outside the library, he took a calming breath and wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers.

My God, he'd never been so nervous in his life.

Peeking in the half-open door, he spied Aubriella sitting on the floor, piles of books surrounding her. She wore one of her *work* gowns, as she called them.

She could've worn a beggar's filthy and tattered rags and still would've been the most beautiful woman on earth to him. Her expression a mélange of desolation and resignation, she gazed out the window where the winter breeze caressed a barren dogwood's branches.

Jack slipped into the room, drinking her in. This woman managed to set up house in his heart, and he couldn't fathom a future without her now.

"Aubrie?"

"The sun set over an hour and a half ago." She didn't turn around. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I'm sorry I'm late. Things just took longer than I anticipated." Yielding to the urgency thrumming through him to be near her, Jack crossed the room, kneeled on one knee, and touched her shoulder.

"Why are you here, Jack?"

She still didn't look at him.

Unease scraped along his spine, but he shrugged it off.

After shoving a stack of books aside, Jack lowered himself to the floor and grazed a finger down her velvety cheek. "Won't you look at me?"

Sighing, she finally met his gaze.

He gave her a tender smile filled with all the love he held for her. "I told you I had something important to discuss with you, darling."

Her gorgeous hazel-green eyes widened at the endearment, and her pretty mouth parted in surprise. Jack's heart soared heavenward at her unconcealed pleasure. Nevertheless, in typical Aubriella fashion, she composed herself in the next blink.

"What is this important matter?" She waved a hand toward the books. "I'm almost done here. I'd intended to leave tonight..."

But she'd waited. For him.

She didn't need to say it.

Her soft, adoring gaze revealed the truth.

“I love you, Aubriella.”

The crackling, spitting fire emphasized the pregnant silence that descended in the room. Several seconds crept by with infinite slowness.

“*What?*” she finally asked breathlessly before skepticism created two lines on her forehead, and bleakness replaced the light in her eyes. “Ah, I see. Back to your old mocking tricks again? I thought we’d put that behind us. More fool me.”

“Not a bit of it.” Jack took Aubriella’s hand and pressed his mouth to her smooth wrist. Her pulse beat a frenetic staccato beneath the skin.

“I adore you, Aubrie. I have loved you for so long. But fool that I am, I didn’t realize what I felt was love. I just knew I was happiest when I was with you. You made me smile and brought joy and excitement into my life whenever I was near you.”

So much for rehearsed, romantic speeches.

“I thought you felt sorry for me, and that was the only reason you spent time with me.” A tremulous, nascent smile bent her mouth.

He cradled her hand in his—no sense lying.

“I did pity you at times. But when you left the Templetons in the snow, I was so afraid for you. It struck me then that what I felt for you was soul-shattering love.” He quirked his mouth into a boyish grin. “And I hope that you love me, too. Just a little.”

“I do.” She laughed, a watery joy-filled warble, and swiped away the lone crystalline tear trailing down her cheek. “I tried to convince myself it was annoyance and irritation, but I finally had to admit I loved you.”

Thank God. For a moment there...

Aubriella, who never wept, brushed away another teardrop. “I didn’t dare hope that you felt the same, and it nearly killed me to think you’d fathered Francine’s child.”

“Impossible.” If Aubriella was to be his wife, she should know everything about him. “The truth is, I’ve never been with a woman. My love, I’ve never wanted to be intimate with anyone except for you.”

A tiny gasp escaped her before a radiant smile lit her face. “*Never?* But you’re so handsome, and the way women flock to you.” She lifted her shoulder an inch. “I assumed you were a man of the world.”

Jack shook his head.

“It’s not something I speak of, but the woman I intend to marry should

know the truth.” Nerves turned his fingers to jelly, and he fumbled in his pocket, finally grasping the ring box. After extracting the velvety square, he opened the lid and held the twinkling jewel before her.

“Marry me, my darling, Aubrie. You can study the human form as much as you like. I’ll buy you copies of every rendering da Vinci ever drew and as many books on anatomy as your heart can stand.” He wagged his eyebrows and gave her a devilish grin. “Other less respectable books and drawings might interest you too, and I’d be happy to pose for you sans my clothing.”

She released an unfettered giggle, an adorable hint of pink appearing on her cheeks. “My heart doesn’t need those things anymore. It has you to fill it now, though I fully intend to draw you, but not naked. Someone might see the sketches, and your body is for my enjoyment alone.”

“Indeed.” Desire sparked, causing a predictable physical reaction to the unintended erotic images she aroused.

Aubriella lifted the ring from its velvet mooring and slipped it on her finger.

“It’s gorgeous,” she murmured in awe. “Almost exactly like one I described to Roxina many years ago when we were still in finishing school and visiting Mabel and George for Christmas.”

Jack had been there.

She lifted her mist-eyed gaze to his. “How did you know?”

“I overheard you.” Jack pulled Aubriella onto his lap, and she let out a tiny yelp of surprise before settling into his chest like a contented kitten. “Even all those years ago, my heart knew what my mind did not. You are my soulmate.”

Eyes glistening, she lifted her mouth to his.

“Kiss me, Jack.”

The scintillating sexual current between them, since he’d entered the library, erupted into a full-blown conflagration at her bidding.

Ravenous, he plundered her mouth, stroking her tongue with his even as he caressed her rounded curves. Clutching his shoulders, Aubriella moaned into his mouth. The sound caused a primitive animalistic growl deep in his throat. Several passionate minutes passed in which he laid her on the floor and covered her body with his, showing her with his mouth how much he loved her.

A sneeze followed by frenetic whispering made him lift his head from nuzzling her delectable bosom.

Quirking an eyebrow, he jerked his chin toward the closed door and whispered, "I think we have eavesdroppers. I might've told Styles I intended to propose and asked him to bring us champagne."

Her eyes flew open and locked with his before veering toward the paneled door. "The servants? Oh, dear."

She slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles.

Of course, she wouldn't blush from embarrassment.

This was Aubriella, after all.

Jack scooted into a sitting position and then stood. He helped her to her feet, and she tried to tidy her hopelessly mussed hair.

"When you are ready, I'd like to hear about your *secret* enterprise." Jack caressed her cheek. "I suspect Roxina and your other friends are also involved."

"Oh, Jack." Aubriella bit her lower lip, her indecision and apprehension apparent. "If we are to wed, I cannot keep secrets from you." Sighing, she shook her head. "Similar to men's betting books, we hold the bank for bets placed by women. It's to supplement their income, or in some cases, it is their only financial provision."

"A *betting book*?" Jack couldn't keep the astonishment from his voice. "For women?"

She gave a cautious nod. "We have strict rules about what wagers we accept, who we accept them from, and how the funds are dispersed." She laid her palm against his chest. "For some women like Roxina, they have no other source of income, Jack."

He blew out a breath. Aubriella and her friends ran a gambling ring. "I shan't forbid you to continue with your venture, but I would like to have a discussion and learn the details."

"Of course." Relief washed over her features. "You'd be amazed at our clients and the things I've learned."

"I'm sure I would be." Not entirely happy with this turn of event, Jack set his concerns aside for now. There'd be plenty of time to examine the situation later. He'd just become affianced, and nothing would ruin this occasion.

"Shall we invite the servants in and share our good news?" He encircled her waist and drew her close, speaking into her hair.

"I suppose we must." She tilted her head to look up at him. "Then I want to discuss how quickly we can marry. I quite like that kissing business, and I

know there's much more to lovemaking."

"Is my future wife a wanton?" Jack chuckled as he angled them toward the door. "I certainly hope so."

"Perhaps." Aubriella gave him a seductress's smile. "I cannot wait to find out."

EPILOGUE



*Stockworth Manor ballroom
Westerham, England
24 December 1818*

As the orchestra played the final notes of a minuet, Aubriella extended her hand for inspection the umpteenth time this evening. She and Jack had arrived at Stockworth Manor last night, and news of their betrothal had swept through the guests the next day.

For once, Aubriella could smile proudly and confidently.

A starry-eyed teenager, she'd dreamed of a pear-shaped diamond surrounded by a rectangular halo of smaller diamonds. Jack had found her that ring.

As Cousin Mabel examined the glittering ring, she fairly beamed as if she'd personally arranged the match between her niece and Jack. "Well done, my dear. Jackson Matherfield is quite the catch and not hard on the eyes either. I've always known there was a special spark between you two. A wonder it took so long for you to realize it."

Now that Aubriella admitted her love for Jack, she could scarcely believe she'd been blind for so long either. As if compelled by an unseen force that prevented her from exercising her will, she searched the ballroom for her future husband.

Her gaze locked with Jack's across the room, and he kicked his mouth into a mischievous smile as he caressed her with his smoldering gaze.

They'd agreed on a short betrothal and planned to wed in the middle of January.

“It is too bad Miss Danforth and Mr. Tellingier did not return for the festivities,” Mabel said a bit too offhandedly. “After all these years, it doesn’t seem the same without them or our annual skit. But I didn’t see how I could continue with preparations for the performance without Miss Danforth’s assistance.”

Her cousin’s gentle gaze didn’t deceive Aubriella.

She was dying to know why, but the secrets weren’t for Aubriella to tell.

Roxina had accepted Aubriella’s offer to live in Aunt Astrid’s house—now Aubriella’s. Shelby Tellingier vowed he must locate Mitchel Danforth and arrange to sell the Danforths’ house. Jack revealed Shelby might need to disappear for a time for his safety. At least until the debt with the loan sharks had been satisfied.

“Cannot say the same about the Willoughbys, though.” A displeased expression pinched Mabel’s mouth, and she pursed her lips. “Never could abide them, but I always extended an invitation for dear George’s sake. They left without so much as a by your leave.” She huffed out an exasperated breath. “Rest assured. I’ll not invite them next year.”

According to Jack, Francine had managed to snare herself a doddering, one-foot-in-the-grave vicar and was to exchange wedding vows the day after Christmas. A crony of her father’s, Reverend Balthazar Digby, had agreed to wed the chit and claim the child as his, though no one with an iota of common sense would believe the farcical tale.

The substantial purse and annual allowance offered as an enticement likely sealed the deal. The good reverend had a penchant for gambling and hadn’t two coins to rub together.

The promise of an annual income must’ve been too much to resist for a man of the cloth about to retire to resist. Now that Digby was guaranteed a comfortable dotage, although, with Francine for a wife, he’d probably be claiming several by-blows as his progeny.

Aubriella hadn’t asked Jack how he’d come by that information. She’d bet Shelby had something to do with it, however.

Lady Lovegrove must be quite pleased. Not only would she be spared her noxious niece’s daily company, she’d won a tidy purse as a result of her wager.

Smiling, Mabel fluttered her fingers toward Winnie Cavender across the room, one of the four unknown siblings Aubriella had first seen at breakfast a few mornings ago. “The Cavenders seem to have fit into our little troupe,

haven't they?"

"They have," Aubriella responded automatically, for she observed Jack's progress in her direction beneath her lashes.

The orchestra had struck up a waltz. In all the years she'd known Jack, she'd never danced with him. It didn't matter any longer that she'd probably trod upon his toes and miss a step. As long as he held her in his arms, she was content.

"Excuse me. I see a muddle about to occur." Cousin Mabel squeezed Aubriella's forearm. She trotted off, shooing people out of her way as she sailed forth, as only Mabel could do.

"There you are, dearest." Mama swooped in and kissed Aubriella's cheek. "You're so lovely this evening." Mama gave an approving nod. "I knew that blue would suit you."

Papa pecked her cheek as well. "Enjoying yourself, my pet?"

His use of Aubriella's childhood pet name caused a lump to form in her throat.

Never in memory had her parents been this attentive.

"How could I not?" The ice-blue satin gown trimmed in silver ribbons and its silver-lace overskirt adorned with hundreds of crystals sparkled like a star in the midnight sky. And for the first time at a gathering, Aubriella felt beautiful. "I'm to marry Jack in three weeks."

Emmet, walking better but still using his cane, limped to her side. "I cannot be happier at your news, dear sister. I know no finer man than Jack Matherfield and welcome him as a brother."

To a person, the Penford family was exuberant that Aubriella and Jack would soon march down the aisle. She couldn't quite decide if that was because she'd finally found a husband, or if they were genuinely happy for her. Given the dramatic turnabout in their mannerism and behavior since she'd arrived, she chose to believe the latter.

Jack stopped before her and, with that wicked grin she'd come to know meant he entertained thoughts only a soon-to-be-husband was permitted, grasped her fingers and lifted them to his mouth.

After kissing the back of her hand, he tucked it into the crook of his arm. "Please tell me this dance isn't claimed."

She nearly swatted him.

Not so much had changed that suitors had filled Aubriella's dance card. "I believe I have this dance free."

Jack gave her parents and Emmet a smart bow. “If you’ll permit me to abscond with my fiancée?”

“By all means, Jack. Mrs. Penford, might I persuade you to take to the floor?” Papa wrapped an arm around Mama’s waist and urged her forward, too.

Mama blushed like a schoolgirl before acquiescing.

“I don’t dance well, Jack.” Aubriella apologized as they took their positions.

She curtsied, and he bowed.

“That’s because you’ve never had the right partner, my darling Aubrie.”

“Or because I have two left feet, each of which is weighted with dried cement,” she responded drolly.

Bless Jack for his optimism. Particularly since a mere fortnight ago, he was the most cynical man she knew.

Had love changed him, too?

He swept her into his arms and whisked her across the dance floor. “When you let love guide you, my sweet, nothing else matters.”

Then he lowered his mouth to hers, and nothing else did matter.

THE END

Thank you for reading *A Yuletide Toss of the Dice* by Collette Cameron!

This was a novella to Collette’s band new *Ladies of Opportunity Series* which will be coming in 2024.

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THE HEIRESS WHO DARED
ME

A DEBUTANTE DARES NOVELLA

CHARLIE LANE



The Heiress Who Dared Me by Charlie Lane

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A London heiress with a tart tongue. A country steward too busy for marriage. A dare like a kiss—surprising and dangerous.

Lady Georgiana Hunt, the ton's tartest heiress, loves cake and London but hates fortune hunters. Unfortunately, they love her. Or her money. They swarm like gnats until an unlikely partnership with her friend's brother-in-law sends them scattering. A fake courtship with the smoldering Josiah Evens, who is rarely in London, frees her from unwanted suitors without stealing her independence. But with no more suitors to fend off and an absentee fake betrothed, independence feels rather ... lonely.

Josiah Evans, the ton's most cheerful steward, loves cake and the country and has no time to marry. He's too busy bringing the life and joy missing since his mother's death back to his father's estate. But he can't resist a lady in need, especially the haughty and bold Lady Georgiana. He can find time to punch a fortune hunter or two during his infrequent trips to London if it makes her smile. And if that smile makes him wish for life outside of work, he'll... ignore it.

When a dare brings Georgian where she swore to never tread—a Christmas house party *in the country*—she must dodge mud and merry making. And help Josiah fend off a devilishly daring debutante with marriage on her mind. Two dares, uncountable kisses, and one snowed in midnight later, these independent opposites face a greater problem—falling in love.

PROLOGUE



June 1820

Wedding breakfast of Viscount Flint and his new wife, London

*“Men only have one thing on their minds, and it’s not cake.” –from
The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady*

From across the crowded room at his brother’s wedding breakfast, Mr. Josiah Evans watched the heiress eat cake. He should not be watching her. That much he knew. Watching a woman eat cake simply felt... well, inappropriate at best, sinful at worst. Lips, tongue, fingers, sugar.

Damn.

The heiress eating cake should not have proved such a tempting image. With her grim mouth and hard eyes, she was not the sort of woman a fellow like Josiah watched. He much preferred women with sultry merriment in their eyes and seductive whispers on their lips.

No, the heiress was neither sultry nor merry, yet he could not look away from her. Not because Lady Georgiana Hunt was beautiful. Objectively, it could not be denied. Tall, statuesque, every curve exactly where fashion dictated it should be. Perhaps a little rounder than fashionable about the bust. She dressed elegantly so likely no one noticed. It was exactly the type of thing Josiah noticed, though. Couldn’t help it. Her hair was abundant and honey colored. The best kind of color, really. It streaked toward amber in the

candlelight and toward golden in the sunshine. Dark eyes, too, of some indeterminate shade between brown and black. But one did not have to know their exact color to know she was beautiful. Objective observation, that. And not why he watched her.

He watched her because for a fraction of a second, right after the fork slipped between her lips, that mouth transformed, softened, the corners tipping up. And in that fraction of a second—*hell*—he couldn't look away if the King ordered him to.

Was the cake *that* delicious? He had to know. He tore his gaze from her and found the cake along with the footman with the knife and plates, and he took a piece. He dug in, bringing the fork to his lips as he turned from the table and—"Ack!" He almost dropped the plate, cake, and all.

The heiress stood before him with her plate held firmly in her hands before her like a shield held horizontally. "You have been watching me all morning."

"Have I?"

"I demand you stop."

"Do you?"

Lady Georgiana pointed her fork at him. "Just because you are the brother of the groom and the new brother-in-law to my dearest friend does not mean I'll tolerate your antics."

He grinned, his fork still hovering. "Antics?"

"I do not tolerate fortune hunters—or fools, either."

"What else, or whom else, do you not tolerate?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Those who think they're clever. And. Are. Not."

"My. My, my, my." He parted his lips as he finally rested the cake on his tongue and hell—all the sugar of heaven exploded on his taste buds, just the perfect amount of lemon tartness, too. "That *is* good." He talked around the cake. "I hadn't planned on having any, but after watching you eat it up like it was some damn erotic delight—"

She gasped.

"I had to try." He took another bite, chewed, swallowed, and stabbed the cake once more. This time, he held it out to her. "Care for a bite of mine?" If looking at heiresses eating cake was unpardonable, offering to feed them was... well, he'd likely end up in the corner of hell reserved for rakes, no doubt. He took another bite of the damn delicious cake and winked at her, accepting his eternal fate.

Lady Georgiana's face turned to brittle glass. Then it shattered with a laugh, revealing something softer beneath the mask—rosy skin and real warmth. Huh. Perhaps this was why his brother Xavier's new wife, Sarah, liked this stony woman. She had a different self, hidden leagues beneath the guise she showed the world. He wanted to dig further, discover more. He shook the impulse away, though, because he had no time for such explorations. He was a new man with real purpose in life. Finally. He itched to leave London, actually. He'd only begun to learn the accounts at Apple Grove House, and he never would if he kept being pulled away because of family matters.

He flashed a look at the newly wedded couple—his older brother and the heiress's close friend, easy in each other's company, exchanging little touches—and felt the corner of his mouth lift. He didn't mind these little family events too much. Mother would, were she alive, have been beaming with pride, brimming with happiness. That made these delays in his work bearable.

So, apparently, did the sight of heiresses eating cake.

He pointed at her plate. "Go along. Finish it up. You know you want to."

She stopped laughing, sniffed, but cleaned the plate, and this time, she did not hide the smile that bloomed with each bite. Once empty of all but the tiniest crumbs, she placed the plate on the table and tilted her head, considering him.

"Well," he said, "After that study of my person, what is your estimation?"

She snatched a glass of bubbling champagne from beside the cake table. "I've heard about you."

"All good things, I hope."

She snorted. "All... carnal things. Things a bit naughty. Sarah says you've quite quit the *ton* to be your brother's steward."

"I shall be *managing* one of the family properties." Finally. What he'd always wanted. He'd been destined for the church from birth but had refused to make a testimonial to the bishop. At which point, his father had wanted to purchase him a commission. Only a strategic conversation with his dear papa, about all the reasons he should be allowed another year or two or three to cut a roguish swath of pleasure through the London ladies, had forestalled that violent direction of his life. His father celebrated all *gentlemanly* pursuits, including bedroom ones, and the old man had chuckled, slapped Josiah on the back, and agreed to a delay. And Josiah had enjoyed himself until Xavier had

saved him, supporting his management of the estates so strongly, so their father had been forced to back down and drop the prospect of a military career for Josiah.

Older brothers were good for something, it seemed.

“Well?” She stabbed her fork toward him. “What have you to say for yourself?”

“Only that one day I plan to manage all my brother’s estates. Better than anyone else could, mind you. He lifted his brows and squared his shoulders, waiting for the disapproving lecture sure to come.

But it never did. She gave a slight nod, a soft display of approval instead. “Fascinating. How, though, if you live in the country all your days, do you—*ahem*—make merry, as I’ve heard you’re wont to do?”

Damn, but she was brazen. To speak of such things in a room inhabited by so many people. And her a virgin. Presumably. Perhaps she’d had too much to drink. Not that he disapproved. Her conversation bubbled through his veins like the champagne that likely loosened her tongue and conversational judgment.

He sighed, a dramatic heft of a sound. “It is difficult. Every day of denial is a blow to my immense control.”

She narrowed her eyes. “But you do not seem as if you are struggling with the desire to toss me on the nearest settee and have your wicked way with me in front of all the wedding guests.”

“I prefer to have my wicked way in private.” Not a wink this time. A smolder.

Her lips parted slightly, as if his words had surprised her. “If you were not a man, I’d make a friend of you. Do you know how difficult it is to get plain speaking from men? From women, too, really. In truth, it does not seem to be a trait many possess. You do. I like that.”

He leaned close, lowered his voice. “You mean men do not discuss erotic delights with you at Almack’s?”

“I’m lucky if they discuss the weather. Men are fools.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“The Dowager Countess of Linborough, my aunt. She often says it. Always has. And I’ve learned it well through my own experiences.”

“Yes, well, how can I argue with two such experts on the topic? Men *are* fools. And you do not tolerate those. Yes, I remember. Hm. A man-hater, are you?”

“Most decidedly.”

“Then we cannot be friends. I’m sure it’s for the best.”

“Assuredly.”

But they grinned at each other. Fools, indeed.



March 1821

Christening of Viscount and Viscountess Flint’s daughter, London

Josiah held the soft, newly christened bundle of baby to his shoulder and watched Lady Georgiana dart about the room. A mouse cornered by a tomcat. The cat? Josiah didn’t know his name, but he knew what the man was. A fortune hunter. A foolish one at that, one who did not know the mouse he cornered was actually one of those big cats, sleek and dangerous, that lived in jungles. No tame British puss, Lady Georgiana Hunt.

Lady Georgiana whirled around with narrowed eyes and hands fisting her skirts. Nowhere else to go, trapped between a precariously thin table with a large urn atop it, the wall, and an ever-approaching scoundrel.

Josiah growled. He hated seeing any woman trapped. Boiled his insides. But more, if Lady Georgiana let her lethal claws slash out, little Bea’s christening party might be ruined. Xavier, the proud papa, would be enraged. Sarah, the doting mama, would be saddened, and Lady Georgiana would feel guilty for mauling a guest on such an occasion. None of it good. He could save them all from that future. So he rubbed little Bea’s backside, nuzzled the thatch of wispy red hair protruding from the front of the lacy cap covering her head, and strode across the room. Perhaps he should hand her off to someone not stalking prey, but he’d only just gotten hold of her, and she’d only just fallen asleep. He’d not let a scoundrel ruin her nap. Or Josiah’s cuddles.

Lady Georgiana saw them coming, and her shoulders relaxed. Her hands fell out of their fists.

Josiah tapped the other man on the shoulder. “Who are you?”

The man swung around and tilted his head back. “I am Mr. Hobbes, your brother Crawford’s chum.”

Ah. No wonder. Crawford *would* invite a scoundrel.

“Perhaps then,” Josiah said, “you should seek out conversation with my brother. *I* should have a conversation with my brother.” Only family, Sarah had said, was to be invited. And friends as good as family. Not Mr. Hobbes.

Mr. Hobbes scowled, casting a glance at Lady Georgiana. “I’ve no reason to abandon my conversation with the lovely Lady—”

“But she seems to want to abandon conversation with you.” Josiah gave the man the type of stare he usually reserved for business dealings and drunken tenants who thought they could harm those weaker than themselves.

“Mr. Evans.” Lady Georgiana’s gaze had shifted from relief to irritation like a cold snap at the end of autumn. “I do not require others to speak for me.”

Mr. Hobbes pressed closer to Lady Georgiana. “And I was not done with our discussion.”

Her shoulders stiffened again, becoming the stout, broken branches of an old oak tree. “I was.”

“I don’t think you know your own mind, my lady,” Mr. Hobbes said, oil dripping from every word.

Lord. She’d punch him.

“What would be palatable to me, Mr. Hobbes,” she said, without punching him, “is the immediate removal of your person from my presence.”

That Josiah could do. Happily.

“That’s our cue.” Josiah gently tapped the nose hidden in the bundled blankets he bounced in his arms. “Time to intervene.”

“We do not need your interference,” Mr. Hobbes insisted, casting a glare over his shoulder.

“Not your decision to make, Mr. Hobbes. And *shhh*.” Josiah glared. “You’ll wake little Beatrice.”

The other man set his jaw. “Lady Georgiana, I would like permission to call on you tomorrow.”

“No.” A rejection like a slammed door.

“I’ll not be discouraged.”

“Is this fellow serious?” Josiah asked Beatrice. He sighed. Time to employ a cannon blast. He held the baby tight to his shoulder with one hand and stepped between Mr. Hobbes and Lady Georgiana. They had been so close that stepping between them put Josiah’s back a breath away from her front. Where her hands fluttered at her belly, they also fluttered at his spine,

occasionally touching, sending tendrils of sensation through him he stoutly ignored. Such an innocent touch. Likely only roused him because he'd been oddly chaste the last few months. No time or energy for mistresses while running Apple Grove.

Her fingertips lightly rested on his shoulder. "I do not need a protector, Mr. Evans."

"And yet you have one." He barely kept the growl from his voice. He stepped to the side and back until he stood shoulder to shoulder with her. He angled a smile at her and her alone, the tingle of her touch still zipping through his body. "I take particular offense at any man's pursuit of this woman."

She paled, then blushed, her eyelids fluttering as her gaze darted about, landing anywhere, it seemed, but on him. He'd never seen her blush before, this ice statue of a woman. It didn't melt her, but it melted something in him.

Mr. Hobbes cleared his throat, but she did not look away from Josiah, and that felt like victory. Better. Mr. Hobbes made another such noise.

"Are you parched, Hobbes?" Josiah asked, never looking from her. "There's wine about. Champagne, too. Go get some."

"Blast," Mr. Hobbes said, but he turned and left.

Lady Georgiana cocked her head to the side and studied him. "I believe you just insinuated you have an interest in me, Mr. Evans."

"I'm afraid so."

"People might think you're courting me."

"Let them. Perhaps they'll leave you alone, then." He pulled the baby from his shoulder to cradle her in his arms.

"You're willing to make such sacrifices?"

"I've no plans to marry."

"Hollow words from a man who speaks them while grinning into a baby's face."

"I've no time to take a wife or set up a nursery."

"Ah. The steward—ah. Apologies. I mean, *estate manager* business." She grinned, a tiny fledgling thing. "Not all men, I see, are pigs."

Josiah shrugged. "Give me time. I'll oink soon enough."

She grunted a laugh and looked into the bundle of blankets. "Hello, Bea. Thank you as well. We women must look out for one another."

A true statement that needed amendment as well. She clearly needed someone, anyone, to look out for her. He'd never once seen her aunt, and she

seemed to have no men folk to protect her. A damn shame. A crime.

“You could marry, Lady Georgiana. Then those fortune hunters have no prey.” And she’d have a husband to keep her safe.

“I’ve often considered the idea. It’s a sound one, of course. Logical. The problem is finding a man who isn’t after my fortune and who is...” She looked away from him, a blush stealing over her cheeks again. “Acceptable to look at. Mr. Hobbes is handsome.”

He scowled.

She cringed. “Still... something about him makes me shiver a bit. And not in a good way. Aunt Prudence always says if my gut makes me question a man, it’s not indigestion.”

He relaxed and gave baby Beatrice a little squeeze. “Excellent advice. But —”

“She’s ill.”

How to respond to such an abrupt statement? “I am sorry. I’m sure she’ll recover.”

“Mm. She’s approaching eighty.” She waved her hand and snapped her head to the side, her gaze roaming across the crowd. “Tis no worry. As you say, she’ll recover. And I’ll not marry.”

An independent woman like her would not be easily swayed. Yet the thought of her alone, no one to protect her, rippled goosebumps across his skin. Who would fight off those fortune hunters? She clearly needed a husband. Or something like. A champion perhaps.

“Make use of me.”

She raised a brow. “And what does that mean? Do not think I’m unaware of the inappropriate innuendo in those words?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “I’ve already insinuated we have an understanding, so you should make use of it. Let the idea linger in everyone’s minds. They’ll leave you alone soon enough. Won’t be a lie either. We *will* have an understanding. Just not the one everyone assumes.”

“An understanding.” She chewed the word over thoughtfully. “An understanding that neither of us will ever wed, but—”

“We’ll hint to everyone that we mean to marry one another.”

She stiffened. “I do so dislike being interrupted, Mr. Evans.”

“But do you like fortune hunters? You can be rid of them if we have—”

“An understanding. Hm. What do *you* gain?”

“You are in luck that I do not mind being interrupted, as you do, Lady

Georgiana. What do I gain? Nothing really. But I lose nothing from it either.”

“You’re too busy for a wife. Yes. I remember.”

“And there is another benefit for you. I will be at Apple Grove most of the time. When I’m in Town for some reason, I’ll pay you a visit, walk with you in Hyde Park, shape the illusion. But otherwise, you are free to do as you please. With the protection of our implied courtship. I can even cast a few menacing looks at other men when necessary.”

“It’s not a horrid idea. Very well then.” She nodded at Josiah’s shoulder. “Bea is drooling on you.”

Josiah held a finger to his lips and made a shushing sound. “She’s asleep.”

“No one will believe we’re interested in one another. We’ve nothing in common. You’re running an estate and prefer the country.”

“And you’re an heiress with a taste for London life. But”—he grinned—“I do like cake.”

She grinned back. “And I like babies.”

“A perfect friendship, then. A perfect partnership.” The words felt true. The words felt right. Easy enough to let the world think he wooed Lady Georgiana and be able to protect her from fortune hunters in the process. His mother, God rest her soul, would approve.

They bent their heads together over Beatrice and cooed.

CHAPTER ONE



*December 22, 1821
Apple Grove House*

*“No true lady enjoys the country. Pigs reside there. And I don’t mean men. But yes, them, too.” –from *The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady**

A death and a dare had brought Lady Georgiana Hunt to a place she’d never thought to go—a Christmas house party. She’d loved the yuletide as a girl—the fires, the dancing, the laughter—but her girlhood and her love had died long ago. Now she knew the holiday for the inconvenience it truly was. Pretending to be jolly, talking to family and friends who had no interest in you.

Outside, the air looked fresh and clear, and an apple grove fanned out in rows by the house. Green, rolling lawns and a lake in the distance, frozen under the white winter sky. So very different from London. So much space. No corners to hide in.

She looked away from the window, the soft pink brocade curtains brushing her arm, and down at the letter that had arrived in London but a week ago.

Georgie,

As you well know, I'm hosting a Christmas house party. As I well know, you've refused to attend. However, considering you are out of mourning, I think you should.

I dare you.

Kindest regards,

Sarah

A direct dare. Sarah had known she'd not be able to resist. Her addiction to a challenge, her pride—the only reason she was here. It had nothing to do with the lack of challenge in the city now that her fortune hunter problem had been solved. Nothing to do with the silence of an empty townhouse either, void of the family she'd invited for Christmas, the family who had turned down her invitation with a few words in a cold note. Nothing to do with the unexpected loneliness landing like a brick to the head. Not at all.

A knock on the door.

“Come in.” Georgiana paced to the mirror to pat her hair. All neat and in place.

“All changed, I see.” Sarah Evans, Viscountess Flint strode in, her red hair wispy and falling out of its coiffure. “And looking fresh even after hours of travel from London. You always look fresh, even straight out of musty coaches.” She plopped on the bed with a sigh. “I tend toward hoyden at all times.”

“You look lovely,” Georgiana assured her. A truth. Her friend had a welcoming smile and a happy light in her eyes. She wore the kindness of her heart in her face.

“You came. I was not sure if you would.” Sarah's eyes glittered.

Georgiana snorted. “You doubt my courage? My daring?”

“You know I do not.” Her fingers tracing the design on the coverlet, Sarah let each word drop slowly and thoughtfully into the air. “I was merely unsure if you would dare yourself to defy me. A counter dare if you will.”

“Defy the Dare Queen? Even I am not that brave.” Sarah had caused a scandal with her dares before marrying Xavier, pushing herself to more dangerous actions in order to raise funds for a hospital. Georgiana’s current dare exceeded all of those, offering true terror. Carols? Winter revelry? Mistletoe? She shivered. “A house party, Sarah? At Christmas? You know I am not made for such things.”

“I do. Which is why I dared you. You’ve been so secluded since your aunt’s death. It’s not good for you. You need a challenge. Surviving something you dislike is certainly that.”

“Editing my aunt’s memories is challenging enough, thank you very much.” Georgiana eyed her traveling trunk. Inside sat the manuscript her aunt had worked on for the last decade of her life, the manuscript she’d willed to Georgiana, tasking her with preparing it for publication.

It was always a task with Aunt Prudence. She’d never spoken to Georgiana without some lesson on her lips—men are foolish, women who fall for men are worse, trust few and never anyone with extra equipment between his legs. Every day a lecture since the moment Georgiana had moved into the woman’s house. Until she’d learned them well enough to earn her aunt’s approval. Then Georgiana had been left so much to her own devices that they’d rarely seen one another. Aunt Prudence had always valued independence above all else. It had been Georgiana’s reward for learning so well.

Georgiana strode to her traveling trunk, opened it, found the manuscript, and put it into Sarah’s hands. “There’s already an interested publisher. The man who publishes Lady Escher’s books.”

Sarah held the pages with gentle fingers, almost as if she did not wish to touch the document. Her nose wrinkled. “It smells a bit of cheroots.”

“Aunt Prudence enjoyed them.”

“The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Woman,” Sarah read. “Quite the title.”

“Indeed. It includes all the maxims she raised me with.” And that Georgiana’s own experience had proved true. “Do not trust men. Said in a variety of different ways. As well as a very vivid account of all her liaisons. The book will cause quite the stir.”

“She hated men but...” Sarah flushed. “But she did not mind...”

“Sleeping with them? No, apparently not. She considered physical pleasure the one useful skill a man could cultivate, but she found men who had cultivated it, sadly, in short supply. When she found one, she, erm, clung.”

“I see. Why task you with this job?” Sarah stood and laid the pages gingerly on a small writing desk beneath the window.

Georgiana shrugged. “I am her heiress in every way. I inherited her money, her houses, and her philosophies.” The truth of the world is what she’d inherited—men were useless and often cruel, and a woman should prize independence above all else. It was a gem rarely given to women. Georgiana had learned to covet it, hoard it early on.

“I do not think you should listen to her philosophies. I’ve never thought you should.”

“Fortune hunter after fortune hunter, as well as my own father and Aunt Prudence’s husband, have taught me the truth of her words.” Georgiana’s father, the Earl of Hatchetford, had long suffered a gambling problem, so had given nine-year-old Georgiana to his eccentric, widowed, childless sister in exchange for money. Aunt Prudence had wanted an heiress, had insisted on raising one herself. Georgiana shouldn’t despise her father as she did. But every time their paths had crossed on London streets, every time one of her younger siblings stared at her from across a park with a blank, unknowing look in their eyes, she hated him quite excessively. And now that they’d rejected her invitation and failed to offer one of their own to the familial festivities at her father’s country seat... she was done caring. She’d learned a very valuable lesson from her father, her family, from her aunt.

“Independence above everything else,” Georgiana said.

“Even above love?”

Georgiana pressed her fingers to her temples and looked out the window. “You and Xavier. All our friends and your sisters have found adoring husbands. Love. You’ve somehow dug up men who aren’t horrid. Men who seem to... care. I am terribly happy for you. But most women cannot expect such riches.” She’d certainly never expected it for herself.

Sarah returned to the bed, sitting primly on its edge. “What about Josiah?”

Georgiana turned to her, sharp as a whip through the air. “What about him?”

“He’s been... good to you of late. Fighting the fortune hunters away and all.”

“True. He is another good man, I believe.”

Sarah leaned forward tentatively as if teetering on the narrow edge of a high cliff. “I’m going to ask a question you may not appreciate, but I refuse to hint around it any longer.”

“If you must.”

“This fake courtship... is it perchance headed in a... real direction?”

“What can you mean?” Georgiana asked, less from an ability to understand and more from a desire to ignore her friend’s meaning, hoping she dropped the question entirely.

Sarah straightened and lifted her palms up, a soft gesture, nonthreatening. But also, a refusal to back down. “It’s only that I’ve seen it before. The fake courtship rousing real feelings. Xavier’s sister and her husband—”

“Are not me and Josiah. I’ve barely seen him since little Bea’s christening.” Five times in the last nine months. One of those times was the day of Aunt Prudence’s funeral. He’d walked with her in her garden, the both of them silent until he’d made her laugh. She’d needed that laugh.

“He punched a man for you.”

A most humorous day. The best outing to Hyde Park she’d ever had. “Lord Afton. The man proposed to me. An insulting affair in which he compared me to a cow. I was with Josiah to begin with, yet Afton approached and proposed, the nodcock. He deserved that blow.” She grinned. “So much blood.”

“As your friend and Josiah’s sister-in-law, I should tell you... Xavier is growing grouchy about it. Thinks he should punch some sense into Josiah for toying with you.”

Georgiana laughed. “He’s not toying with me. You both know that. We *told* you. It’s all part of the ruse. It worked, too. After he broke Afton’s nose, no one dares approach me, fortune hunter or no.” She’d become Josiah’s property in the eyes of the *ton*, though no announcement had been made, no verbal confirmation. He never even touched her in public. And yet, she was his. To everyone else. It irked her, the idea she might belong to some man, even imaginatively, but *she knew* she didn’t, and the lie served a purpose, so she let her ire slip away.

“You do not think he’s even a little bit in love with you, then?” Sarah asked.

“Lord, no! Josiah’s an excellent friend. And he is helping me. As friends do if you will remember.” Her aunt had always said men couldn’t be friends with women. They’d only try to get beneath their skirts once they saw an opportunity. That sentiment was actually written down. On page five of her memoirs.

“You’re sweet on him.” Sarah gave a lazy grin. “When you say his name, your lips twitch, like they want to smile.”

Did they? Georgiana turned back to the window, welcoming the thick curtain to hide her definitely-not-twitching lips. “How is baby Bea? Walking yet? When do they begin to walk? Can she talk? How does she take her tea?”

“It’s clear I’ll have to teach you about babies. Your knowledge is scandalously imperfect. But I’ll not let you distract me just yet. Friendship is a lovely place to start. Wouldn’t you like to marry a man you can be friends with?”

“No.”

“Then what will you do? With your fortune and your independence and your new freedom from fortune hunters?”

“Apparently, attend a house party,” Georgiana grumbled. “Tell me, what does one do at this sort of thing?”

Sarah lifted her chin and cast Georgiana a sly glance that would not be out of place in a fox’s den. “There’s cake. I’m sure Josiah will bring you some. There’s always cake at your tea after he’s visited. A pretty, pastel pastry of some sort, mountains of it.” Said as if that proved something.

It did not. “And? I enjoy cake. My *friend* knows this of me.”

“Ah well. I guess cake means nothing.” When clearly, she thought it meant everything. Sarah flopped backward onto the mattress with a sigh. “Such a pity. Since the two of you seem so well suited.”

Georgiana grunted. “He’s a steward who stomps through mud and, oh, I don’t know, inspects cows and pigs or some such thing. I’m a lady of London. I prefer other amusements. Balls. Walks in manicured parks. Visits to the modiste.”

“He’s helping Xavier. And dancing can be had in the country. In fact, there will be dancing. At the Christmas Eve ball, which means fine gowns. And we’ll have mistletoe, and—” Sarah snapped her mouth shut and studied the ceiling with a frown. “Oh. Oh, yes. That’s an idea.”

Georgiana sank slowly into the chair at the writing desk, needing the curved arms for support and the cool wood for calm. “No, it’s not, Sarah.

Whatever it is, it is *not* an idea.”

Sarah lowered her gaze from the ceiling slowly. “I dare you—”

“No. I’m in middare right now. You cannot pile on another. It’s not sporting.” She curled her hands around the chair arms until she felt the skin stretch taut across her knuckles.

“I dare you—”

“Sarah—”

“To kiss Josiah.”

And there it was.

“No.” Georgiana rapped her knuckles on the table, welcoming the sharp knock against bone, to punctuate her refusal. “I’ll not fall for matchmaking schemes. Why didn’t I see it before? You are trying to bring Josiah and me into a web of... love.”

“You do not have to say it as if it’s a curse. Something on the bottom of one’s shoe that wrinkles the nose. Love is grand. Freeing—”

“It’s a chain. I’ll not sacrifice my independence to—”

“And you think I’ve given up mine? I help run a hospital! A hospital my husband funds solely so I can supervise it.”

“And you’ve married one of the few men who would allow you to do so.” She rolled her lips between her teeth and leaned away from Sarah. She’d spoken too loudly, too vehemently.

Sarah shook her head. “I disagree.” She stood and strode for the door. “And you’ve been dared, so you have a choice.”

Georgiana followed her out of the room. “You cannot force me to kiss anyone.”

Sarah shrugged. “I cannot. But I can dare you to. And if you don’t do it, no harm done to me, but to you... how much power does your pride have over you? You’ve never backed down from a dare before. Will you do so now?”

“Of course.” Maybe? She wasn’t so sure. She’d begun to feel a bit wiggly inside.

“What worries you, Georgie?” Sarah asked, stopping and looking over her shoulder. “That you’ll enjoy it? That you’ll desire more?”

“No! Of course not. Ridiculous notion. Very well. I accept your dare. But only to prove I’ll not enjoy it, and even if I do enjoy it...” He was a handsome man, after all, and likely knew what to do with those firm, chiseled lips of his. “I’ll not want more. You could have proffered a more difficult

challenge, Sarah.” Surely this would prove no challenge at all. Kiss a man and win a dare. Nothing easier.

Right?

CHAPTER TWO



*“Men enjoy making babies but not tending to them.” –from *The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady**

Josiah hid behind a potted plant, a red ribbon dangling in his face. He batted at it. Like a damn cat. Who had thought it wise to decorate the plants? The house had not been so jolly since before his mother’s death. Garlands of fragrant holly hung everywhere, and a roaring fire crackled cheerfully in the grate, fending off the unusually bitter cold of the winter evening. The crowd filling the room talked and laughed and bounced babies, and Edith, Josiah’s sister, plonked away at the piano with a Christmas tune. Sarah had brought joy here.

And he’d helped, making sure gifts would be delivered to the tenants and that those who wished had time to visit their families. Ensuring there was enough in the coffers to support a party like this and keep them warm and merry. Improving the grounds, the stable, the plumbing, even. He’d worked damn hard the last year to do what he’d told Xavier he could when he’d pleaded to manage Apple Grove. He’d achieved all he’d set out to. And more.

The house had spirit again, was more than a dusty mausoleum inhabited by grunting men folk. It felt like his mother had come back to them all in some small way. It felt warm now, hopeful and near perfect.

Near because Crawford’s wife Lisibeth had brought her debutante sister. Unmarried and moon-eyed over Josiah. Currently, the chit—Miss Dorinda Darlington—was stretched up on her tiptoes, searching the room. For him no doubt. He ducked farther behind the plant, found another ribbon poking him

in the eye, a twig, too. He cursed, swatted it away, and cursed again. Couldn't see a thing now. Meant no one could see him. Good. Nothing would tempt him to reveal his hiding place.

"Lady Georgiana Hunt," the butler announced.

Josiah popped to his full height, knocking the plant over. It wobbled. He caught it, keeping his gaze trained on the woman in the doorway. What the devil was Georgie doing here? When he'd asked her last month if she would attend, she'd said—and he'd never forget it—she'd rather clean her navel with a dirty boot scraper. Colorful. Direct. Every word perfectly Georgie.

She stood tall and regal, defiant, before the room. She was stunning in red velvet. She'd stopped wearing mourning clothes after three months, and he'd been glad for it. Black brought out the jagged ice in her. Her maid had piled her hair high and thread a gold ribbon through it. She looked well. Very well. Intimidating, too. Excellent. Exactly what he needed—a beautiful miracle to scare curious debutantes away.

He ducked behind the plant once more, peeked his head out, and hissed at her. "Gee!"

She blinked, looked to the side of the room, toward him.

"Pst! Gee!" He rustled the plant, revealed his face between the boughs.

Their eyes locked, and her eyebrow arched slowly toward her hairline. She wove a sure way toward his hiding spot, and when she reached him, she crossed her arms over her chest and spoke to the room, not to the plant.

"Hiding? Or do you have a special affection for this particular tree?"

"Not a tree. A plant."

"Oh? What kind?"

"I don't know. The green kind. Mayhap it's a tree. It's not important."

"Oh, I disagree. I've just discovered that this estate's manager does not know when a plant is considered a tree."

"Not my area of expertise," he ground out. "Now help me, and I'll show you to the cake. Sarah's requested stacks of it be made for the party."

Her eyes became gems. Shimmering with malice or eagerness, he could not say. But finally, her red lips parted, and she said, "How may I be of service?"

"Do you see the young lady there, with the blonde hair, standing next to Crawford's wife?"

"Ah yes. Her sister, I think."

"Her sister, Miss Darlington, and the thorn in my side." His grumble was

rough enough to shake the tree. Plant? No matter.

Georgiana chuckled. "Set her sights on you, has she?"

"Of course. I'm terribly good looking."

"I suppose some women would find you appealing. That good-natured grin." She studied him with an academic tilt of her head.

"Wicked, you mean."

"Thick black hair with that ever-dangling lock right on your forehead."

He pushed his hands through his hair, knowing it would make that lock fall, jaunty and tempting.

She tilted her head in the other direction. "Good nose. Eyes blue as the sky and full of merriment."

He fluttered his lashes at her.

She rolled her eyes. "A good build, too, sturdy and strong and tall. A true man of the country. Yes, I can see how you might turn some small portion of the female population silly. Poor Miss Darlington. Did she ever have a chance?"

"Not likely."

Georgiana rolled her eyes again and studied the young lady across the room. She crossed her arms over her belly and tapped her arm with one finger. "Hm. *How* should I help you?"

"Keep up the charade."

"With your entire family so near? Sarah says Xavier is not best pleased with us."

"He has more than once threatened to toss me through the ice in the lake. I do realize continuing our act when under such scrutiny is a risk, but you came to a party you said you would never attend, so I have decided to interpret that as a sign. We must pretend a little longer. It is your turn to protect me."

"Very well."

A quick, succinct agreement. Warmed his soul.

"Will you come out now?" she asked.

He slid out from behind the tree to join her. "I owe you my eternal gratitude, Lady Gee."

She waved his gratitude away with a frosty flick of her hand. "We will be even after this. Does she know you have no time for a wife?"

"I mentioned it a time or two. But it has not seemed to sink in. I found her waiting outside my bedroom door this morning."

“That *is* daring.” Her gaze floated to the girl, a touch of admiration there. “I would like to get to know her even if you do not.”

“She pretended it was by chance.” He rolled his eyes. “As if I did not know better.”

“Brazen chit. Was there a lady in your room?”

“No!” There had been no ladies in his room, or he in theirs, in months.

She shrugged. “A natural assumption with you. A village mistress perhaps?”

“There is no such creature.” He poked her in the shoulder. “The lady wounds with such assertions.”

She lifted one eyebrow, merriment in the slope of her cheeks and in every bounce of the dancing curls around her face. “Give me a dagger, and I’ll show you wounds.”

He leaned forward, closing the small distance between them. “You’re showing your teeth, Lady Gee.”

She snapped those teeth at him, straight and white and sharp behind berry red lips.

They grinned. This—their sharp back and forth—would soothe her grief. What knight ever rode into battle armed with insults? He did if it helped.

He laughed. “Damn, it’s good to see you. I’ve been so bored I can’t feel my face.”

“Never say so, Mr. E. How will you feel the kisses of all your ladies?”

“True, but I must know. Why did you come? I know how you feel about mud. Did you try the thing with the boot scraper first and decide you’d made the wrong choice?”

She shrugged, licking her lips to tame her smile. “I am here only because your sister-in-law dared me to come.”

He tightened his jaw, but that didn’t stop it, so he slapped a hand over his mouth, but that proved no barrier either. Finally, the laugh escaped, and he hunched forward in an attempt to corral the sound, keep it from rolling across the gathered guests. “A dare!” he wheezed. “Of course.”

Her bow-shaped lips pursed, and her eyes brimmed with ire. “I do not see the humor.”

“Course you don’t, Gee. Not surprised. You debutantes always take your dares seriously.”

“I’ve not been a debutante for some time now,” she huffed. “Men. My aunt did warn me.”

“Ah, your aunt,” he said, recovering and straightening to his full height. “Please say you’ve brought her memoirs. I must know more of them.”

“I have, but I shan’t share them with you. You are not worthy.”

“Naturally. But let us put aside our differences and seek out more pleasant diversions.” He stepped away from the plant and held out his hand.

If it had been a snake, she’d have not shown more wariness of it. “Cake?”

“And babies.”

She took his hand, and he tried not to notice the sliver of skin between the white buttoned cuff of her glove and the hem of her long red sleeve. A stripe of *her* between velvet and cotton. Softer than both? He squeezed his hand and ignored the question, ignored the odd desire to strip his glove from his own hand and rub the pad of his thumb across the sliver of her skin. He dragged her into the crowd, her hand squeezing his own, as if it were a lifeline.

Josiah’s nephew Thomas was closest, and they swept in with *oohs* and *aahs*, but just as Georgiana held out her arms for the little imp, a shadow stepped before them. No, a large and hulking body.

“Xavier,” Josiah said.

“We need to speak.” His brother never asked. Only ordered.

“Can it wait?”

“Absolutely not.”

Josiah sighed. Usually, he’d do as he pleased, making Xavier red in the face, but if it was estate business, he’d need to know, and he wanted to know now. This house party was proof of his worth, the culmination of everything he valued most—work and family—repairing the damage that neglect could cause so easily. He’d been working for all this, and he’d not let any detail fall through his fingers.

He looked to Georgiana with an apologetic half grin. “Stay here. Save a baby for me.”

Her face smooshed up. “I’ll do as I please, Mr. Evans.” She turned with an arched brow to Josiah’s brother. Any other chit would cower under Xavier’s glare. Naturally, Georgiana did not. “Lord Flint, will you attempt to command me about, too?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Xavier grumbled, wrapping an arm around Josiah’s shoulders as he reached for his infant with the other. He led both baby and brother into the hallway.

“Bea’s clout needs changing,” Xavier said, releasing Josiah.

They often discussed estate matters in locations other than the study.

Xavier did not like to sit still, and Josiah would not sit unless he had to. They reached the nursery soon enough, and Xavier handed Bea to the nurse, who soon handed the baby back in a less odiferous state. Xavier took her to the large thick rug near the fire and sat her down, joined her, and waved a wooden toy that resembled a horse in front of her, singing off key.

“Join us, Jos.” He didn’t even look up.

Josiah sat cross-legged on the other side of Bea who giggled up at him. He tapped her nose. “What’s this about, Brother?”

“Tell me about Lady Georgiana.”

“As I’ve told you repeatedly, there is nothing to tell. We have an... arrangement, I suppose, to ward off the unwanted attentions of fortune hunters and marriageable misses. That’s it.”

“Daft is what it is. Have you debauched her?”

“No! Hell, Xav. No.” And what an insinuation. “I don’t debauch innocents! And I’m rather insulted you think I would.”

“Father would not mind if you did.”

“But *you’d* rip me limb from limb, then force me to marry the woman. And not marrying is the entire purpose of this charade.”

“Good.” He fell to his back, and Bea giggled, immediately crawling atop him. “I didn’t truly think you had. But I like to be thorough.”

Josiah joined him, back to the rug, staring up at the ceiling. “Are we done with the interrogation?”

“No. Have you *thought* about sleeping with her?”

He opened his mouth to say no, but the word would not come. What did come was a thousand visions of wonton delights, honey-gold hair streaming down a lithe back, his name on her soft, pink lips, her usually sharp tongue applied to his neck. He shivered.

“What if you did marry her? Sarah seems to think the two of you would suit.”

“She’s my friend, Xav. Nothing more.” He closed his eyes to press back the flood of visions. “She’s asked for my help, and I will give it. I’ve no intention to wed.”

“Why not?”

“I’m too busy. I’ve asked you if I can take on the care of your northern estate, and—”

“It’s too much.” A too gruff reply that stung like a saber to the gut.

“I’ve done an excellent job here.” Josiah clawed his fingernails into the

plush carpet, seeking the blunt press, the pain of the hard wood beneath.

“I know. You’re the best damn manager Father has.”

“Not that he notices.”

“He notices little but his mistress these days. I’m married and will likely soon provide an heir. Our sister is married well. He’s done his duty and is determined to live for pleasure now.”

Had their mother known pleasure before her death? Her eyes were always tired in his memory, her face lined with greater age than her years.

“I do though, Josiah,” Xavier said. “I notice how well you’ve done. I do not always say it, but I’m quite”—he tugged at his cravat and studied the ceiling—“proud of you.” Mumbled words.

But Josiah heard them. Felt them.

“Anyway.” Xavier rushed forward, wading with fast feet out of the murky waters of emotion. “You should focus on only one estate. And you should make a life for yourself here. You have the steward’s cottage. It’s recently renovated and large enough for a family, and Lady Georgiana—”

“Is a lover of London and not meant for a cottage in the woods. She is going to help me avoid Lisibeth’s little sister. Then she is going to return to Town. And that is it.” He couldn’t imagine her in the cottage, wearing her red velvet gown, looking like a queen as she strode through small rooms with much comfort but little fashion. An heiress like her with an earl’s son who reveled in work as earls’ sons were not supposed to do. A farce, that.

Xavier grunted. Beatrice crawled off his chest, headed straight toward Josiah, who scooped her up in his arms, cradled her on his chest, and rocked them back and forth until her laughter shook his entire body.

When Josiah caught Xavier’s eye, expecting to share a laugh, he saw only the seriousness of steel. “What?” Josiah laughed.

“I dare you to kiss her.”

Josiah stopped rocking. “Pardon?”

“Kiss her. See if she’ll suit. In that way. If she doesn’t... quickest way to figure it out. Why not kiss her?”

“She’s an innocent. And weren’t you recently warning me off kissing her?”

“She’s an heiress who knows her own mind and appears to be as averse to marriage as you are. Why not kiss her?”

Why not strangle Xavier was the better question. He fisted his hands and suppressed the impulse.

“It might ruin our friendship,” Josiah said. And he felt peculiarly protective of that.

“Or you might make it better. Come here, darling.” He reached a hand out to Bea, who burrowed deeper into Josiah’s chest. “Traitor. Jos, kiss her. I dare you.”

Once upon a time, his brother had been known as the Dare King, a man who completed dangerous tasks for a lark. He didn’t dare now, didn’t risk his neck or his family’s reputation. That he was using that old phrase now—I dare you—told Josiah one thing: His brother was serious. His brother, for one reason or another, wanted Josiah to kiss Lady Georgiana Hunt.

Josiah rolled his eyes and rocked the baby again, letting the tinkling bell of her laugh heal the unhappy places inside him.

Kiss Georgiana? He couldn’t. He shouldn’t. A silly dare. A dangerous one because he liked her and kissing for a dare seemed rather... caddish. It might prove Georgie’s notion, earned from her aunt, that men were pigs. He didn’t like that. Didn’t like that she’d known more pigs than princes. Didn’t want her to think him a pig despite all his teasing.

He wouldn’t oink. Not this time.

CHAPTER THREE



December 23

“The only good husband is a dead one.” –from The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady

The sunniest room in the house, with its wide windows and vines curling outside the glass, was the best place to rifle through Aunt Prudence’s mind and the pages of her memoir. Georgiana dragged a desk before the windows and sat, spine straight, determination in place. With the exception of the surprisingly graphic descriptions of her affairs, every page was like an echo in Georgiana’s mind. The same words she’d heard since she arrived, alone, on her aunt’s doorstep one Christmas morning.

She chewed her lip. Was the only good husband a dead one? Once, she would not have questioned her aunt. But now...

Sarah would certainly not agree with the sentiment. Many of her friends would lose their hearts with their husbands. But Aunt Prudence had hated her husband, had railed against him often, and with good reason. He’d slung fists as well as words at her, only stopping when it became apparent she’d never have a child. Poor woman. Thank goodness Uncle Angus had died quite early, leaving Aunt Prudence almost four decades of life without him to enjoy the beds of other men.

Clearly, in some cases, dead husbands were best.

“There you are. Sarah said you’d hid away up here. We have precious few moments before the others join us. She’s determined you won’t lock yourself away the entirety of your stay. Apparently, that violates the spirit of the dare. You must not only be here, but you must *participate*.”

She groaned and turned in her chair, clasping the back edge of it in gloveless fingers. He stood in the doorway, shoulder propped against the frame, lean body angled to advantage, legs crossed at booted ankles.

“Mr. E,” she said with a smile. “I welcome *your* company.” Though she could not deny the dare—the kiss—hung over her head like a guillotine, and his presence inched the blade closer to her neck. “I’m reading through Aunt Prudence’s memoirs. I’m almost finished with the entire thing, but I’m not sure I can read much more today.” Each word was more bitter than the last. An earned bitterness, to be sure. She pitied her aunt. But she also began to wonder if her aunt’s philosophies should be adopted as such, her bitterness stolen and worn like a heavy cloak across Georgiana’s own shoulders. Perhaps, considering Xavier and Josiah, she should consider her aunt’s dictates more as a warning. She must approach men with caution, like the snarling beasts they were, but armed with knowledge, she could protect herself.

Josiah strode to the fireplace and poked at it a bit, encouraging the dying flames into a roaring, crackling, lovely heat.

“Thank you. I did not realize how cold I was.” She pulled her shawl up tighter about her shoulders.

“Happy to serve you, my lady.” He dropped into a chair nearby and slunk low, long legs outstretched, gaze heavy on her. “You look... drained.”

She stiffened and rifled through the pages of her aunt’s memoir. “A gentleman would never say so. But perhaps”—she thrust a page at him—“all gentlemen *would*. My aunt has often said men will be mean to women because they *can be*.”

The smile drooped as he read the page she’d given him, that very maxim scrawled across the top of the paper. When he placed the paper on the desk and looked up at her once more, he spoke, his jaw tight, his words hard and slow, “I did not mean offense, and I apologize for my thoughtless words.” He fell forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs. Strong thighs, shown to advantage in buckskin. “I admit, I’ve not always been a thoughtful fellow. Some days, it’s still a struggle.”

“By some days, you mean Monday through Thursday?”

“Oh, and Friday, too.” He tried a wavering grin. “Your aunt is right on this one. Men can be mean and say as they wish. Like Afton, that beef-wit. But you do not have to suffer their words. I cannot imagine you doing so.”

“One excellent lesson I learned from my aunt was how to stand up for myself. Financial and emotional independence are the greatest gifts she gave me.”

He stared at the ground. “I meant only, when I commented on your looks, that I was worried. You always look beautiful. Surely you know that.”

“It’s nice to be told that now and then.” Soft words for the soft feeling stealing through her. A good river of warmth to wash away the bitterness left behind by her aunt’s past and opinions.

He lifted his head, their gazes locked, and his lips seemed to stretch into the same small smile she felt turning up the corners of her own mouth.

Noise from the hallway spilled into the room.

“There you are,” Sarah said, her arm wrapped through Xavier’s, a gaggle of people at her back, all of them spilling into the room.

The connection snapped, Josiah fell into the back of his chair once more, and Georgiana straightened and bundled up her papers, replacing them in the leather folio they’d come to her in.

Sarah bustled over to Georgiana and pulled her up, dragging her to a table closer to the fire. “Cards. We’re to play vingt-et-un.” She plopped Georgiana down in a chair and waved to Josiah. “You, too. Come along now. Everyone gather round.”

Xavier did as she said, grumbling, “This is what comes of giving up daring, my dear. You’ve begun to fixate on other competitive challenges.”

His wife flashed him a smile.

“Must we?” Georgiana asked. “Cards are all well and good, but I was reading. And I am sure I do not wish to dampen the party spirit by beating you all soundly.”

“See there, Xavier,” Sarah said. “There’s my challenge. Mrs. Hoskins is bringing negus in a moment—ah! Here she is.” Sarah bustled over to help the housekeeper, then pushed the serving cart to the table herself as everyone settled in their seats.

Josiah sat right beside Georgiana and across from Miss Darlington. Peter, Josiah’s younger brother, sat next to her, across from Georgie. The chair across from Xavier remained empty until Sarah took it, pressing a warm cup of negus into Georgie’s hands.

“We are all family here, and you will serve yourselves, I hope,” she said to the assembled players before nudging Georgie’s shoulder. “You are our special guest, though, so I’ve served you.” She winked. “Yours might be more potent than the rest.”

Georgiana sniffed the warm wine drink. Lemon and nutmeg and sugar. She took a sip. Not as good as cake, but it warmed her insides. She sipped again and took the cards as they came to her. She focused. A little competition riled the blood. Or was that the wine? Or the man sitting next to her who, for some reason seemed bigger sitting than he did standing, as if he could curl her entire body into his own and shelter her—

What nonsense. She needed no sheltering. She took another sip, sighed her satisfaction, and got to work. She won the first hand.

Sarah glared, and Xavier patted her back, whispered something to her about rewarding her for being a good sport later.

Josiah had a whisper for Georgiana, too. “Good work, Lady Gee.”

She shivered, sipped her wine, and tried not to gloat.

“Mr. Evans,” Miss Darlington called out. She leaned slightly over the table, pressing the underside of her breasts into its top, pushing them up. Her lashes fluttered. Bold chit.

Georgiana couldn’t help it. She liked the girl. But she’d promised to help Josiah, and it seemed he was about to be under attack. She could lean, too. She did so. Closer to Josiah.

“Yes, Miss Darlington?” Josiah asked.

“You are excellent at cards. I could not read your expressions at all,” the debutante said.

“Were you watching him so closely then?” Georgiana asked.

“Oh, yes. Who cannot watch Mr. Evans closely? Such a very handsome visage. It’s hard to look away.”

Silence descended on the table but for the crackling of the fire.

“Are compliments unwelcome?” Miss Darlington asked, folding her hands together before her in a way that pressed her breasts together.

It was much too cold for such a low bodice. Georgiana would have to teach the girl the art of fashion that allowed for practicalities as well as seduction. When one must cover up to keep warm, one should choose the right fabrics and shapes to accentuate one’s form. No tables or elbows required.

“Not at all,” Josiah assured her.

“Not unwelcome, perhaps,” Georgiana said, “for *Josiah*.” She lifted a brow and sipped her drink as silence wrapped around her blatant use of his Christian name. Let that detail sink into Miss Darlington’s skin. Then, when the silence became a touch awkward, she turned to Xavier. “Will you deal?”

“Of course.” He shuffled and divided up the cards.

This hand was not as good as her previous one, and she rested one forearm on the table, drumming her fingertips as she considered how to play.

A solid warmth brushed up against her arm, stopping her fingers midbeat. She glanced down. The length of Josiah’s *naked* forearm pressed against her own arm, encased in green velvet. He’d divested himself of his jacket at some point and had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbow. Scandalous and informal. No man in London would be in public in such a way. But Josiah was a man of the fields and woods. No refined Town prince, he. A light dusting of hair swept up the back of his arm, and she felt the crispness of it where the backs of their gloveless hands grazed. She glanced up at him to find him looking at Xavier, daring him with a glance to beat him at this hand.

He did not even appear to notice their touching arms, but at the sight of his fingers wrapped long and strong around his cup, steam curling up from it, steam curled inside her, too.

She downed the rest of her drink to drown her inexplicably wanton thoughts and refocused on her cards. But the feeling of his arm against her did not lessen, and her breaths would not slow, and her heart—she jumped up from her seat, letting her cards flutter to the table and finding the pot of negus to refill her cup.

She drank this one too quickly and kept her arms narrowed in her lap. She did not win this time. Sarah did, and Xavier bussed her forehead.

“Clever as always, Queenie,” he said. That glow in his eyes when he looked at his wife. What was it that made a competitive man like him seem glad his wife had beaten him soundly? Love?

The word curled like steam on her tongue, feeling heavy there.

Lord, she was foxed. Did anyone notice? She looked up, found Josiah grinning at her.

“I’m foxed,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she knew they had a desire to go for a jaunt about the room.

“I see. Well, then, Lady Gee, let’s—”

“What’s all this, then?”

Everyone turned toward the door as the Earl of Westgrove sauntered

through. His long, once-dark hair was mostly gray now, though some strands of black still flickered through like glimpses of a midnight sky through curtains, and his blue eyes, so much like Josiah's, sparked.

"A party?" he said. "And I was not invited? No matter. I've a meeting with a lady in the village later." He winked.

"Father." Xavier stood, his voice calm but his form rigid. "Please do consider the company when choosing conversational topics."

"I suppose that's the gentlemanly thing to do, eh?" He chuckled, but then his eyes locked on Georgiana. "You. I've seen you about. The heiress?"

"Heiress no longer. I am an independently wealthy woman." She stood, pulling herself up tall, tipping her chin up, too, then she sank into her best bow. And her best bow was better than everyone else's with the exception, perhaps, of the Queen. Even when foxed.

"This is Lady Georgiana Hunt, Father," Josiah said. "You've been introduced before."

"Yes, well, I can't be bothered to remember every chit's name now, can I?" The clock ticked off seconds as Lord Westgrove scrutinized Josiah. "Going to marry her?"

Josiah jumped, eyes widening.

"If not," his father continued, "there's that one behind you." He gestured over Josiah's shoulder at Miss Darlington. "Her hips aren't as wide, but she has money, too, and the heiress is likely too good for you now that you've lowered yourself with working like a common—"

"Enough." Xavier's single word command echoed off the walls. "Isn't there someone waiting for you in the village, Father?"

Lord Westgrove snorted, gave Josiah one last look. "Let me know if you need help making a decision. Your mother had hips enough for six children, five of them boys, and she had the good sense to shove off to the afterlife before old age could bother her much. I know how to pick 'em."

"Bloody hell," Josiah hissed, his arms stiff clubs at his side.

But his father didn't hear. He was whistling and walking out the door.

A collective groan followed his exit, and everyone melted into their seats.

Josiah scrubbed his hands down his face. "And Father is—"

"Not the best role model," Peter finished. "Yes, yes. I know."

"Negus, anyone?" Sarah asked. "And charades, perhaps? I'll see if Edith and Griffin are back from their walk. They might wish to play."

Georgiana took her cup and left the group as Sarah left to find Lord and

Lady Hartfield. She returned to her chair near the window and held the cup beneath her chin, letting the steam warm her as the outside chill pressing into the glass did its best to freeze her.

“Come closer to the fire, Lady Gee.” Josiah had followed her.

“No thank you. That was enough participation for now. I’ve made merry and am quite exhausted from it. Besides, it’s too warm over there.” Her entire body was a furnace.

He sat in the chair he’d sat in earlier. “You’re foxed is what you are.”

“A bit. Not too much though. Just enough for my mind to have become like molasses. My limbs, too.”

Stillness took him. And with his elbows braced on his knees, and his hands clasped together, he looked like a statue of grave cogitation. Finally, his mouth broke the illusion. “I apologize for my father. He’s—”

“Like every other man, I suppose. I know them. Him. I am not shocked.”

“You should be. I... I acted like him for years. I’m not proud of it. I knew it was... not quite right. I wanted to please him, though, show him I was worth something.”

She startled and snapped her head to face him. “You *are* worth something.”

“Not to his way of thinking. Third son who did not go into the military as he’d been destined to.” He gave the slightest shrug as if to throw off the ghost of a red uniform. “I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to be here. My mother was sick. Dying. She didn’t ask me to stay, but I wanted to anyway. For her. For myself. I knew she was dying somehow. Didn’t want to go off and die myself. What good would that do? But my father thought that meant I was weak, that my mother had somehow ruined me, made me cling to her skirts.”

“Your mother died?” She knew the answer, of course, but she was a prodding for more information.

He nodded. “Seven or so years ago now. I was young. I was supposed to go to school.” His gaze had grown distant. “But I knew if I did, I’d never see her again. The pregnancy had not been easy on her. I begged to stay. Father railed at me. I left. And”—his shoulders slumped—“I was right. I returned for her funeral. Their funeral. The babe died, too. A little girl.”

She reached for him, her hand moving on a wave of warm wine to his bare forearm and resting there, wrapping gentle fingers round. “Josiah, I’m ___”

“It’s fine. No need for apologies or condolences. When Xavier began to

take the load of the estate work from Father, I saw my chance to prove that a man who cares for his family's home, for his family's holdings, is not weak. Wanting to comfort a dying loved one is not a fault."

She nodded and squeezed his arm.

He hung his head. "I've done much here since I convinced Xav to reassign the previous steward. Fixed the staircase and modernized some of our farming methods. Improved our bookkeeping. Mother would approve, I think. Father doesn't notice. Not that he's noticed anything regarding the estate for some time now."

Her brows collided. "You did all that?"

"I'd like to do more. Add a shower. Have you seen them? Fascinating things. Healthful, even. Not as fun as a bath in a tub by the fire though." He lifted his head slowly and winked.

Her heart stuttered.

"Much more leisurely, too." The way he looked at her... his gaze like a touch, a caress along her bare neck, fingers spearing into her hair... she could barely breathe.

"I have a feeling you've a double meaning." Her voice breathless and raspy.

"Oh, I do." He winked again.

This time, her heart didn't stutter, it stopped. She must be way past foxed. She'd not had enough of the watered wine to push her to extremes, but that must be the cause of her flailing body. She'd never gone silly from one of Josiah's winks before. Her body felt as if it were falling, her mind reeling. She removed her hand from his arm and blinked the falling sensation away, found her focus.

"My aunt's opinion," she said, proud her voice was steady and strong, "was that husbands were better off dead."

Josiah cracked a laugh and fell back into the chair, arms hanging to his side. "Perhaps some are, Gee, perhaps some are."

She pressed her fingertips to her temples. Everything was so muddled. "But some are better off alive. Xavier for instance." A difficult concession to make but it *must* be made.

"Undoubtedly so."

"How come you are not so muddled about all this?"

"Because I have not had so much wine as you. It's truly not a particularly difficult concept to grasp."

She looked at the leather folio containing her aunt's memoirs stuffed beneath the desk. Perhaps something else had helped muddle her mind long before now, and she currently waded through fields of ancient mud to discover the truth shining in the distance, out of reach.

"I've captured Edith and Griffin!" Sarah called out, bustling back into the room, Josiah's sister hooked through one arm and her husband through the other. She settled them near the negus and looked about. "Where are—oh." Her gaze had landed on Georgiana and Josiah, and her lips curled into a sly grin. "You two may stay there. If you like. No need to join us if you're having a cozy chat." She caught Georgiana's eye, pursing her lips as if to give a kiss.

A reminder, a double dare.

Georgiana groaned. "Josiah. Jos. I think I'll call you Jos."

He laughed. "Yes, Gee, Queen of the Warm Wine?"

"You're not going to like what I have to do at all."

He shook his head, that lock of hair falling over one merry eye. "You need fresh air." He slapped his thighs—such nice, thick thighs—as he stood and offered her a hand.

Which she took so quickly she almost fell into him as he pulled her from her seat.

"Skating, anyone?" he asked, pulling her toward the door.

"Don't think skating foxed sounds like a good idea," Georgiana muttered. But it did sound daring. She liked that.

Peter jumped up, as did Miss Darlington.

"No, no!" Sarah waved them back down. "You've both already started this game. You must see it through." She smiled Josiah and Georgiana out the door. "Have fun! Perhaps take a walk first to sober someone up before strapping blades to her feet?"

Josiah rolled his eyes and pulled Georgiana close to his side, a rather welcome help in keeping her upright. "That was the plan."

Plan. She had a plan. Do her dares and go back home. But that meant kissing Josiah. And with their sides touching, and his palm warm against her, even a dared kiss seemed more dangerous than balancing on blades while bosky.

Fresh air would be good, though. Fresh air would clear up the matter of husbands and kissing, would remind her as much as Lord Westgrove's boisterous interruption had, that some dares went too far, and kissing Josiah

was one of them.

CHAPTER FOUR



*“Kisses. Bah. Cake is better.” –from The Masculine Inconvenience:
Memoirs of a Superior Lady*

Giving a sharp woman a pair of blades for her feet would likely prove a bad idea, but Josiah was the daring sort. And she did seem better now after an hour’s walk through the gardens. He’d left her there to sober up while he gathered supplies, and in the hopes Sarah would release the other guests to skate with them in time. He needed people, barriers, between him and Georgiana after the earlier events of the day. But after the negus, everyone seemed to have sunk into a lazy haze for the rest of the afternoon. So now with two pairs of skates slung over his shoulder, he led Georgiana toward the frozen lake, shoving the word “dare” right out of his brain.

He couldn’t think about what he’d been dared to do. Not after sitting so close to her, arms pressed together, her scent—fresh soap and soft velvet—burning him up as much on the inside as on the outside. Not after her muddled question about dead husbands. Not after confessing his weaknesses to her, showing her his raw wounds. Not after watching her pace the garden for an hour, waving her arms as if she was talking out loud to herself, likely trying to work through her muddle.

No dares. No... kisses.

Only blades and ice and wicked whipping winds. Skating, with its precariousness—an open situation on a lake, viewable from the house, and a

painfully hard surface—offered the perfect location to avoid those things.

The sky hung low and gray to match Georgiana's thundercloud scowl, though, and a kiss would go a long way to brightening up, well, everything. How long had it been since his lips had touched another's? He liked kissing too, and he'd given it up. For a good reason. Even if his father didn't see it.

The storm clouds above made a home in his chest.

No! He would not turn grump. Christmas was a mere three days away, and his friend had arrived to make things merrier than they would have been. What need had he of a wife when he had Georgiana? There was no room in his life for a wife. But Georgiana fit just nicely.

"Lady Gee," he said, looking over his shoulder at her, "the weather has entered your face. Be careful about that."

Her scowl deepened. "This seems the height of folly. Skating. Bah."

"It's the height of diversion. You'll see. And it saved you from more communal merriment."

"There's that I suppose." A grumble like thunder.

"Don't worry. I won't let you fall."

She glared. "I hope I skate circles around you."

"The negus leaving you feeling nasty, Gee? Have a headache?"

She bared her teeth. Pretty little things. Didn't make him a bit afraid.

When they reached the water's edge, they stopped and surveyed the dark-blue ice.

"Are you sure it's thick enough?" she asked, worrying her bottom lip.

"See how it's dark blue in color? That means it's safe. Thick. If it were white, we'd not venture out. Is it thick enough?" He huffed. "Lady Georgiana, I would not toss you on too thin ice. Surely you know this about me. If you fell through, I'd have to go in after you, and do you know how cold that would be?"

"Very?"

"My bollocks would freeze off."

The storm cloud broke, and a smile lit her face like the summer sun, melting the ice within her. She threw a laugh skyward that called to his own smile as he slung the blades to the ground. See, he didn't need a kiss to give her the sun.

"This is why I value our friendship, Josiah. You do not mince words around me. I thank you for it. Most see a lady and censor every word that passes their lips."

He dropped to the ground. “Are you a lady? Hadn’t noticed.” He had. Often. Quite often he’d noticed her... lady bits. He simply chose to ignore them. To varying degrees of success.

“Precisely.” She dropped to the ground beside him and reached for a pair of blades. “Now, how do you do this?”

“Let me.” He came around to face her and took the blades from her gloved hands. Her cheeks were lovely today, berry red and glowing, and he tried his best not to notice, but Xavier’s question yesterday—*have you thought about sleeping with her*—had not stopped nagging him since. He picked up one of her booted feet and fitted it to the skate. “You’ve got big feet,” he grumbled. And nice ankles and pink stockings that he should not know existed, and placing a kiss right in the hollow behind her ankle bone would be—

Damn Xavier. Right to hell for he’d thrown Josiah into one. Would he ever be able to turn off the visions the word *kiss* had flooded through him?

She swatted his shoulder. “Take it back.”

“Can’t take back the truth.” Can’t take back dares, either, and all their wanton suggestions.

“Humph. The better to kick you with, then.”

“If you can catch me.” He finished tying her skates on her boots and managed his own before standing and holding out a hand to her.

She took it, and he pulled her to her feet, studying her as she studied the lake stretching out before them.

“You look worried, Lady Gee.”

“I am a bit. I’ve never done this before.”

“And you really doubt you’ll be anything but terribly proficient in no time at all?”

“Perfectly right.” She grinned. “Well then, teach me.”

Why did those words, from her lips, sound so erotic? Like cake, they were. And cake was decidedly not good for the constitution.

He crept cautiously out onto the ice and pulled her with him. She wobbled, lips pressed thin, hands gripping his tightly, but she found her balance and leaned into him for guidance. He skated backward slowly, her two hands in his, her gaze flying between her feet and his face, flying between panic and delight.

“Skating is freedom, Lady Gee. It’s exhilarating and daring. And I know you like daring.”

She nodded, apparently unable to talk while skating.

He lightened his grip on her hands. "Try on your own?"

Another nod, and he let go entirely, and she wobbled, eyes growing into huge moons, arms flailing.

"Stand tall," he said. "Reaching for me will pull you over. Stay calm, too. Move after you find your balance."

She did everything he said until she stood on her own without flailing. "Not so bad. Now what?"

"Move." He skated backward away from her. "To me."

She glared at his skates, then raised her chin high and pushed one foot forward. Then another and another until with jerky, halting strides, she reached him, grasping his hands once more. She did not smile when she looked at him, but her face beamed with happiness, nonetheless.

"If I built a house out here, the suitors could not get to me, and I would no longer need your help."

"What if they learned to skate?"

"They haven't the brains for it, I'm quite sure." She was moving more comfortably now, lengthening her strides, getting closer as he moved farther away.

He held out his arms and slid forward as her gaze caught in his. Until her body jerked. Then her mouth fell open, her eyes flew wide, and she fell forward. Right into his arms. His balance erupted into chaos and the world spun, but he could not straighten his arms out to the side to right his balance because then he'd drop her. So, he clutched her tight. And fell.

The hard ice slammed into his back, and the breath left him in one solid gust of air. Birds cawed, wheeled off branches, and soared into the gray sky, and fingers fluttered like feathers about his face. Georgiana's face appeared in his swimming vision, breath fogging from between parted lips, eyes overflowing with more emotion than he'd ever seen from her.

"Are you hurt?" she demanded, her voice high and sharp. "You must *not* be hurt. I'm sorry. I truly am." She slapped his chest. "You're not to be hurt, do you understand?"

He found his breath with a laugh. "Not. Hurt." He groaned. "Much."

She collapsed on top of him, her hands making fists in the heavy folds of his greatcoat, her face hidden in his chest, for several heavy seconds in which he regained his breath. Then she lifted her face, pressed her lips to his, and stole his breath all over again.

When they'd fallen, the sky and ground had flipped, the world became uneven and unstable, topsy-turvy inside and out but for one thing. Her. Solid in his arms.

And now she kissed him, upending his world once more. If the mere mention of kissing Georgiana had unleashed a flood of images he could not tame, actually kissing her unleashed a flood of sensations that scalded him, turned him to ash, despite the freezing lake beneath him and the gray sky above. Damn, she knew how to kiss, slanting her mouth across his with fervor and skill, using her hands on his cheeks to draw them closer to one another. And since his arms were still around her, he tightened them, allowed himself to register, then enjoy the press of her breasts against his chest.

Then he kissed her back.

Or tried to.

She jerked away from him as he lifted his head from the ice to meet her lips with harder passion, and she slapped her hands to ice, lifted her chest from his, eyes wide with... what? Shock? Disgust? She rolled off him, yelping when she hit the hard surface.

"How do I get up?" she asked, her voice as sharp as the blades on her feet.

"Wait a moment." He shook the lust from his bones—tried to, at least—and rolled over to his hands and knees. He put one foot then the other to the ice and stood slowly, carefully, then bent at the knees and held a hand out to her. "Take hold."

She rolled up to sitting and took his hand, locking her fingers about his wrist. He did the same to her and tugged. Eyes wide, hands clenching for life, she found her feet and fell into his arms once more, but this time he was ready and kept them both upright.

Then she pushed him away so that he coasted backward in a slow slide away from her. She straightened her skirts, fluttered her eyes, and tamed her breath. When she finally met his gaze again, there she was—thin-lipped and icy-eyed, the Lady Gee who used her sharp tongue to wound, not to kiss.

Oh, but he knew better now. What the hell was he supposed to do with such information?

Forget it.

"I do apologize," she said. "Let us return indoors."

"Giving up so soon? Tell me, will you accomplish the dare if you sit in your bedchamber all day?"

“I was not dared to skate.”

“You were dared to take part in a festive house party. Skating is festive.”

She growled. A feral beast lurked beneath her polished surface, teasing him with glimpses, exciting him, making him want more.

“Come, Gee,” he said, “your mood will improve, once you learn how proficient you are at this.”

“Proficient? I knocked you over.”

And kissed him and kissed him and kissed him.

She looked away. Was the red stealing across her cheeks from warm memory or cold air?

He skated toward her, took one of her arms in his and wrapped his other arm around her waist. She tightened, flinched, looked up at him with tight lips.

“I’ll help you around the lake once like this until you get the rhythm of it. Is that allowed?”

She nodded, the set of her jaw one of utmost determination, and they glided off at a snail’s pace, him trying to ignore the feel of her in his arms, and her focused on her feet, the space of ice before them, and her body’s movements. They skated in silence. The sun, trying to break through the thick clouds above, dispersed a faint glow above them, and the ice radiated cold from below.

“Let go,” she finally said. “I’m ready.”

“You sure, Lady Gee?”

A firm nod. “I can do it on my own.”

Ah. Her much-coveted independence.

He let go of the arm around her waist but kept it near, giving her freedom but hovering close enough to swoop in and save her if needs must. He loosened his hold on her hand, and she shook him off, pulling away from him.

He tensed. He couldn’t keep her safe if she was far away, and she was pulling away. He sped up his stride, chasing after her, and side by side, aware of her every wobble, they made a lap of the lake. When they neared the end, or rather the beginning, the place where they’d fallen and she’d kissed him, he sped up, circling her to skate backward in front of her.

He’d never seen her grin like that before. Her entire being blazed with happiness, and so his entire being blazed with pride.

He spread his arms wide when she caught his gaze. “Well done, Lady

Gee. How do you feel?"

"I should be asking you that, after that tumble. I feel... incandescent."

He whistled. "Ready to move to the country then?" Why'd he ask? And why did a tease feel so important?

She laughed. "At least make a visit during the winter."

Because she reigned in a different world than he did.

In silence, he helped her to the edge of the ice and helped her sit down to remove her skates. He plopped down beside her to remove his own. The near-frozen grass crunched beneath them with every move.

She shivered. "Do you think it will snow?"

He nodded. "Are we really never going to acknowledge what happened?"

She pulled her knees up to her belly, and her skirts pooled around them, the deepest green spilling across the winter-brown ground. She stared forward. "That I'm a better skater than you, and with only one try?"

"No."

"That I nearly killed you?" She leaned back and peered at the back of his head. "Do you have a bump?"

"No and no."

She set her shoulders and spoke just above a whisper but with firm words. "It was a dare."

Her meaning came over him slowly like the first drifting flakes of a snowstorm. It—the kiss, she meant—had been a dare. It made him feel... grumbly. But also... he didn't quite believe her. Panicked hands fluttering about him. Her demands that he not be hurt. Then the kiss. Didn't seem like a dare.

"Someone dared you to fell me, then kiss me?" he asked.

"Just kiss."

"So, you took advantage of me when I was down."

She picked at the dead blades of grass between them. "Seemed an opportune time."

Hadn't seemed like opportunity. Hadn't tasted or felt like that. Had felt like desperation. Had tasted like relief. Had seemed like desire.

They stood at the same time, and he gathered the skates, slung them over his shoulder. They wandered up toward the house.

"Do you think anyone saw?" He shouldn't poke the bear. But he wanted to. No clear reason why, just the impulse to poke, poke, poke.

"If they did, they would have seen us fall, catch our breath for several

seconds, then stand once more. Nothing more. And if they did happen to see more from such a distance and such an angle, it would merely secure the rumors about us, a happenstance that has benefited us both.”

He scratched his jaw. “True. Lady Gee?” Time for another poke.

“Yes?”

“I was dared, too.”

She stopped walking, darting a closed look at him. “To do what?”

“Same as you.”

She started toward the house once more. “We’ve both accomplished the dare then and can leave our tormentors to rot.”

He chuckled. “Sarah?”

She nodded. “Xavier?”

“Yes. But Lady Gee?”

“Yes?” Was that irritation he heard in her voice? Perfect.

“I’ve not completed *my* dare yet. You kissed me, but you stopped kissing me before I could kiss you back.”

“That is an unnecessary differentiation. We were both involved in the kiss.”

“It’s quite a valid differentiation.”

“What do you mean by it, though? That you intend to kiss me again? In order to complete your dare?”

He wiggled his eyebrows and lengthened his strides. Of course, he didn’t. He couldn’t. But it would be fun to let her think so.

Not as fun as kissing, though...

She chased after him. “Josiah. Tell me. Do you insist on completing the dare?”

He kept walking, longer strides, faster, until she was running after him, skirts raised for greater ease of movement.

“Josiah, get back here and answer me!”

No. He didn’t think he would. He’d let her stew, guess, and fret because... because he liked to tease her, yes, and because such a tease would distract her from whatever woes had brought her to Apple Grove House to begin with. He didn’t believe she’d come only on a dare. Something in the way she’d spoken to him today, after the card game, had revealed her hidden soul. She’d seemed a bit sad, a lot lonely, and too much used to both.

He could not kiss her because he could not have her. She was London, and he was at Apple Grove. She was a lady of independent means, and he

was an estate manager with a heart tied to the land, to his family. And he was too busy, anyway.

A mantra that had begun to feel hollow, false.

He hunched his shoulders as he entered the house, letting the warmth wipe all that away. He would tease her to keep things light and playful when one kiss had made him wish that he were the type of man a proper lady would wish to wed.

CHAPTER FIVE



December 24

“Christmas is for fools and children... is that redundant?” –from The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady

Georgiana had kissed him, and Josiah intended to kiss her back. Maybe? He wouldn't say, devil take him. Surely he would not, but if he did... disaster loomed ahead, and Georgiana planned to evade it. By evading him. She sat between his two younger brothers, Peter and Henry, in the large drawing room where everyone gathered. At the other end of the room, a large fireplace warmed the assembled guests. In the corner where Georgiana sat, only half listening to schoolboy tales, tall windows let white winter light flood through clean glass. The sky outside was pale and clouded and looked ominously like snow. More ominous still, the few flakes that were already falling, slowly and lonely, onto the deserted, tangled garden.

Hopefully, the snow would become bored and wander away, leaving them to sunnier skies and weather that did not wet the boots. Outside was the surest way to avoid Josiah. So much room to hide there. But two strapping boys offered excellent indoor hiding. Even though they'd not yet reached manhood, they towered over her own small frame. Like their older brothers, Peter and Henry were dark-haired, handsome, and big. Like Josiah, they possessed a rough beauty.

Rough beauty? Her words for Josiah? As if she were... as if she were smitten with the man.

Ha! 'Twas only a kiss, and a dare-fueled one at that. It was of no consequence.

A lie, and she knew it. She'd kissed him not because of a dare but because of fear. Panicked she'd hurt him, she'd put lips to lips and breathed in the steam of his breath in the cold winter air and *liked* it. Wanted more from the rough and beautiful man who kissed with the softness of adoration and the patience of... what? Some hard-won transformative emotion she didn't even believe in.

Worse and worse.

She tried to focus on something Peter was saying. "Thistle feet?" Georgiana asked. "What does that mean?"

Peter chuckled. "No, Lady Georgiana. I said mistletoe. See?" He nodded to the doorway where a bunch of greenery with white berries hung. "Sarah and Edith sent us out to gather it up this morning. We were not supposed to put it up until tomorrow, but—" He grinned.

Henry grinned, too. "It's more fun this way. Earlier, Papa bumped through the door at the same time as Xavier, and when we told them to look up, they both turned red as a fire and ran quick as terrified mice in opposite directions."

Peter guffawed. "I say they still owe us all a kiss."

Kisses. Could she not escape them? They swooped in and stole her attention away. She'd thought she'd already known enough about kissing. Had made a study of it some years ago. Out of curiosity, a thirst for knowledge of all kinds.

She'd known nothing. The myriad of points along their bodies where she and Josiah had touched had been pinpricks of heat that had spiraled out into pure pleasure. He'd been hard as the ice but warm, and she'd wanted to eat him up like her favorite cake.

Foolish, that. Best to ignore it, return to how things were before the kiss.

She peeked out from behind Henry's shoulder. Josiah had entered the room at some point, and he stood with Xavier near the fire talking heatedly about something. Josiah's mouth was mobile, flexible, and expressive, and she could not look away. He turned slightly so his back was to her. She scowled at the loss of Josiah's profile. Then she didn't, prompted by an unexpected gain to replace the loss—Josiah's backside. Broad shoulders to

make a lady's mouth water and a trim waist. A rear lovingly outlined by buckskins and thick, muscled thighs from hours of riding each day.

Men of the country had their good qualities, it seemed.

"Lady Georgiana, did you hear that?" Henry asked.

"Yes. Quite amusing."

"It is, isn't it," Peter replied, unaware, despite the monotone note of her voice that she'd not been attending the conversation at all. Rather, she'd been enjoying delectable sights she had no right to notice.

Until she wasn't anymore. A woman—Miss Darlington—moved between her and Josiah, blocking the view and tapping Josiah on the shoulder. He turned around, and though no one but Georgiana likely noticed, his eyes widened. An infinitesimal sign of panic. The huntress had him in her sights, and like a terrified doe, he wished for a direction to flee in. She sank heavily in her seat, weighed down by guilt. She'd promised to help him. And he'd helped her today. She'd never thought sailing around a frozen lake with blades on her feet would make her feel so light, so alive, so happy. But she had, and she already planned to do it again tomorrow if she could discover where Josiah had put the skates.

He'd helped her to a moment of joy when she'd felt so little joy in the past months. Months only? No. Years had sunk her down and rubbed her raw, years of being alert and vigilant to protect her heart, years of looking around every corner for a dastardly man waiting to deceive her. Years of living with a woman who spoke with her only to speak ill of everyone and everything. Years of knowing her family—mother, father, brothers, sisters—wandered about the world with no interest in her.

No wonder everything had soured. No wonder *she* had soured.

But Josiah was the opposite of sour. He had tasted sweet. So sweet. Unexpectedly so, like cream and chocolate.

Miss Darlington hung on Josiah's arm. Tittering. Pulling him toward the doorway, toward the mistletoe.

Georgiana stood up like a spring. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

Josiah saw her as soon as she stood, and his shoulders melted downward, relief writ plain upon his body.

She sailed across the room, dodging guests with ease, and put herself just below the mistletoe instead. She batted her eyelashes at Josiah and met Miss Darlington with a polite smile. "Good afternoon. Are you well today?"

Miss Darlington smiled back. Just as politely. But her gaze flicked for a

brief moment to the bundle of leaves and berries above Georgiana's head. "Perfectly well. Thank you very much, Lady Georgiana. And have you slept off the effects of the negus?"

"I have. Thank you."

Often, young debutantes cowered a bit when faced with Georgiana. Her title, her money, her relative independence... they made her formidable to girls whose lives depended upon reputation, pedigree, and deep pockets.

This debutante, however, fresh-faced and lively, did not cower an inch.

"Excellent," Miss Darlington said. "I'd dislike facing an opponent who is not at her best. I do so enjoy a good challenge."

No question what sort of challenge she meant—capturing Josiah.

"Now," Miss Darlington said, "you are quite in the way."

Georgiana stuck her feet to the floor. To move would be to surrender, to abandon Josiah to the enemy. Never. "This is quite the warmest spot in the room, and I feel chill."

"I suggest you move nearer the fire," Miss Darlington ground out.

Josiah stepped between them. "I trust Lady Gee knows the best way to keep herself warm."

Using the nickname—a sure way to tell the chit, without saying much at all, that he and Georgiana shared a closeness.

She could do one better. She looked up at him and raised a brow. "I thank you for your trust. I do have many *excellent* ideas about how to keep warm." Kissing, for instance, provided a wealth of instant heat. Hands, too, lifting hems and lowering bodices, and knees—his—pressing between her legs where she throbbed for release. All excellent sources of heat.

A sort of hiccupping sound escaped from Josiah as red rushed across his cheeks. Imagine. A man like him, blushing. He rolled his shoulders and recovered. "Ah, yes, I too am something of an expert on the subject of staying warm. I guarantee a tangle of mistletoe can heat a body better than a log or lump of coal."

She almost rolled her eyes and broke into a laugh. Or she would have months ago, but after that kiss their usual banter seemed more potent, more like a prelude to something bigger, something unavoidable.

A snapping sound grabbed their attention. Miss Darlington had pulled a fan from the ether or some hidden pocket, flicked it open, and fluttered it before her, half her face hidden.

"Mr. Evans, perhaps you could demonstrate just how mistletoe works for

such a purpose.” More fluttering beneath those blue eyes.

His jaw dropped, and Georgiana tapped his shoulder before he could find his voice and speak the shock written on his face.

“It does seem as if Miss Darlington is in need of an education. What a shame, though. You promised yesterday to take me to the barn to see the cows.” She would *not* wrinkle her nose.

Miss Darlington did, though, and took a step back. “Cows?”

“Just so,” Josiah said, offering Georgiana his arm. “Let us be off then. Perhaps you’ll get a chance to milk one.”

She took his proffered arm, and they exited the room together.

“Cows, Gee,” he muttered. “I’m taking you to the stable, not the barn. We’ll find horses there, dogs. No cows. We’ve a few tenant farmers in the nearby village with cows and barns. I can take you to milk those if you like.”

“I do not like. And the truth of the matter hardly signifies. Talk of cows worked to free you from Miss Darlington’s sights, didn’t it?”

“That it did.” He squeezed her tighter to his side. “What about puppies? Will meeting a small furry litter make up for the absence of cows?”

“Let’s see, shall we?” She should pull away now they were away from prying eyes, but it felt nice to be tucked in right there, safe and warm. She’d saved him, and she should leave him be until she was next needed, but they must visit the stable now. In case someone watched them.

They jaunted into the gray morning light toward the stable, small weightless snowflakes dusting their shoulders. They’d not taken the time to don coats and pelisses, hats and muffs, and she wrapped her arms around her to hug herself warm as they walked.

The stable loomed, big and dark and deserted. Would he attempt to complete the dare and kiss her?

He wasn’t saying.

She pulled away from him once they entered the barn. “Where is everyone?” She needed people about to ensure her safety from a kiss she shouldn’t want and that should not happen.

“About, I’m sure. Though with a single day left until Christmas, we’ve sent many home. It’s just family here. No need for formalities.”

Family. The word put a hitch in her steps. She stumbled as if it had appeared suddenly and physically before her, an unseen ha-ha in an otherwise even field. She was here. Did that mean he considered her family? Family to this large and loud group of people? She’d lost the only family she’d ever

had, had never thought to gain one back. Had not thought she wished to gain one back. But... perhaps she did?

The word she'd stumbled over poured liquid gold inside her, ambrosia in linguistic form, bringing with it images of yesterday, everyone laughing as they played cards, teasing by the fire. Warm. And good. So very good.

He cupped her elbow and peered down at her, his fingertips sizzling heat through layers of clothing, heat so visceral she looked down to ensure his hands had not turned to fire. No gloves, but no flames, either. At least none either of them could see.

She yanked her arm away. "I'm well. Thank you. Where are these puppies you promised?"

"Wait a moment." He spoke around a grin then strode off, disappearing into the bowels of the building.

When he did not soon return, Georgiana called out, "Jos. You're not leaving me here like a fool, alone and cold are you?"

"Never!" His voice boomed back to her though she could not see him.

She ventured toward the sound, and then he appeared, bouncing into view.

"This way. I've made it just perfect for Lady Georgiana, mistress of London Town."

"You do know how to make a lady suspicious." She ventured carefully, one small step at a time until she passed through the stall doors and stood beside him, looking down at tumbling balls of fur. "Oh."

"Go ahead," he said, "kneel down and play. I've put a blanket over the hay to protect your skirts, and I've another one here." He patted a dark blanket hung over the stall door. "We can rest it over your legs to protect your lap. Can't help with your bodice unless I wrap you up from head to toe."

She sank to her knees on the blanket, her hands fluttering to her belly, her belly fluttering for reasons related to the man behind her she'd rather not investigate.

Why'd she have to kiss him and ruin everything?

"Take one up," he said, kneeling beside her and reaching for a tiny dog. "They won't bite much. Watch out for sharp little teeth. Like daggers, they are."

She glanced at him to see if he teased. It was entirely unable to tell, so she reached for a dog. They were brown with white blotches and floppy ears, and she touched her fingertips softly to one's back. It whipped around to sniff,

and she snatched her hand back. Another pup, another time, had sniffed her hand, licked it.

“Oh.” She pressed a hand to her cheek, digging deep into her memory, and stared firmly into the puppy-strewn hay. “It has been so very long since I’ve held a dog. I had one once. A little one. When I lived with my father and mother.” Pocket had been his name. She’d loved him more than a little. “It’s been so long since I thought of him. I missed him. When I first went to live with my aunt.”

“When was that?”

“When I was ten. Almost. Let’s see. It was the day after Christmas, and twenty-two days until my birthday.”

His hand wrapped around her neck and nudged her, encouraged her to look his way, and she did but dropped her gaze. Until his knuckles beneath her chin raised it, forced her to see his eyes. “Your parents sent you away during Christmas? When you were so young? Hell, Georgie. Did you know the woman they sent you to?”

“I’d met Aunt Prudence once before.”

“Once? And your parents sent you to live with her?”

“My father, the Earl of Hatchetford, was much in debt with too many children. I have nine brothers and sisters. Living ones. And when my aunt, my father’s sister offered to take me, my father and mother gladly shoved me off in her direction. She’d married rich. But she was widowed by the time I met her. They’d had no children, and everything was entailed except her dower share that went to some distant cousin, but she also had her own wealth, secreted away and invested with the help of a lover. She wanted an heiress to leave it to. Mostly as a final insult to her dead husband, a way of saying, look, a woman will inherit it all!”

Shadows fell heavy across his grim face. “She adopted you as an insult to her dead husband?”

Georgiana shrugged, the only way she could face the disgust in his voice. She’d never considered it as anything other than a fitting revenge for a man she’d been told was nothing but cruel.

“When you left to live with her, on Christmas day, did they travel with you? Your parents?” No disgust in his voice now. Only softness, the gentle reach out toward a wild thing that might bolt.

What need had Georgiana to bolt, though? They were just the facts of her own life. “No. My aunt sent a coach for me, and I was deposited on her

doorstep, valise in hand.”

“Hell.”

“I never went to them for Christmas after that, or for any other reason, and my aunt did not find it expedient to celebrate that holiday. Or any other.”

“I suppose that explains your distaste for the holiday.”

She swallowed the rising lump in her throat. “I’ve not had a Christmas for over a decade now. And the last I remember was not particularly joyful.”

Something heavy buzzed between them. She never talked about her family, not even to Sarah. She’d not received a letter from her mother since her aunt’s funeral, nor from any of her five sisters and four brothers, nor from her father. Once they realized the portion paid to them yearly—the benefit of handing a daughter over to a lonely old woman to be her heiress—would continue after Aunt Prudence’s death, they had disappeared once more. Before Aunt Prudence’s death, they’d visited now and then, presumably to ensure the old woman didn’t forget them. And now that they knew she had not, it appeared they intended to forget Georgiana.

“I invited them for the holiday,” she said quietly. “They declined and did not extend an invitation to me.” Were they all together now? Forgetting her in the same air and around the same fire? Loneliness rose on a swelling wave. She held her breath until it retreated once more.

She tried to look at Josiah but could only manage to focus on his hand resting on his thigh. His buckskins were tan and stretched tight over thick muscles. His hand was large and roped with veins and tendons, the knuckles scuffed. The hands of a man who used them to work. The details threatened to fill her up with sensation, memories of his body beneath her when they’d fallen to the ice, when she’d pressed her lips to his. The air grew thick, and her breath came hard.

She scowled. “Where have your gloves got to?” Scowling, picking, poking—familiar things flooded her lungs with air once more.

“Hell if I know, Lady Gee.” Then he huffed. “I can’t believe it has been over a decade since you’ve held a puppy. Criminal. They do have them in Town, you know. Here. Take this one.” He stuffed the one he’d been holding toward her belly, and her hands wrapped around it instinctually, and—oh—its fur was so soft, its nose so cold and pink. Every blade and edge of her completely melted away, and she felt raw, exposed, helpless. She clutched the puppy to her, dipping to nuzzle her cheek on its soft head and almost—*almost*—shed a tear.

For what? And why?

For herself. And for so many reasons.

“Georgie.” Josiah’s voice was hoarse and low. “I—”

A stampede of puppies tumbled into her lap, yapping for their brother, and she never got to hear what he would have said because they broke into laughter, and she fell backward. Into the hay, throwing the blanket beneath her askew, the puppies tackling her, licking her.

“Hell.” Josiah picked a puppy off her and put it aside. He picked another puppy up, and the first one he’d divested her of charged back into the fray, and Georgiana’s laughs came from so deep within that her belly ached. Every puppy he picked off her just returned again and again until he gave up and lay in the hay beside her, his laughter mingling rich and deep with her own.

He rolled to his side, facing her, and she would not have noticed. She’d flung one arm over her eyes ages ago, and the other over her aching belly. But his warmth. And his laughter had stopped, creating a cavern of silence around them both but for the scurrying puppies. So, she let her arm fall to her side and opened her eyes. He hovered over her, one arm braced by her head, the length of his body pressing near, his eyes intense and so blue she could not see past them. Except for that rogue lock of hair falling over one eye. She pushed it back and tucked it behind his ear.

She was still looking into his eyes when he spoke, and she did not see his lips move.

“I was dared, Georgie. I *have* to.” He lifted his free arm to cup her jaw, her cheek, his rough, ungloved hand so very big on her face. She felt like a doll, tiny and fragile. On an inhale he closed the distance between them, nudging his nose against hers. And on an exhale, he kissed her.

A dare. Only a dare. He’d even said so.

Why, then, did it feel like so much more? Why did her arms wrap gently around him and find a groove that felt so right? Made for her. Why did her back arch up to press her belly against his hard, flat chest, a heaven of geometry, angles and curves? Why did he moan and tighten his hold? Why did his hand roam lower, down her neck and shoulder, and lower to smooth over her ribs, then upward to cup her breast?

She gasped, and he didn’t seem to care. Neither did she. Not a gasp of shame or anger. A gasp of shock, yes, but one that welcomed, too, especially when his thumb began to sweep left and right and left and right over and over again, a teasing of her nerve endings.

He slanted his kiss, parted her lips, and touched the tip of his tongue to hers. She followed his lead, exploring him as he did her, opening to him. As he did her. Where their lips met, all softness. Where their bodies met, hands and arms and the leg he swung over her skirts, all breathless expectation.

Only a dare?

When the kiss washed away the memories she had not wanted to drown in that day? When it had replaced the hollow sadness inside her with something like... hope? How long had it been since she'd felt that? And when had it gone missing?

And why was it Josiah who brimmed it full within her?

A creak from somewhere nearby shattered the eager silence between them. He lifted away with the sound, looking up, alert.

She couldn't lose it, lose him, lose this new finding of herself, this moment of discovery. She wrapped her hands around his head, darting her fingers into the thick, silken strands of his hair, and pulled him back down for another kiss.

A third kiss.

A kiss not born of daring but of need.

"Mr. Evans? Lady Georgiana?" Miss Darlington's voice, high and inquisitive, innocent yet knowing.

"Hell," Josiah hissed, rolling off her. "*Hell.*"

The puppies scattered. Oh. Yes. The puppies. She'd quite forgotten them. But now she wanted to gather them all to her, hug them all at once.

"Shh," she hissed. "You're scaring the poor dears."

"Shh," he hissed. "You'll give us away."

She darted to her feet. "Hell."

"Precisely." He swept hay from his buckskins. "Now you see."

Now she saw. Whatever it was they were doing in the hay, he could not do it, did not have time for it.

She brushed the hay from her skirts in frantic motions, but when he stepped near, she stopped moving all together, stopped breathing, too. So near. Their chests nearly touching, his gem-like gaze roaming over her face as he lifted a hand and pulled a bit of hay from her hair. He stepped away and rubbed his fingers together, sending the hay fluttering to the floor.

Yes. Now she saw. She saw she did not want him to step away. She saw she'd come here not for the country or for Christmas but for family. For *him*. Her friend who made her smile and feel less hollow, her friend who felt like

the closest of family, like the person who kept her safe and warm and happy. Every day. Every night.

Where was her coveted independence now? The thing she held closest in the world?

She wanted to hold *him* closer. Because he held her tight when she needed it, unsteady on blades sliding across ice, and let her go when the time was right so she could glide alone on her own two legs. Because he kept his distance yet held her steady, punched men not to claim her but to help her claim the life she wanted, a life alone.

Did she want that?

Maybe not so much. Maybe not anymore.

Curse it.

Of course, she'd fallen for the only bachelor in England who didn't want her in return. And how exactly had it happened? Somewhere between cake and fake insults and pretending they belonged to each other, she'd realized she actually did belong to him.

Hell indeed.

CHAPTER SIX



*“The marital act is a waste of time. Learn how to please yourself.”—
The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady*

Josiah had been a heated breath away from letting his hand wander lower on Georgie’s delectable body, find the hem of her gown, and rake it up the length of her legs. Without thinking about it, he’d meant to find the very core of her and explore its wonders. Before that, the shapely length of her legs in her impractical silk stockings and the curve of her hip. And after that, he would have brought her to the peak of pleasure with his fingers. He would have felt her writhe, and heard her scream, hopefully his name. And then... and then what?

Thank God they’d been interrupted.

He strode out of the stall. *Please stay put, Georgie. Stay the hell hidden.*

He strode right past the wide-eyed Miss Darlington and toward the stable doors. “Looking for me?”

“Ah, Mr. Evans. Where is Lady Georgiana?”

“I’ve not a clue. She left immediately. She despises dirt and fur and such.”

“Ah. Of course.” Her smile brightened. “I am delighted to have met *you* here, though. It was truly you I was looking for, after all.”

He leaned against a post and crossed his arms over his chest, his legs at the ankles. “I feel I must be direct with you once again, Miss Darlington. I am not in the market for a wife.” There. Let her take that how she would.

She kept her grin, gave a little shake of her curls. “And what of Lady Georgiana?”

“What of her?”

“If you’ll allow *me* to be direct, Mr. Evans. There are rumors about the two of you, but no one in your family, including your eldest brother, will confirm the truth of them. And don’t all bachelors say they hate the idea of a wife? Until they have one.” Her grin widened. So many teeth! “And so, Mr. Evans, until the banns are read proclaiming some other woman to be that wife, I say there is hope.”

He straightened and took a step toward her.

And the bang of a stall door hitting the wall made him jump.

Georgiana stood elegant and icy calm, her gaze riveted on Miss Darlington. Then it swung to him. She marched down the aisle and stopped directly beside him, while a smile like a pleased cat curved her lips. She walked two fingers up his arm and over the slope of his shoulder before sliding her warm palm behind his neck, pulling him down and kissing him soundly on the lips.

He stumbled backward, landing against a locked stall, his hands floating at his sides, unsure what to do—as they wished to grab her tight against him or, as he knew best, set her aside and lock his arms behind his back like bars of steel, chains of iron.

His arms didn’t matter because she clutched him, popping up onto tiptoes to meld their lips, their bodies, together in an embrace that should have no audience. An embrace with one clear message.

And one inevitable outcome.

Then just as quickly as she’d claimed him, Georgiana stepped away and turned to Miss Darlington. “As you see. Mr. Evans is not on the market.” She sent one sizzling gaze over her shoulder at him, then strode out of the stable with a defiant sway in her hips that made his already hard body throb. He trapped a groan inside his chest.

What had she done?

Miss Darlington cleared her throat. “Ah. I see. That does clarify things.”

For her perhaps. For him, everything had turned mud.

“Excuse me, Miss Darlington. I must...” He had no excuse close to hand, so he bowed and left.

Georgiana all but ran toward the house, her skirts pulled high, and he chased after her. He didn’t run. No need to. He’d catch her, eventually.

Through the door, up the stairs, right to her bedchamber door. He heard it slam shut before he even reached the top of the stairs, and still he pressed on

until he stood right before it. Knocked. Perhaps banged would be a better descriptor.

“Open up, Georgiana. Now.”

“No.” So calm. So damn calm, he wanted to spit.

“I’ll break the door down.”

“You won’t!”

“Ha. You do not know me if you truly think that.”

“The noise will bring the entire house to the hallway.” Her hissing voice was closer now, right behind the door.

“And Miss Darlington’s prattling will do the same.” He slammed a shoulder against the door so hard the frame shook. “Open it.” A growl, a demand.

He reared back and lifted a leg. He’d kick the damn thing down.

It swung open, and the glare that met him dropped his booted foot with a thud to the floor. She stood golden and cold, chin high, spine straight, arms crossed beneath her plump breasts. He stormed into the room and slammed the door behind him.

“You’re a beast.” She spat the words. “Break your own door, and for what reason?”

He prowled closer. “What reason? You kissed me. How’s that for a reason?”

“I saved you from the matrimonial machinations of Miss Darlington. Isn’t that what you wished me to do?”

“She’ll tell everyone.” The words ripped out of him in a rush of panic, accompanied by a host of words that didn’t make it past his lips—caught, trapped, failed.

Her eyes widened, and she rocked back on her heels. “You’re screaming will tell everyone.”

He turned, thrusting his fingers through his hair. “I *can’t* marry you.”

“Of course not.”

He turned back to face her, quick as a star shooting across the night sky. “Then why the hell kiss me in front of her?”

She shrugged. “I have never intended to marry either. I fail to see how it matters.”

“I’m a gentleman,” he ground out. “And I’ve more or less compromised you now.”

“I’ve compromised *you*. You’re overreacting, Josiah. Neither of us intend

to marry, and—”

“And no amount of money can save your reputation. Before, our names were connected through rumors, a vague insinuation based on a few meetings in Town. Now it’s a *truth*, Georgiana. A kiss makes all those rumors true. If I do not marry you now, you are ruined.” And he couldn’t allow that because that would be the biggest failure of all, the one his mother would most abhor, the one that would dim the pride in Xavier’s eyes. Did he have time for a wife? Plans for one? Need for one? No. But would he let her ruin herself so soundly?

Hell no.

“You know this, Georgiana,” he growled. “Why the hell am I explaining it?”

She seemed to... shrink. Her shoulders slumped, and the pink drained from her cheeks. The angry gleam in her eyes died, too, and her gaze fluttered away from him. Then she recovered, and she strode up to him as she had in the stable. “I’ll not marry you.”

“You will if Miss Darlington speaks.”

Her jaw ticked, the muscles there, everywhere in her body really, hardening in determination.

“Gee.” He softened his voice, stepped closer, hands raised palms up between them. “It will not be so bad. I will be a rather distracted husband, but I will do my best. And quite obviously we have a... spark between us. Things will be good, particularly in the—”

“We will live in the city?” she asked, her tone of voice more demanding than questioning.

“Of course not. You’d live here. My work is here, and—”

“No.” She stepped closer. He could feel the rise and fall of her breaths, the heat of her breath on his chin. She poked him in the chest. “I do as I please, Josiah Evans, and you’ll not control me. No man will.”

He snapped around, flinging his arms into the air and letting them fall dead as logs at his sides. “I don’t want to control you! I want to... I want to...” He spun back around, the toe of his boot scuffing on the wood floor. He felt wild, desperate, energy coursing through him like a river at flood. She wouldn’t marry him. But she had to. She must. She’d be ruined if she didn’t. And something else. Something simmering he didn’t dare look at. Another reason—his rising panic. After today, she’d never speak to him again, she’d cut him out of her life with a dagger glance. Something she could not do if

she wed him.

The loss of her.

The loss of her—her wit, her touch, her soft, hidden heart. The loss of her friendship.

Hell no. He'd just have to convince her. He closed his eyes and rolled his shoulders, willing his muscles to relax, and said once more, "I do not wish to control you. But there are reasons you should not reject me out of hand." He stepped forward, walking her backward toward her bed until her thighs hit it, and she sat. "Let me show you." Still, he prowled after her, nestling one knee at a time on the mattress, laying her back on the bed. "Do you know what I wanted to do to you in the stable?"

Her breath caught as he laid his body next to hers, only a sliver of sizzling space between them, and her eyes fogged, the anger draining slowly from her. "You were kissing me, so I assume you wished to be kissing me."

He nodded. "And more." He cradled her head with one hand, and with the other, he crushed her skirts in a fist, drawing them up and up until those stockings, those legs, lay open to his gaze. He left her skirts puddled at her waist, and stroked his palm, his fingertips up the length of her leg until she shivered.

"I assure you," she said, her eyes closing, "you are making me far from miserable."

What use were words? He grunted, splayed his hand on her upper thigh, and let his finger explore the heated space between her legs. No teasing, no slow seduction. He found what he wanted and took it. She gasped and bit her bottom lip, and he replaced her teeth with his, bit into the sensitive, sweet-tasting flesh.

Using pleasure to convince her how good it would be in their marriage bed. A bit of himself he had shoved deep down, mostly because it sounded rather like Xavier, screamed out that this was not how to woo her. Woo her? Was he doing that? Wooing his friend?

Yes indeed he was. No going back.

He dropped to his knees at the end of the bed, and when she gasped, reached to grab him back to her, he wrapped his hands around her hips and dragged her to the edge of the mattress.

"From our first conversation, sweetheart, I've shocked you with my mouth, using it to say things no gentleman says to a lady. You shocked me with your mouth, too. Heaven, what you can do with a cake between your

lips, Gee. I could watch you all damn day.” He cupped her knees, pressed them out to make room for his shoulders, loving her hissing intake of breath, her fingers tangling with his hair. “No good man would do what I’m about to do to an innocent. But I’ve a feeling... you’ll like it. Are you ready to be shocked by my mouth once more?” His seeking fingers found her nub and rubbed.

Her hands fisted in the coverlet, balling it, wrinkling it, her knuckles white, her back arching as she pushed her cunny against his hand. “Shock me,” she whispered.

“You’ve pleased yourself, sweet. I know you have. You’re just the type.”

“Yes.”

“Next time, think of me.”

A breathy chuckle. “Nothing new.”

Damn. Her admission rocked him back on his heels, and he almost fell flat on his arse. “Have you?” His own voice hoarse with a likely unquenchable lust.

“Yes.”

“Yes. Such a biddable word from such a termagant.”

She reached down her body for him, tugged his hair, proving she’d never be biddable.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Please.” A plea.

“Here.” He caressed his knuckles over her, then put his mouth where he had promised.

She yelped, a shiver shaking through the length of her. “I... I...” But she had no words.

And he wouldn’t give her the opportunity to think of any. She tasted sweeter than any woman he’d ever tasted. Perhaps because he knew her better than any other woman he’d touched like this, and when he licked and sucked, circled and kissed and stroked inside of her with eager, probing tongue and fingers, *she* claimed *him*. More than she had in the stable. Claimed his heart.

How the hell had it happened? When? When he’d watched her moan over cake and seen a crack of joy in her usually dour demeanor? When she’d entrusted him to take care of her unwanted suitors? When she’d told him about her last Christmas with her family?

Then she moaned his name, and *when* didn't matter. *Now* only had meaning.

"Josiah," she said again.

He put every cursed realization into his ministrations, and when next she moaned, it became a scream, her muscles tightening, her back arching. He climbed back onto the bed to watch her climax break over her, and she grasped for him, hands cupping his face, lips seeking out his so he could share the moment with her. A hard, fast kiss before her muscles unknitted, and she hid her face in his shoulder.

He lay with her as her body unwound and her breathing settled into an easier rhythm. Then he rolled onto his back, and she followed, half her body covering his, her ear resting against his chest, right over his beating heart. His? More accurate to say hers.



What did it mean to belong to someone? The question floated lazily through her as Georgiana rested in Josiah's arms. She'd always known belonging to someone, particularly a man, would prove the worst of nightmares. The last man she'd belonged to—her father—had practically sold her. Now she belonged to no one but herself and would never have to worry about such betrayals.

But did she belong only to herself? The last few minutes suggested she'd stepped over a line, threatened her self-possession, her independence. And enjoyed it. Reveled in it. Even now, melting into Josiah's body with a languid heat that would melt the falling snow outside the window, she wanted more.

He claimed they would be good together, but his proof offered evidence on the physical plane alone. A steward and a Town girl? A woman who valued her independence above all else and the man who'd stormed into her bedroom and demanded she marry him.

Unease crept through her like a slow trickle of honey—sticky and too sweet and offering granular truths in the amber ooze.

She should not have kissed him. Not like that—possessive and eager and in front of Miss Darlington. The girl would talk, surely. Josiah was right. This changed things.

She should move away from him, but his scent of horse and hay and

winter air stayed her, and she flattened her palm on his chest. “Perhaps...” She spoke softly and slowly, testing her voice. “We should wait before taking any action. See if Miss Darlington speaks of what happened.” There. A compromise, and a sensible one, too.

He made a low noise she likely only heard because her ear pressed against his chest, heard every rumble of his being.

“I should not have done it,” she admitted.

“Why did you?” But his arm stole around her back, pressing her closer.

She did not groan. Not that anyone could hear, but oh, how she wanted to. When her head hit the pillow later that night, she’d groan good, flail her legs a bit too because she knew precisely why she’d kissed him in front of Miss Darlington.

Jealousy. A primal urge to tell the other woman a single powerful message—he’s mine.

She waited for him to respond to her suggestion that they play a waiting game and forget his own question. She would not answer it. And, it seemed, he would not respond to her. Instead, he ran his knuckles up and down her temples.

“What if,” Georgiana ventured, offering another compromise, another solution, “I tell her it was all a dare? A game.”

He sat up, taking her with him and pulling them both to their feet. “It wasn’t a dare. Nor a game.” He smoothed her hair and righted her skirts, tending to her with gentle, possessive motions. But he never looked her in the eyes.

It hadn’t been a dare. The first kiss either, honestly. She straightened his waistcoat, smoothed his lapels, brushed a bit of lint off his shoulder, and tried to tame that wild curl of his. She wanted, needed, to know how he felt about her. His friend. Yes, that much was clear. But the way he’d kissed. The way he’d...

“Why did you do that?” She cast her gaze toward the bed. “To me?” There was a right answer to her question, and it fizzed in her like champagne bubbles. Her feelings for him just as fizzy, popping along her skin with a giddiness she’d never felt before. More than friendship, more than flirtation, more than helping one another escape. He’d become the arms she wanted to escape to.

If he’d kissed her, touched her, rocked her to that perfect peak of feeling because he felt the same... The tips of her fingers felt cold as her blood ran

hot.

He scratched the back of his neck, then let his arm fall heavy to the side. “Because I wanted to. To prove to you marriage will not be so bad.”

“Marriage... *will* not be so bad?” She stepped away from him. “What can you mean by that? Using *will* as if marriage is a certainty?”

He strode around her. “Because it is.”

“Pardon me?” The slap of her slippers against the floor was as quick as the blood pounding in her heart just before she caught his arm, turned him toward her, held him fast, a manacle of a hand around his biceps so he could not leave. Not without explanation. “It most certainly is not.”

“Don’t be naïve, Georgie. We must wed. Miss Darlington will not stay quiet. Why would she? We let the *ton* think for months I was courting you. And surely everyone heard me crashing down your door.”

“And is there no other reason? For kissing me as you did?”

“What other reason could there be?” A wave of red flushed across his cheeks before he paled. “I did not plan for this.”

It was as if he’d said he did not *want* this, despite his bellowing, despite his insistence, despite the way he’d caressed her. Loved her, she’d thought.

With trembling fingers, she released him, shrank from him. “No. You did not. And neither did I. Where are you going?”

He strode for the door, opened it. “I’ll return when you’re more sensible, or you can seek me out. We can discuss where we will live and the like, but we must wed.” The last gaze he gifted her bore no sign of compromise, no softness, humor, or friendship. “You can’t escape it.” He strode into the hall.

She flew after him. “I’ll not marry you, Josiah Evans! I’d rather die.”

He flinched. “We’ll see.” Spoken without even looking over his shoulder at her. With long, calm strides he disappeared down the staircase.

A red rage grew like an ocean wave within her as she reentered her chamber and slammed the door closed. She grabbed the nearest object at hand and threw it at the door where it smashed into countless pieces. Her breath came in heavy, angry pants, but the shattering of the vase had stilled something inside her, chilled her like a deep winter wind. “You are a scoundrel like all the rest, Josiah Evans.” But his betrayal hurt worse than all the rest because she’d thought him better. The best, really.

She turned from the door and marched to the window. She wished she hated him. But she didn’t. Not even a little. Perhaps this was what her aunt had meant when she’d warned her of men. Not of their cruel carelessness or

roaming nether regions, not of their dull minds or greedy guts. Perhaps she'd been warning of their inability to know their own hearts, and their willingness to break others.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Christmas Day

*“Never wait for a man to help you. You must always save yourself.” –
from *The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady**

Josiah yawned as he stepped foot into the hallway the next morning. Or tried to. The sound caught in his throat, turned into a guttural choke when his brother slammed him up against the wall.

“What the hell?” he tried to say, but it came out more like *grraacckkk*.

“What the hell,” Xavier growled, low and feral, “are you doing with Lady Georgiana?”

What was he doing with her? Trying to save her from a fate she didn’t fully understand. A fate she didn’t seem to want to understand.

Josiah curled his hands into fists and curled all his muscles into steel to push against his brother, who held fast. “You can’t get an answer if you strangle me.”

Xavier loosened his grip, and Josiah shoved him hard, sending him stumbling back a few steps. Josiah’s hand made a fist, itched to connect with his brother’s eye, but he shook it out and strode toward the stairs.

“Answer me.” Xavier’s hand on his shoulder yanked him back. “The entire house heard you arguing yesterday when Sarah and I were out gathering greenery. You, they say, demanding to be let into her bedchamber.”

He hissed the last two words. “Then neither of you show up for dinner, and today she left with the rising sun, refusing to stay for the ball this evening. Answer me. What the hell happened?”

She’d left? Josiah’s beating heart shocked the air from his lungs. Breathe. He could not breathe. He pulled at his cravat and pushed some words through. “We. We had a. A disagreement. She’s gone?” He found a window at the end of the hallway and peered out, hands clenching the frame. Snow fell hard and fast, and at least two inches of the powdery stuff covered the ground. She’d left for London at the beginning of a snowstorm, and on Christmas day, the anniversary of the day she’d left her family, of her own transformation from poor earl’s daughter to heiress. Alone.

A small growl rumbled through him, a determination to stop that fate.

“Do you care she’s gone?” Xavier demanded, striding toward him.

“Of course, I do! In this weather? It’s much too dangerous for travel.” He headed toward the other end of the hall, Xavier following.

“Is that the only reason you care she’s left?” Xavier asked. Another demand.

And one that poked at a scratching discomfort in Josiah’s gut, a screaming banshee whose wail he could not quite understand over his fervent need to bring Georgie back. Yesterday... yesterday had sent him reeling from the heights of pleasure to the depths of anger and dismay. Frustration, determination, a bit of awe as well—all had wound him tight and clouded his mind. He’d avoided her the rest of the day. She was an intelligent woman. She would realize with rational thought that they must marry. He’d hoped this morning to meet her over the breakfast table and see that recognition in her eyes.

But she’d gone. At the beginning of what might be a snowstorm if the low-hanging gray sky were any indications.

“Is that the only reason you care she’s left?” Xavier jolted down the stairs at Josiah’s back, his voice a bark in Josiah’s ear.

No. No. Something else, damn him.

“I told her we would marry,” Josiah said, incapable of answering his brother’s question. “And she refused. If you roar at anyone, roar at her.”

Xavier’s hand on Josiah’s shoulder stopped him near the bottom of the staircase, and Josiah curled his fingers round the polished, dark oak banister and turned with the speed of molasses dripping from a dish to face his brother. Xavier didn’t flinch away, though Josiah knew rage sparked in his

eyes. For slowing him down, keeping him from going after her.

“You *told* her?”

Was Xavier going deaf?

“You can’t tell a woman like that what she is and is not going to do.” Xavier groaned and scrubbed his palms over his face before looking at Josiah like he was the world’s biggest nodcock. “Last year she wore a wig and domino and followed Sarah about on a series of dares that could have ruined them. Almost did ruin them! She has her own money, her own home, and you think she’s going to bow to you and say, *As it pleases you, Mr. Evans*, when you tell her what to do?”

Josiah’s hands became fists, and his ribs became a vise. Not because of the insult but because Xavier was right. He’d mucked up good. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s clear.”

“I want her.” No, more than that. “I’ve wanted her for quite some while, but... she does not fit into my plan.”

“Plan?” Xavier grasped Josiah’s shoulder and dragged him down the stairs, pulling him into an empty sitting room just off the foyer. “Hell.” The curse a grouchy mumble. “I’m supposed to be hanging mistletoe and ribbon and greenery and smiling and singing right now. Sarah wanted tonight’s ball to be perfect, and *this* nodcock mucks it all up.”

“Nodcock!”

Xavier pushed Josiah into a chair. “Explain this plan of yours.”

“To improve the estates. Starting here. Moving on to your northern estate, then—”

“I told you it was a bad idea, Josiah.”

Josiah jumped from the seat, paced to the fireplace, needing something to warm his icy bones. “But I have good ideas.”

“I know. I’m well aware. But you’re a man, not an automaton, and—”

“I want to make it up to Mother.”

Xavier froze, then inhaled slowly, nodding his head as he focused on a point far across the room. “Ah. I see. That I do understand.”

Of course, Xavier would understand. He’d spent the years since their mother’s death becoming a better man, too, the kind of man who would make her proud, protect his family. Josiah wanted—no needed—to follow in his brother’s footsteps. Not his father’s. Never his father’s.

Josiah braced his elbows on the white mantel above the fireplace and

rested his forehead on its sharp edge, closing his eyes, listening to his heart, trying to calm his thoughts, order them. “Georgiana will never live here, and I cannot do my work in London. But there’s something between us, some leaping flame that ignites whenever we’re in the same room, that draws us toward one another through a crowd. I’ve kissed her. She’s kissed me.” They’d done more than kiss, and God, he wanted to do more than that. “I would marry her in a heartbeat if I could. Demanding she marry me is the only way I can have her. If she has a choice, she’ll choose London over me. Choose independence.”

Josiah turned to gaze out the window. Snow was falling faster now. How far along the road had she gotten before the snow had started? Does the driver know how to navigate the roads in such weather? Every nerve in his body felt frayed and deadly.

“You didn’t give her the choice to decide, though, did you? And truly... must she choose?” Xavier kept his place across the room, and dressed impeccably in buckskins, bottle green waistcoat, hessians, and jacket, he seemed the epitome of the country gentleman. His size and the scruff on his jaw were the only signs of the brute he’d once been. A transformation willingly done for the woman he loved.

Xavier was a happy man, a man who had everything he’d ever wanted and many things he’d not known he desired. Until he met Sarah, a daring, determined, outspoken, passionate, rebel of a lady. She’d certainly not been in his plan. The soft rug beneath Xavier’s feet stretched across the room in pinks and greens until it ended at the tip of Josiah’s scuffed boots. It seemed an ocean between them, between the man who’d bent for love and... Josiah who did not.

He would not. He could... not...

A blanket of freezing certainty fell over him so thick and cold and suffocating it might as well have been an avalanche, and when it melted, it left him with a burning purpose.

He strode for the door. “I must go.”

“After her?” Xavier trotted behind him.

Josiah nodded. “When did she leave?”

“Not more than an hour ago while you slept like a babe. Take a horse. You’ll catch her easily, but the roads—”

“I know.”

“Be careful. And bring her back. Preferably betrothed. To you.”

He'd try.

Josiah had his gelding Arrogance saddled and barreling down the road in a quarter of an hour. He did not know how long he rode, and he had to slow at points to avoid ruts that had formed. Sooner than he expected, the large, hulking shape of a coach rose before him. He pulled up on the rein, slowed to a trot, and patted Arrogance's neck. "Thank you."

As he approached, the coach grew larger. It sat heavy and still, gathering snow on the side of the road. It tilted a bit with the curve of the road into the gutter, one set of wheels lower than the other. Had she changed her mind? Was she even now debating returning to Apple Grove, returning to him? Or had they gotten stuck?

He dismounted and strode forward.

"Mr. Evans!" The coachman turned around from his perch, his brown hat and greatcoat dusted white. He tipped his hat, and snow fell off it.

"It's you, John." Good to see she had an experienced driver at least.

John's face softened from curiosity to something like relief. "She found help, then? Reached the big house?"

"What do you mean?" Dread pooled heavily in Josiah's chest as he stopped just below the coachman, his gaze flickering toward the coach windows, its wine-colored curtains drawn tight.

"The lady I was taking to London. Lady Georgiana, I think. She set off down the road a half an hour ago to get help. The front wheel on the other side is broken. We hit a rut."

"And you let her go?" Josiah swung open the coach door. Empty.

"I couldn't stop her. I tried to go myself, but she said she'd do it herself and that she expected me to stay here with her luggage to keep it from getting stolen by the highwaymen."

"We have no highwaymen, John! And damn the luggage. She's more important! She's everything! Where's the second coachman?"

John's eyes grew wide. "Everyone's gone home for the day who wished to. And I didn't have time to scavenge up a footman. The lady wasn't interested in waiting."

Josiah cursed under his breath. "I shouldn't have yelled. Apologies, John. Take Arrogance and tell Lord Flint she's missing. I'll look for her on foot. Starting here and moving toward the house."

John's face took on the pale sheen of newly fallen snow. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Evans. I didn't mean... I should have..."

“Don’t worry about it, John. You couldn’t have stopped her unless you physically locked her up.” And that might have angered him more than this, to see her stripped of her freedom, her independence crushed under lock and chain. He’d lost sight of that yesterday in his need to have her by any means necessary. But now he knew having her wasn’t the most important thing. Her happiness was. From now on he’d protect that as fiercely as he protected her.

Worry was a feral beast inside his belly, he turned into the forest that lined the left side of the road as John mounted Arrogance and galloped away. She’d not been on the road itself. She’d not been at the house or in the stable. He would have seen her on his mad ride to catch up with her. But she would be somewhere in the world between there and here. He knew this land better than he knew himself some days. The trees swallowed him whole, the snow fell faster, and he would find the woman he loved.

CHAPTER EIGHT



*“I loved a man once. It would have been nice to have him love me back.” –from *The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady**

Georgiana pulled her fur-lined cape closer and scowled up at the sky. The sun had dropped below the canopy line of the forest, and each heavy step forward saw it drop lower. Soon it would kiss the horizon and darkness would spread like spilled wine across the sky.

Then she scowled down at her boots. Perfectly acceptable for traipsing through muddy London streets, but perfectly horrid for wading ankle-deep in snow.

With darkness approaching and being soaked to the bone, Georgiana realized she was lost. Worse than that, she was a mutton-headed fool for insisting she could do this on her own. She navigated London streets, not country roadways. She’d taken a wrong turn. She’d not even known there were turns to take in wide open spaces.

And to think, just yesterday, she’d been reconsidering her position on the country. It did not seem so bad as all that. In fact, she’d begun to suspect that her aunt had poisoned her against it. Or perhaps, her own experiences had. She’d once loved stables and puppies and lakes and, yes, snow, but she’d been forced to leave it, and leave it she had, in heart as well as in body. If she could not have it, she had determined not to want it.

Well, she was a woman now, an heiress in charge of her own destiny, trying to be at least. Though clearly, she needed to know and listen to her limits. She could love the country if she pleased, though. That much she could manage, to form her own opinion on this particular matter. And since she had nothing else to do as she wandered in who knew what direction, she formed it. Skating had been invigorating. Puppies were precious. And snow... well, she still hated that. Perhaps she wouldn't so much if she were dry and sitting before a fire, a good book in hand, a large, warm, muscled body nearby who'd tease her and laugh with her and—

No. Thoughts of Josiah were worse than snow sinking through her shift, turning her into a walking icicle.

Because she hated men.

Particularly one man.

Because they—he—thought they knew best, thought they could shove a woman around, control her fate. She'd never allow that. No matter that the man could skate pleasure across her skin as delicate and lovely as the shapes the skates cut into the thick blue ice.

The trees closed in around her, more suffocating than a narrow city alley, and the day's dim light turned to shadows around her. She whistled while she walked, tried to, at least. Her teeth chattered. Thank goodness she'd brought her muff, and if the wind had not begun to howl so, her hands would be quite warm. But the shadows of the gathered trees grew darker, the wind had started howling, and the snow came faster now, seemingly determined to smother her. A shiver racked her body, and she wrapped her arms tight about her.

She couldn't go on. Impossible to wander aimlessly like a lost soul. She stopped and scanned the trees, looking for low branches, and—there. Yes. She'd climbed just such a tree as a child, and she did so now with difficulty once she found the courage to bare her legs to the wicked wind to gain greater ease of movement. She went no farther up the tree than she needed to in order to peer out over the canopy.

She saw it immediately—the sharp outlines of a roof, the stout brick of a chimney. A house. Not too far away, either.

She scuttled down the tree and set her steps in the correct direction, each step more difficult than the last. She sang as she walked, though she'd never been very good at it, lifting her wavering, shivering voice to the treetops with the lyrics of a bawdy ballad her aunt had taught her.

Josiah likely knew it. Josiah likely had a lovely deep baritone.

She was not supposed to think of him, but she did not have the control to stop it, so she trudged through the snow-deep woods with a singing Josiah by her side, his teasing smile leading her on.

When she almost stubbed her toe on the gray stone façade of the building, she stopped, stumbled backward, her head craning up. “I made it.” She laughed and ran around the side of the building. “I made it!”

The house sat at the back of a clearing in the woods with gardens on one side and a small stable on the other. It was larger than a cottage and made of the same stone as Apple Grove. She ran to the door and knocked hard, pain exploding across her knuckles from striking her frozen skin on the hard, cold wood.

“Please,” she called out, “do answer the door.”

No one did. She knocked again. And again, calling out each time, but the windows were the dark, dead eyes of a skull. And no smoke curled from the chimney.

“Please,” she said one more time before falling against the door and sinking down its length. She sat there alone on the hard stone entrance to the empty house, skirts sodden around her bent legs, arms wrapped tight, feeling the warmth drain from her body into the wet earth along with her consciousness.



In the darkness, she wiggled her toes first, glad that the warmth shooting through them was real and not a figment of her imagination. Nor was the warmth everywhere else on her body. It pressed into her, heavy and delicious like silk against the skin.

Very much like silk against the skin.

She opened her eyes. Brocaded material of deep red hung above her, and a fire flickered somewhere nearby. A mountain of coverings—blankets—had been piled atop her, and Josiah sat, elbows on knees, hands clasped as if in prayer, head hung, in a chair beside the bed she lay in.

And she... she was entirely naked. She yelped. Undignified, yes, but a natural reaction nonetheless.

Josiah’s head whipped up, his eyes glittering gems of high emotion—

concern, panic, fear. He dropped to his knees, slamming into the floor by the side of the bed as his hands reached for her face, cupped it with gentle fingers and rough palms.

“You’re awake.” His eyes shuttered closed on a heavy exhale.

Georgiana curled her fingers around the edge of the blankets and pulled them up past her chin. “I... I am. And I’m...” She wet her lips. “Ah... I am disrobed. Entirely. It seems.”

“You were soaked through and unconscious. I couldn’t let you stay in those clothes. Even your shift.” He cast a look behind his back, and she followed the line of his gaze to where large swathes of cloth—her clothing—hung over chairs and tables pulled close to the fire. “I did not enjoy it.” He swallowed hard, and she found she could not look away from the bob of his Adam’s apple in his strong, corded throat.

“Where are we?”

He still held her face, and now he pushed one hand into her hair and rubbed the pad of his thumb along her brow. “The estate manager’s cottage. My cottage.”

She tried to remember the house she’d seen through the fog of falling snow and couldn’t quite. Firelight cast quivering shadows on the walls and ceiling as she took a closer look at her surroundings. Everything neat and clean and nice, just like at Apple Grove House.

“It’s lovely,” she said. “What I’ve seen of it so far.”

“It pleases me that you like it.” His eyes roamed her face like she was a priceless work of art, and she risked removing her arm from the shield of blankets weighing her down in order to caress the line of his jaw.

“Josiah,” she said.

His gaze focused on her eyes.

“How did you find me?”

“I heard you singing. Someone singing. Poorly. I prayed it was you.”

“So that you could add a flaw to my otherwise perfect disposition?”

He chuckled, sunshine breaking over the storm clouds of his face. “So that I could hold you in my arms once more. So that I could tell you how sorry I was, so I could beg for forgiveness and woo you with cake. All the cake to be had in England. The continent as well. So, I could kiss you and tease you and make you laugh and perhaps one day convince you to marry me.”

She stiffened and pulled her arm back under the blankets with a shiver.

“You’re cold.” He stood and left her side, poked and prodded and blew on the fire until it roared.

Cold? She was on fire. Every part of her in flames. He would always be this way, wouldn’t he? Protective and high-handed, seeking to fix something for her when she, herself, was not certain it needed fixing.

But it was not anger and indignation that boiled her blood at the moment. It was lust, raw and needy. As well as something much more potent—the desire to protect him, too. What to do with all that? She knew what Aunt Prudence would suggest. Take the man’s body and discard all else. But the *all else* was what Georgiana liked best about Josiah. His body was a delight, to be sure, but his mind, his heart, his humor... they stirred her even more.

When he returned to her side, he drew his chair nearer and sat in it, half draped across the bed at her side, his fingertips playing with her hair. “How did you find my house?”

“I didn’t know it was yours. I didn’t know it existed. I climbed a tree and looked out and saw a clearing, a house. I walked toward it.” She closed her eyes, shame flaming through her now. “I’m such a fool. I should never have walked off alone like that. I’m lucky I’m alive and not a solid block of frozen ice.”

His hand in her hair stilled for several moments before it began stroking through her hair again. “You were wearing silk, Gee. Silk stockings, silk shift...” His voice was hard and rough. “Your vanity clearly outweighs your sense.”

Her eyes snapped open. “And your ego outweighs any justification for it.” He grinned. She grinned back.

“I’m angry with you,” she admitted. “I don’t like being told what to do, what’s best for me. I’ve looked out for my own interests for over a decade now, and I can do so for several more. That’s partly what sent me out alone into a snowstorm. I wanted to prove to you, to myself, that I need no one. Not even you.” She huffed, rolling her eyes at her own foolishness. “I swear, other than this unfortunate lapse of judgment, I’m quite capable. I’m merely... not in the city. I suppose I’d never be able to survive the dangers of the country. This proves it.”

“False. You found your way through the woods to somewhere safe. You are, always have been, quite capable. Even when out of your element. Gee... we don’t have to marry. I won’t force your hand. I don’t want you to feel as if I think you’re incapable. I don’t. I never could. I merely... I want to keep you

safe. Always. I”—he closed his eyes as the muscles in his jaw worked hard —“found you half frozen on my doorstep and couldn’t decide what the best course of action was, besides getting you inside and warmed up. Should I thank God for guiding your steps toward me or curse myself to hell for driving you to such madness? Had you not warmed up, woken up, my heart would have frozen with you.”

She pressed her hands to her chest to calm it. He wouldn’t force her. And it made her soul sing.

He cupped her cheek once more, then leaned forward and dropped a breeze-light kiss on the tip of her nose. “It is Miss Darlington’s choice to tell about what she saw or not. And it is my choice to hold out my hand to you. Or not. But I am holding it out, Gee. It’s yours. The choice is also yours. Whether or not you take it. Whether or not you marry me.”

Marry him.

Or not.

Her choice, taken away by no one.

She held it in her hand like a precious gem as ash fell from the sky and into her palm to mar it. Where would they live? Would she be able to trust him fully, man that he was? Would he tire of her one day? Would they find in a year’s time they did not suit? Would he stop being her friend as soon as he became her betrothed? Her lover? She shook the ash of doubt away and beheld the gem.

Then she made a choice, and she surged up out of the blankets to kiss Josiah soundly. And he kissed her back, his fingers spiking into her hair and pulling her toward him. No. She pulled him down, her arms escaping the warm cocoon of blankets he’d rested atop her to circle around his neck and pull him entirely from the chair until he sprawled across her. Even though he balanced on his elbows poised on either side of her body, the weight of his body rippled a delicious feeling through her. Safety. That was it. He made her feel warm and safe and... not sated. Not yet. But soon.

She arched against him, and the blankets fell below her breasts, pressed into his chest. He hissed a curse and rolled to the side, pulling her with him so the back of her body fit into the curved front of his own, the blankets between them muffling sensations, baring the knowledge she needed of the way he might feel against her backside.

His hands though, no barrier prevented them from cupping her breasts and rubbing his thumbs over her tight, pebbled nipples as he showered kisses

along the curve of her neck. How had she been so cold earlier, frozen to the very soul? She'd never suffer a chill again, not with the inferno his firm lips pressed into her skin.

"Please," she said, "please more."

And he obeyed, biting her shoulder, a light nip that sent sparks skittering through her body like marbles scattered across ice, and then he nipped the lobe of her ear, kissed the tender corner of her neck behind it.

More. She needed more, and the damn blankets were in the way, heating her, constraining her, keeping her from getting exactly what she wanted.

"Off. I need the blankets off," she said.

A deep chuckle near her ear, and then he shifted and slipped to the floor.

She reached for him. "Come back."

He walked away instead, ambling to the end of the bed where he lifted one corner of the top blanket. He pulled it slowly toward him, gathering the material in his arms, and when it was a red wool bundle, he tossed it to the floor, reached for the next one and did the same.

"There are five blankets here, two greatcoats, four shirts, and three sheets." *Swoosh*. Another blanket disappeared down the bottom of the bed.

Gaze riveted on him, on his wild hair and glittering eyes, she clutched the very bottom sheet, the one nestled against her body, up to her chin.

"I'm afraid I panicked." He flicked another blanket from the bed, and she felt the weight lighten a bit. "Once I had you stripped, I put you in my bed. And pulled up the sheets and coverlet, but you seemed so small there, small and shivering. I'd rather die than see you suffer, so I ransacked my wardrobe, found the greatcoats, a few large shirts and tossed them on top of you. But it didn't seem enough." Another blanket, this one of a deep green, slid slowly down the length of her body, pulled by the tanned fist of the man standing tall before her. "So, I found the cupboard where the linens are kept and carried an armful in here to toss atop you." He'd found the greatcoats and the shirts, and he reached, muscles stretching against his shirtsleeves, firelight caressing the corded length of his throat, and tossed them from the bed before grabbing another fistful of blanket—the last one—and pulling it slowly, like a seduction, off her body.

Only one sheet remained between her body and the air, and she should feel cold, after losing all that weight and heat. She didn't. She ached for the air to caress her sweating skin. For him to caress her.

His arms fell limp to his sides, and his head drooped forward. "I was

terrified, Gee. Terrified I would lose you even though I'd already lost you"—his voice broke, and he swallowed hard—"I'd already lost you."

"Why?"

His gaze shot to hers.

"Why do you wish to marry me?"

He looked up and seemed somewhere else for several breaths. Then he reached toward the end of the bed and fisted the silk sheet, the final layer, pulling it with enough force to yank it from her grasp, away from her chin, so it flirted with revealing her cleavage like the bodice of a modest gown.

"Because I love you, Lady Georgiana Hunt. To hell with rumors and ruination. To hell with what I should do. There is only you. And how I know in here"—he beat a fist against his chest—"that I need you. Even if you will never need me."

She waited only a heartbeat, letting the words sink in and find a home, but then she curled upward, letting the sheet fall off her chest and pool around her waist. She curled her legs beneath her and crawled across the bed, a slow and measured stalking. She kept his gaze—stealing, she saw with pleasure—his breath, and when she reached the edge of the bed, when she reached *him*, she stood up on her knees and cupped his face. Every inch of her open to his gaze, but he only looked in her eyes. Good. She wanted him to see as well as hear every word she would give to him. She kissed him first, a good way to start.

"We were fools," she said when she pulled away.

His eyes fluttered open, glowing with humor. "Quite right. Which time?"

"The time we thought we could be just friends."

"Ah, yes." His voice husky as he lifted his hands to her shoulders, then caressed his rough palms down her upper arms, then back up, then back down, a pattern that made her shudder with delight, with the promise it stroked into her skin. "That time. Fools indeed." His eyes clouded, and his gaze drifted lower, and for the first time she felt truly naked.

And truly adored. For that's what glowed in his eyes—uncomplicated, unadulterated adoration.

She found his lips once more and poured her heart into her kiss. He kissed her back, hard and demanding, and giving too, and the mattress shifted, and he was straddling her, leaning her back.

"No!" She jerked away and pressed a palm to his chest. "Not yet." She pressed him back and heard the thud of each of his feet hitting the floor.

“What do you want, Georgie? I’ll give you everything I am.”

She grinned, and it felt wicked and wonderful. “I want your clothes, Josiah. And I want to undress you as you undressed me.”

A shiver racked his frame, and he took a step back, held his arms out wide, an invitation. She slipped to the floor, the bare planks cold against her feet, and she wasted no time, tugging the shirt from his buckskins and tossing it to the floor with the ocean of blankets and greatcoats that had once covered her. His torso rippled with muscle. She’d known it would, known he’d be like marble warmed on a summer day, but seeing and touching proved better than assumption, better than imagination, and she traced every ridge and slab from his pectorals and nipples to the ridges of his abdomen and lower.

The buckskins were dealt with as quickly as the shirt had been, and as they dropped to the floor, she knelt and divested him of his stockings, rolling the sensible wool down his calves and finding those calves hard with muscle, too. She tilted her head, studying them. Did she find calves delightful? She must. She squeezed one—like squeezing a rock, it was—and a shiver pooled need at her very core.

Then she looked up at him. No, not at him because the proud jutting length of him was in the way. In the way? No. Exactly where it should—just beside her yearning mouth. She took it in hand, studying it, remembering how he’d brought her to pleasure, to climax, with his mouth just yesterday. So she kissed the tip, saw the bead of dew appear just there, and licked it away.

He groaned, his hands tightening in her hair before he knelt, slid his arms beneath hers and hauled her to her feet, threw her onto the bed, and joined her almost in a single smooth movement.

“Tell me what else you want?” he demanded, scattering kisses along her jaw.

“I was rather enjoying touching you.”

He groaned. “You can’t. I can’t. Last. I can’t last. Tell me something else you want.”

“This, too.” All of it. Not just his hands on her, his kisses, but his dominance. He’d thrown her on the bed, and a thrill had raced through her, a primal notion she’d chosen a man who could protect her. If she needed it. Right now, she didn’t need his protection. She needed his devotion. “Touch me. Kiss me. Everywhere.” Such power as she’d never felt before rushed through her. Not even when all the wealth she’d been promised by her aunt

had become hers, had she felt such delirious power. Money was nothing. A man like this above her, beneath her, surrounding her, wanting her, needing her—*everything*.

His hand stroked down her belly, and his mouth found her nipples, sucked them, licked them. She cried out and grasped his hair. Not a demand he stopped. A plea he continued.

“I love your breasts,” he said as he kissed them. “Like perfect little cakes, sweet and round.”

She laughed and stroked her fingernails down his back, making him hiss.

And then his hand found that aching spot between her legs, the pleading nub, and circled it, sliding a finger inside her. She gasped and arched off the bed, and then everything happened so quickly. If the world had slowed down in her sad march through the forest, even her blood marched to a more sedate rhythm as the snow froze it, now every bit of her sang time into a frenzy.

Until she broke apart. Entirely. The growing pleasure at her center reached its pinnacle beneath his tender, fervent ministrations and made her cry out his name to the heavens, made her soul leap up and follow there, becoming a constellation in the winter night sky.

Limp and shattered, she knew it was not over, and he moved, groaning her name and placing the throbbing, hot length of himself at her entrance. With one hard stroke he entered her, and she cried out once more, a cry he gathered into his mouth with a kiss, his body stilling, his hands caressing, his lips promising everything through the kiss.

Words caressed her ear a moment later, and his promises became solid things.

“I’m sorry,” he said. A mantra. “I hurt you. I’m sorry. I could not stop myself, and—”

“I’m not hurt.” She stroked her fingers down his hair and flattened her palms as she rubbed them down the length of his back. “I’m not hurt. Please, Josiah. *Please.*”

“Yes.” And he moved, in and out, slowly. Oh-so-slowly.

So slowly she arched up and pressed her mound against him to ask for more, demand it. And he gave her what she asked for. Of course, he did. He pumped faster and faster as she clutched at his shoulders, his neck, his wonderfully muscled backside. Something else wonderful rolled within her as well. Another of those soul-singing moments. Impossible. But obviously possible, because when he thrust one last time and threw his head back to call

her name, her entire body shook and shivered, a tree in the wind, and melted once more into peaceful perfection.

He collapsed atop her but didn't stay long, wrapping steel-banded arms around her and rolling so she lay atop him. Warmer than before, with a mountain of blankets on top of her. Better than before. So much better than ever before.

CHAPTER NINE



December 26

*“Only marry a man who intends to spoil you in the manner you wish. No such man exists, though, so prepare to never marry.” –from *The Masculine Inconvenience: Memoirs of a Superior Lady**

Josiah awoke before the sun, and he did not need its snow-brightened yellow light to illuminate the focus of all his attention. He’d been watching Georgiana sleep, and even in the dark, he’d seen her well, loved her entirely.

Still so much lay between them, though. Namely, the entire distance between London and Apple Grove, but he’d figure out how to shrink it.

She stirred, her long legs stretching out, tangling against his, and then her eyelids fluttered open, revealing wide, shocked eyes that melted in memories, then sparkled with a smile.

“Good morning,” she said, as if this were not the first time she’d welcomed dawn in his arms.

“Good morning.” He loved her. He wanted to say so, but she’d not said the words yet, and he wanted to hear them, wanted to do something that might make her feel them so sharp and so true that she could not but speak them out loud.

He gathered her into his arms before she could say another word, before

the reality of their lives, their preferences became a wall between them, and he stroked her to arousal, kissed her until she was a mewling mess breaking beneath him. Her nails scratched down his back, and he grabbed her, rolled, wanting to see every glorious inch of her before clothing became, once more, a necessity.

She straddled him, but confusion blinked in her lust-fogged eyes until she found a focus and grabbed his cock, rubbing the pad of her thumb against it, dipping low to kiss its tip, to lick its length, washing him in exquisite pleasure from head to foot. He tangled his hands in her hair and tugged, wanting inside her. He bent her head back, and their gazes locked, and then he drew a path with his nails down her neck and shoulders and ribs and waist until he could clasp her hips, encourage her to position just where he wanted her, and thrust into her. She sank down with a hiss and toss of her golden curls backward. Hair so long it teased his thighs. He kept his hands dug into her hips, helping her ride him, helping her find the right rhythm, the rhythm that made them both tighten and groan. Then he slipped his hand to the center of her body and rubbed her throbbing nub, and she shattered, and if he could watch her fall apart above him every day of his damn life, he would. He'd do anything. Give anything.

Her arms went limp for a brief moment before she dropped her gaze to his, heated his chest with her palms, splayed fingers, and dropped to kiss the place where his heart beat.

And he couldn't hold out any longer. Faster, faster, until he shattered too, grabbing her to him and holding her, giving everything to her, whispering her name in her ear, whispering his love though she never did, welcoming sleep when it found them both.

The next time he woke, she was gone. He snapped upright, flinging his feet to the floor.

"Josiah. You're awake." She smiled at him from near the fire, half dressed in stockings and shift and untied stays. "Can you help me?"

He prowled toward, aware he was naked and heavy and hard and wanting her once more.

Her eyes widened. She'd noticed too, and she turned from him to offer him her back. He tightened her stays and then tied the tabs of her ruined gown. When she put her pelisse on, worry poked at him.

He found his own pants and shirt and threw them on, looking out the window. "Where are you going? The snow is too deep. We should stay here

for a while.”

“Surely there’s a way to make a path to Apple Grove. They’ll be worried. And I’m certain you’ll wish to be there to give the tenants their baskets.”

True enough. But it felt like she was running.

“The sun is out this morning,” he said. “The sky is blue. No more snow on the horizon. It will soon melt, and then we can safely return to the big house.”

A bite of her lower lip and her wandering gaze riled the poke of worry into a gnawing creature, but he turned to the window and let her think, observe, and talk in her own time. Following his rampant desires had led nowhere good last time. He must allow her to set the pace. He pulled his waistcoat on as he watched her reflection move about the room in the window’s glass. She ran fingertips across rows of books and round the gilded edging of the looking glass where he shaved each morning.

“It’s a charming room,” she said, almost as if to herself.

Charming? He winced. He’d never thought the room or the house humble, but with this heiress standing here, judging, the rather rustic nature of everything hit him like Gentleman Jackson’s fist to his gut. Could she ever be content with *this*? With *him*?

Her slow but constant movement stilled at his desk. Like a thief, she rifled through the papers, and he could not rouse himself to feel bothered, to feel like it was an intrusion. Her rummaging about in his life could never be that.

She picked up a leaf of paper and turned to him, her gaze a burning coal on the page. “What is this?” A quirk in her voice he could not identify. “It makes no sense.”

He turned, too, leaning his hips against the windowsill and crossing his arms over his chest. “Let me see.” When she handed the paper over, he knew it in a glance and grinned. “That is for you. For us, really.”

“It appears to be a list of confectioners and bakeries.”

“Precisely.”

“But why?”

“So, I know where to look for houses. They are all on the outskirts of London. I will have to travel much and perhaps stay here some weeks, but by finding a home for us right outside London, you can have what you wish, and I can, too.”

“And the bakeries?”

“Are so I can buy you sweet things as often as you like. Good to have them conveniently located. Watching you eat sugar is the next best thing to kissing sugar off your lips. Hm. Not done that yet. We should try it soon.”

On hesitant, rocking feet, she stepped toward him. “When... when did you do this?”

“While you were sleeping. I needed to occupy my mind, and thoughts of you surviving were best suited to the occasion.” Itching to hold her, to prove to himself she lived and was unharmed, as if last night and this morning’s activities had not already done so, he swept across the sparse distance between them, backed her up against the desk she’d so recently pilfered through, and lifted her, setting her atop it and nudging her knees apart with his hips.

Her arms wrapped tight about his neck, and each breath pushed her chest against his. “I’m not important. I never have been, except as a pawn to sell and be bought, to seek revenge with, to—”

“You are most important. To me, you are everything.” He nudged the side of her nose with his own. “Happy Christmas, sweet one. You’re no pawn, and you know that. If you forget it, I’ll remind you.”

She kissed him, lips searing his and fingernails digging into the skin at the nape of his neck, demanding he get closer. He hiked up her skirts to her waist and fell into the kiss, and then pulled at her, demanding the same.

“Josiah.”

“Gee.”

“Josiah!”

He frowned, kissing the curve of her neck. The arrow of his name penetrated the fog of lust rolling through him, but he brushed it aside. Of course, she’d be saying his name. He’d pulled her to the table’s edge and nudged his knee against the bit of her body already wet for him.

“Josiah!”

But that wasn’t her voice calling his name.

They looked up at the same time, abandoning each other’s body with shock-widened eyes.

And the bedchamber door flew open.

Georgiana dove into Josiah’s arms, hiding her face in his chest, and Josiah lowered her skirts below her knees.

Josiah’s father stood in the doorway, his head cocked, his gaze greedy on them before he burst into laughter. “Here we’re all worried sick, and you’ve

cornered the heiress, my boy.” More laughter.

Georgiana slowly straightened, her gaze narrowing on the intruder.

“I think you should leave, Lord Westgrove.”

“Indeed,” Josiah growled. “Get. Out.”

Georgiana slid to the floor and turned from his father, straightening her clothes, her hair, likely her nerves as well.

But his father did not get out. He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe and crossed one ankle over the other as if he intended to stay for a chat. “Compromised a fortune. Not gentlemanly, but men in your situation can’t be choosy about how they acquire wealthy wives. Likely can’t get one at all without a little coercion.

“And what exactly is my situation, Father?” Josiah asked.

“Working.” He spat the word like it was dirt on the tongue and looked around Josiah to Georgiana. “Once you’re married, you’ll get him to stop this nonsense, yes?”

She swung around, and Josiah stepped out of the way. He’d seen that particularly sharp dagger of a gaze aimed at fortune hunters, who she cleanly dispatched with no remorse. She stopped when she stood directly before him and... melted, the sweetest grin gracing her lips. “Oh, yes. It is such a shame Josiah wastes himself making sure your estate is running well. How scandalously insupportable that he ensures your tenants are happy. How horrifically insupportable that he cares about something other than...” She cocked her head to the side. “What is it a gentleman like Mr. Evans is supposed to care about?”

Josiah’s father’s brows had knit together, and he looked first left, then right as if he weren’t quite sure she was talking to him. When his gaze once more landed on her, he straightened, shifted from foot to foot and said with more hesitation than Josiah had ever heard him use before, “His mistress?”

“Josiah,” Georgiana said, sugar dripping from his name. “Do you keep a mistress?”

“Not since earlier this year. March, to be exact.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “March? Before or after—”

“After Xavier and Sarah’s wedding.”

“Hm. Fascinating.” She returned her attention to his father. “What else?”

“Well, young men of his station should focus on... pleasure. Gambling, drinking. He has money of his own and does not have to *work*. If he must have a profession, it should be more gentlemanly. The church perhaps. Or the

military.”

“Of course, Lord Westgrove. It is all clear to me now. Thank you for that explanation. In short, you believe that Josiah should abandon work he’s good at. Abandon something that gives him purpose and delight.”

His father grasped the edges of his great coat and snapped them tight. “Precisely. And you’ll make sure he does so, insist he move to London and —”

She threw her head back with a laugh, strong and wicked. “Oh, no, my lord. I’ll do no such thing. You see, I’ve rather taken a liking to this charming little room and this charming house that provided such excellent shelter during last night’s storm.” She walked forward slowly, each step pushing his father backward and into the hallway until she stood just inside the bedchamber, her hand on the edge of the door. “And more, I’ve taken a liking to Josiah. A man of intellect and humor and kindness, quite worthy of all the love, paltry though it may be, I have to give him. I quite plan on moving into this house and sleeping in this bed and being proud of my husband for doing exactly what he is doing—ensuring the future profitability of an estate that belongs to you, you nodcock!” She slammed the door shut and slammed the lock home, then she turned to Josiah with a dusting of her palms together. “There.”

Incoherent rumbles rolled under the door, then, “You harridan!”

“I am, rather, aren’t I?”

“Decidedly so,” Josiah assured her. He sauntered slowly toward her, wrapped his hands around her waist, and pulled her closer. “Tis a mystery why I love you.”

“Clearly, you’re a nodcock, too. Must run in the family. I’ll have to watch for signs of it in our children and teach them good common sense.”

“Like wandering alone in a snowstorm?”

She swatted at his shoulder and laughed at herself. “Just so.”

He leaned his forehead against her as his father banged on the door, yelling incoherent demands. “I love you. You do not have to move here. It is not the sort of luxury you are used to. It is quiet here, not as it is in London. I know you need—”

“I need you. London had grown lonely long ago. After Aunt Prudence died, I sat alone every morning and night. And the closer Christmas came, fewer people were in Town, all my cursed suitors gone for good... everything was hollow. I felt too much like that little girl on Christmas day, sent away

from her family forever.”

“Never again, Gee. You’ll be with me today and every Christmas day after.”

Her smile was small but strong, and she drew a delicate finger down his stubbled cheek. “I think... I think it was not the dare that brought me here. It gave me an excuse to go where I wanted to be.”

“And where is that?”

“Wherever you are.”

He kissed her. And kissed her. And kissed her. He kissed her until the bellowing outside the door disappeared and the sun melted the glittering snow and they stood alone together, not needing an aunt’s approval or a father’s as long as they held each other in loving arms.

EPILOGUE



April 1822

“The best man is one you love who loves you wildly in return.” –the working memoirs of Mrs. Georgiana Evans

From across the crowded London ballroom at Sarah’s first event as hostess, Georgiana watched her husband eat cake. A brute, he was, shoving the dense, fruit-heavy slice right into his mouth without a care for the raisins that had dropped by his boots or the crumbs dotting his evening jacket. With a sigh, she bustled across the room. She’d have to clean him up. He saw her coming before she arrived, and the grin that grew on his lips—slow and knowing and hot-blooded—put speed into her steps.

When she reached his side, she opened her mouth to read him a lecture and found a bite of cake between her lips instead, attached to his fingers. She tried to stay strong, but the sugar melted her as it melted on her tongue, and she chewed and swallowed her lecture with the cake. She took the plate from his hands and helped herself to more.

He chuckled, then said, “You have been watching me all evening.”

“Have I?” Oh, a crumb fell on her décolletage.

He found it, swiped it away with the pad of his thumb, and sucked that

thumb right into his mouth.

Her mouth went dry.

“I demand you stop,” he said, “watching me.”

“Do you?” She managed to lift an eyebrow, unable to take her gaze from his lips. “Just because the hostess is your sister-in-law does not mean I’ll—”

“Let me seduce you? Drag you off to a bedchamber and have my wicked way with you?”

“I was going to say tolerate shenanigans.”

“Ah, yes, Wife, I remember. Shenanigans, fortune hunters, and fools. All things you do not tolerate. What about aroused husbands? Do you tolerate those?”

“Most decidedly, I”—she licked her lips, letting him wait—“do.”

“You’re sure?” He folded his arms behind his back as if to keep himself from temptation and tempered his smile. “I’ll not interrupt your evening if you do not desire it. You’ve missed almost every ball this Season. Musicals, teas—all of it missed because you’ve been languishing with me in the country.”

“You call it languishing, Josiah, but I call it living.” She bounced up on her toe and whispered in his ear, “Happily. You taste better than cake. And better our little cottage than some crowded ballroom. I miss my garden and my library. And teasing your father. He turns a very funny shade of red that simply does not exist anywhere else in the world. And who but me will make sure Peter and Henry don’t pick up their father’s silliness when they are home from school. Sarah is running her hospital, and you and Xavier tend to the estates. There is no one but me to reform your father and educate your brothers. I do it selflessly for the women they will one day meet.”

“You enjoy lecturing them.” He tapped the tip of her nose.

“Of course not.” She fluttered her eyelashes as if she were one of the debutantes dancing around the room in anxious gentlemen’s arms.

“You want to boss them about.”

She leaned forward and dropped her voice low. “I want *you*.”

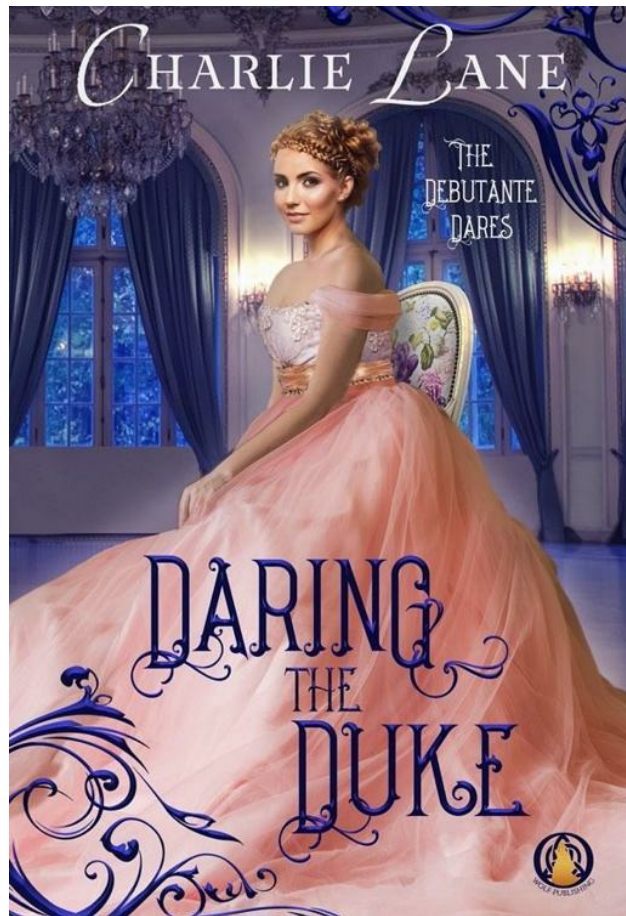
The cake dropped to the ground as his arm stole around her waist, and she gasped loud enough for the nearby string quartet to miss a note. The colors of the ballroom—black and white and pastel pink—blurred together as he whisked her away. To an abandoned room for now, but later he’d whisk her back home, to a house in the country where she was never quite alone, not on Christmas day or a springtime evening, not on snowed-in mornings or rainy

afternoons. Her own family had sold her away, but she'd found a new one, and with Josiah's kiss on her lips and words of love in her heart, she'd never be alone again.

THE END

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ABOUT CHARLIE



USA Today bestselling author Charlie Lane traded in academic databases and scholarly journals for writing steamy Regency romcoms like the ones she's always loved to read. Her favorite authors are Jane Austen (who else?), Toni Morrison, and William Blake, and when she's not writing humorous conversations, dramatic confrontations, or sexy times, she's flying high in the air as a circus-obsessed acrobat.

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MISTLETOE MAGIC

A SISTERHOOD OF SECRETS NOVELLA

JENNIFER MONROE



Mistletoe Magic by Jennifer Monroe

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Love and romance await those that meet under the mistletoe...

Headstrong and spirited, Miss Amy Felton yearns to embark on a grand adventure across the vast ocean to America. There's just one problem. The man who possesses her heart has no desire to leave England. With her father threatening to marry her off to another suitor, Amy needs Tobias not only to commit to her dream, but to her heart as well.

Mr. Tobias Deverell, second son of a baron and a devoted man of the cloth, is in love with Amy. But with his future firmly rooted in England, he does not share his future wife's dream of moving abroad. Nor can he bring himself to tell her how much she consumes him. After all, strong men do not go about spewing words of love.

With Christmas Eve fast approaching, Amy searches for a solution to bridge the divide between their hearts. When she acquires a mistletoe rumored to possess mystical powers, Amy hopes it may be the very thing to ignite Tobias's heart.

As the holiday draws nearer, Tobias must grapple with the conflict between his duty to the Church and the undeniable pull of his heart towards Amy. Can he find a way to reconcile the two before it's too late?

Mistletoe Magic is a sweet Regency romance that explores the joys and challenges of love during a time when miracles are possible.

CHAPTER ONE



Chatsworth, England, December 1809

It was not the letter itself that made Miss Amy Felton's heart race, but rather what it might contain. She had been called into the office of Mrs. Agnes Rutley, the headmistress of Mrs. Rutley's School for Young Women, only moments ago. For weeks, she had fretted over how her parents would respond to her admission that she had a romantic interest in Mr. Tobias Deverell. And this could very well be it.

Or rather, her father's response to this admission. He would not be greatly pleased that she had settled for a second son of a baron rather than the heir himself. Especially one who was completing his seminary training to take up a position as a member of the clergy.

Now, the letter she had been fretting over sat in her hands. And the only way to open it was using the silver letter opener offered by her headmistress.

Her hand trembling, Amy poked the tip of the opener into a corner of the envelope and paused.

"Why don't you sit," Mrs. Rutley said, rising and offering one of the two chairs in front of her desk. "I'll leave if you prefer to be alone."

A kind woman with touches of silver in her otherwise chestnut hair, Mrs. Rutley was more like a second mother than a headmistress to Amy and the other students at Courtly Manor where the school was housed. But as much as she appreciated Mrs. Rutley's motherly ways, the contents of the letter were far too private to share just yet.

"You should not have to leave your office, Mrs. Rutley," Amy said, although she was not sure her feet would move if she tried to go. "I can—"

“I don’t mind,” Mrs. Rutley said. “I must speak to Mrs. Shepherd about dinner. Take all the time you need.”

Once the headmistress was gone, Amy sat in one of the chairs. But rather than opening the letter, she placed it and the opener on the top of the desk. What were a few more minutes of waiting? Whatever response her father had sent would not change.

Writing to her parents had been bold. Not only had she expressed her admiration for Mr. Deverell, but she also wrote that he would soon make his intentions to marry her known. Yet that had not been the full truth.

The subject of marriage had not come up in conversation. Yes, they were courting if the amount of time they spent together was considered such a situation. But their future—either together or otherwise—had yet to be discussed outright. Whenever they came close to bringing up the topic, it was always precluded with an “if.”

“If we were to wed...” or “If we begin a life together...” But thus far, he had not out-and-out asked her to marry him.

And that was not the only problem. Once Mr. Deverell completed his studies in January, he hoped to head a church of his own here in England.

Yet as much as Amy adored Mr. Deverell, her best friend and former schoolmate Ruth Bannermann had promised to take Amy to America. For four years, she had dreamed of the day she would live abroad and start a new life in a country that was still in its infancy. To be a witness to the molding and shaping of a new society sent a shiver of thrill down her spine.

But it was not only the excitement of the new world. Two former students, who Amy had met during one of the infrequent visits to England, devoted their lives to giving what aid they could to an orphanage in New York City. And the idea of joining Theodosia and Unity in such a marvelous endeavor appealed greatly to Amy.

Amy had a very specific reason for wanting to help in this way. When she was ten, Gladys Overton, a dear friend of hers at the time, had lost both parents in a terrible carriage accident. Gladys, thankfully, had family who could take her in, but Amy had heard of too many cases where there was no family. And that thought frightened her for every child suffering from such a loss.

How could a child not have a home?

Although she had never traveled abroad—or outside of England, for that matter—the idea of sailing across the ocean in itself seemed an adventure.

How many nights had she stayed awake listening to Ruth's tales of sailing across the ocean? With each storytelling, the thought of leaving England appealed more and more. Granted, she would miss her family and those she loved, but she had reached an important decision. One must be willing to say goodbye, at least for a time, if she wished to fulfill her dreams. And what better place to do that than with her friends in New York City?

Amy stared at the letter as if it were an adder. Oh, what did it matter? If she never opened it, what difference would it make if Mr. Deverell *did* propose to her?

With a surge of bravery, she grabbed the missive, slid the opener beneath the seal, and unfolded the parchment.

My Darling Daughter,

Thank you for your last letter. I have given the matter you mentioned deep consideration, and although I had other plans for your future, your mother has requested that I meet this young man of yours before making a final decision. Therefore, on the fifth of January, when we come to collect you from the school, I would like to meet this Tobias Deverell. If he meets my approval and is willing to ask for your hand in marriage at that time, I shall agree wholeheartedly.

Amy let out a relieved sigh. Mr. Deverell could win the respect of any man, so the first requirement was not an issue. Half the battle was won.

With a smile, she continued to read.

If, however, he does not meet my approval, or if he has not made his intentions clear by that time, Mr. Hamlin has expressed an interest in marrying you. I have informed him that I shall give him an answer once your mother and I return home. Either way, I wish for my only daughter to be married by summer. Spinsters have no place in our family.

Her head spun. Surely, he was jesting! Mr. George Hamlin was five and thirty and owned several workhouses in Hartford, not far from where Amy's family lived.

Amy tried very hard not to judge others by their appearance, but when it came to Mr. Hamlin, it was difficult not to do so. She recalled their first meeting—a party hosted last year by her parents when she had gone home for the summer holidays. Mr. Hamlin was in attendance, and his looks had frightened her.

He had unruly dark hair, a large, fluffy mustache that bits of food used as a refuge beneath a bulbous nose, and ears that stuck out on both sides of his head. To make matters worse, he tended to talk longer than any polite person should. And usually about himself.

No, marrying that man was out of the question. Imagine their poor children! Would their son also hope for an equally disastrous mustache?

And this nonsense about becoming a spinster was outrageous. Amy was just eighteen. Many young women married later in life. Why, she knew more than a dozen who spoke their vows at twenty-two and were still able to bear children!

Yet what could she possibly do about it?

One thing is certain, she told herself firmly. I cannot tell Mr. Deverell.

She wanted more than anything to hear him say he loved her as much as she secretly loved him. After all, men should be the first to say the words. What she could not stomach was him rushing to ask for her hand, simply because he was afraid of someone else having her. Or saying he loved her only because that was what she longed to hear. Such actions came from desperation. Not from the heart.

The door opened, and Mrs. Rutley returned. "Was it what you hoped to hear?"

Amy sighed. "Yes and no," she replied. "They have agreed to meet Mr. Deverell, but Father has already begun negotiations with a man who repulses me. And there are conditions. What if Mr. Deverell does not meet them?"

She explained further the contents of the letter and the situation in which she found herself. "What am I to do? I don't want to force him to love me, Mrs. Rutley. But without his declaration, I'm not sure I can marry him. But then I'll be forced to have a man I despise as my husband." She dropped into

one of the chairs and covered her face with her hands. "This is all more than I can handle! Why can love not be easier?"

As she had done so many times before, Mrs. Rutley took Amy's hands in hers. "Your plight is not uncommon, you know. Many women dream of hearing a man proclaim his love for them. Especially when he's captured her heart. You're correct. You cannot make Mr. Deverell fall in love with you. Such feelings must happen naturally."

Amy nodded. "But why must it take so long? There must be a way to speed up the process."

Mrs. Rutley's smile was as warm as always. "Oh, there is, but I cannot show it to you. Each couple's experience is different. But do not despair, for the answer you need resides inside you."

Removing her hands from those of the headmistress, Amy frowned. "That is all you have to say? It resides inside me?" These were not the wise words she had expected.

"I'm afraid so," Mrs. Rutley replied.

To say she was disappointed was an understatement. What kind of advice was that? If the answer were inside her, it was only logical that Amy would already have the answer.

Still, she thanked her headmistress.

"Now," Mrs. Rutley said, "Mr. Treen will be here soon for your art lesson. Once he has gone, I must ask a favor."

Amy nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Will you give Antonia a tour around the village? You've always been so good with the younger students, and she's exceptionally shy."

Amy sighed. Her world was falling apart, but Mrs. Rutley seemed not to notice. Or care, for that matter. Antonia, who was only fourteen, had arrived the previous week, looking every bit a frightened lamb. She had arrived an entire month earlier than most of the new students, as her parents had to journey to Scotland to visit an ailing aunt and were not expected to return until the spring.

"Yes, of course," Amy replied.

"Thank you. And don't forget about the Christmas Eve party Lord Walcott is hosting. Has Mr. Deverell given you an answer?"

Henry, Lord Walcott was a close friend of Mrs. Rutley, and his parties were well-known for being joyous occasions. Despite this fact, Amy wanted to weep. Like everything else she asked him, Mr. Deverell had not yet

responded to her invitation to attend the party as her guest.

After assuring Mrs. Rutley that she would ask again, Amy followed the headmistress to the foyer. There, Mrs. Shepherd, the school's cook—and self-proclaimed protector of the students—stood at the open front door.

“A true reverend by January?” she was saying. “That's superb news, sir. You know, my uncle wanted to join the clergy. He was a smart man, just like yourself. Problem was, he couldn't stay away from the drink. Pity, that. He'd have made a good vicar.”

Amy could not stifle a giggle, and Mrs. Rutley winked at her. “Give me a moment.” The headmistress went to the door. “Mrs. Shepherd, why don't you invite Mr. Deverell in from the cold? You can bring a tea tray to the drawing room to help warm him.”

Mrs. Shepherd let out a string of apologies as she brushed back a strand of dark hair from her face and hurried away.

Mr. Deverell stepped into view, and Amy's breath caught. At the age of twenty, he was a tall, handsome man with dark hair that fell in waves upon his brow. His jawline was strong and his eyes a deep blue.

As he removed his overcoat, Amy soaked in his tailored coat and snug breeches. She had never considered a man's arm muscles until she had met Mr. Deverell. Now, she had a fascination with them. Very improper, certainly, but she could not stop her mind from asking how large they could become. And what would it be like to touch them?

“Shall we go to the drawing room?” Mrs. Rutley asked, making Amy start. She really should keep her thoughts on more appropriate matters.

A blazing fire welcomed them as they entered the room. Amy sat on the couch, and Mr. Deverell took the place beside her, much to her pleasure.

“I hope you don't mind if I work on my embroidery while the two of you chat,” Mrs. Rutley said.

Amy nodded, but Mr. Deverell smiled. “Not at all.” Once the headmistress was settled, he turned to Amy. “I've given a great deal of consideration to your request, Miss Felton, and have reached a decision.”

Amy had to grip her hands to keep from throwing her arms around him. They would go to America after all! Which meant he would be proposing soon. Perhaps even at this very moment!

Mr. Deverell shifted in his seat. “I had to rearrange my schedule, of course.” Amy frowned. Rearrange his schedule? He would have to rewrite it completely, would he not? “I've now made time to accompany you to Lord

Walcott's party."

Amy's heart dropped to her feet, and she could not stop herself from gaping.

"Did I wait too long to respond? Do you no longer wish to attend? Or..." He swallowed visibly. "Or have you found someone else to escort you?"

"No," Amy replied. "No, of course not. Yes, I would love to go with you to the party. I was just expecting... something else."

Mrs. Shepherd entered and set a tea tray on the coffee table. "Do you want me to pour, Mrs. Rutley?"

The headmistress waved a dismissive hand. "I'll see to it, Mrs. Shepherd. You may go."

With a quick bob, the stout woman withdrew. As Mrs. Rutley served the tea, Mr. Deverell said, "Well, you needn't worry, Miss Felton. I would like to invite you and Mrs. Rutley to dinner on Monday evening. I've mentioned you to Father, and as my parents are visiting, he has requested to meet you. I do hope you will come."

Amy hid a grin behind her teacup. One did not simply invite any woman to meet his parents. This was a clear sign that a marriage proposal was on the horizon.

Troubling thoughts popped into her mind. What would Lord and Lady Deverell think of her? What type of person was the baroness? Amy had heard that mothers-in-law could be judgmental, especially those with prospective daughters-in-law who were not nobly born. Would she, a merchant's daughter, be worthy of marrying the second son of a baron?

But worse still was the fear that Mr. Deverell simply did not wish to marry her at all.

CHAPTER TWO



At the age of twenty, Mr. Tobias Deverell understood two things in life. One was that he would lead the life of a clergyman, hoping to bring light to those stumbling in darkness. The other was that he was madly in love with Miss Amy Felton.

And how could a man not be so? The greatest poets could never create the words to describe her beauty. Her blonde locks shone in the afternoon sun. Her blue eyes glinted with purity. Her feminine fragrance charmed him.

But what captivated Tobias the most was Miss Felton's kind heart. Her selflessness set her apart, a quality that was truly rare among most, especially men and women of means. She spoke to others with respect and offered kind words to those who were suffering.

One characteristic that made Tobias feel uncomfortable, one she shared with most, if not all women, was her inclination toward love.

The first time she alluded to an emotion stronger than affection, it was in the context of a story she had read. Then she brought it up again three more times when she explained how her schoolmates had found love. She had not said the word exactly, but Tobias had an innate ability to pick up on subtle hints. He knew she was implying sentiments much deeper than simple regard for him.

And he felt the same for her.

The problem was that admitting he loved Miss Felton would cause him a host of problems. Men who admitted to having such strong feelings were deemed weak-minded. His brother, Richard, who would take over the Deverell barony when their father died, was the strongest, most assured man Tobias knew. And Richard would never admit he loved his wife, Valina.

After all, theirs had been an arranged marriage, so there was likely little love to which he could admit.

Tobias had grown up in Gravesmith, some ten miles east of Chatsworth, and life had not been easy for him. He had spent most of his life living in his brother's shadow. Richard was the better shot, the faster runner, and the cleverer man. If it were possible, his brother would call water from the rocks.

What Tobias wanted more than anything was to prove his worth. He would do everything possible to leave the obscurity in which he lived and make a name for himself. But admitting his love for Miss Felton would only make him appear weak and hinder his chances for success. Bold men did not make declarations of love.

"Have you given any more thought to America?" Miss Felton whispered beside him.

This was the one question he had hoped she would not ask. Tobias could not leave England, not with so many lost souls in need of his ministering. His dedication was to the Church of England, which meant that his life was here. How could he expect to take his life to an unfamiliar land? No, he had to remain here if he wanted to see success.

Miss Felton would eventually come to his way of thinking, he was certain. Yet he had to be careful. If he was candid with her, he would break her heart, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. If the Church required him to go, he would. One day. But for now, a change of such magnitude was simply out of the question.

"I have," he replied. "And I believe I've got too much responsibility here at the moment. But I'm a fair man. If the opportunity arises—if I am asked to go elsewhere—I'll do so." He took a quick drink of his tea. "But it may be some time before that happens."

Her gaze dropped. "Have you any idea how long?"

Tobias set his cup on its saucer. "No. As I said, I can only wait for the call to know for sure where I'm meant to be."

Wood crackling in the fireplace was the only sound in the room. Even if they went to America, they would have to be married first. The thought of marrying her excited him. But a proposal to one Miss Amy Felton could not come without an admittance of love, and that he could not do.

Oh, why did relationships have to be so complicated? Perhaps he would be better off simply ending their courtship now and allowing another suitor to take his place.

No. She was far too important to him to walk away. They would work through this one difference somehow.

“Regardless,” he said, “I want you to know that there is no other woman I wish to court. Perhaps in the coming weeks, we can speak more about our future together.”

“I would like that.” She paused to nibble on her lower lip. He always liked it when she did that. “But we really should do so before January. If you don’t mind, of course.”

“Oh? And why so soon?”

Miss Felton glanced away, and he frowned. What was she hiding?

Then he laughed. He knew why she wished to hurry. “Of course. Your parents will be coming to collect you, then. Well, you needn’t worry. If you haven’t informed them of our courtship, I’ll do so the moment they arrive.”

“Yes, well...” Miss Felton took her empty cup and turned it in her hands. “Is there not something else you would like to tell them? Or rather, ask them?”

Tobias’s breath caught in his throat. He knew precisely what she meant. Marriage. But they could not marry until Miss Felton saw the importance of his mission and put aside this nonsense of living abroad. Perhaps they could discuss the topic in depth during dinner on Monday.

A smile crept onto his lips as he recalled a friend, Mr. Reginald Foberton, who had proposed marriage to a young lady. She had been so overcome with happiness that she agreed to everything Mr. Foberton asked of her. In fact, she became a different person altogether...

Sometimes, the hardest problems required the simplest solutions. On Monday, once he had stated his intention to marry her, she would drop the idea of traveling to America once and for all.

“If all goes well on Monday, I’ll have exciting news for your parents. I give you my word.”

Her cheeks turned crimson, and the conversation soon changed to more casual topics. And as so often before, he found himself laughing at their conversations.

“I suppose the performers at Astley’s Circus are artists,” he said with a laugh. “Though one could not compare them to great writers.”

As usual, Miss Felton defended her position. “Each has their own set of talents that bring about enjoyment. To place one lower than the other is not fair, is it?”

Tobias could not argue and admitted defeat. “Point taken, Miss Felton. I suppose I have learned something new from you again.”

He stood, as did Miss Felton and Mrs. Rutley. Seeing Miss Felton’s smile was well worth that promise. Once he received his first commission and was settled into his own church, they would settle into their life together. “I must be on my way. I’ve got a meeting scheduled with a friend, and then I must go and see a widow.”

Miss Felton nodded. “Your willingness to reach out to those in need speaks of who you are—a man I’m proud to have courting me.”

“The honor is all mine, Miss Felton. I’m sure you already realize this, do you not?”

After an exchange of farewells, Tobias was soon in his carriage and on the way to the home of a good friend. Henry, Lord Walcott, had listened to Tobias’s problems often. His father gave decent advice, but sometimes a man needed a different perspective—one that was impartial—and Lord Walcott was just the person to give it to him.

CHAPTER THREE



Only a handful of carriages ambled along the road that led to the village of Chatsworth. An hour earlier, Mr. Deverell had ridden away from the school, leaving Amy with more questions than before his arrival. How would he know when he was called to leave England? And how could he be so certain that she was not the messenger of that call?

Then there was the issue surrounding their future. Did he plan to ask her parents for her hand in marriage when they arrived in January? He had made it abundantly clear—without stating outright—that he wished her to be a part of his life, but courtship could only go on for so long. They had been courting for six months. At this pace, she would be a spinster before he came around to proposing marriage!

Before she could accept, however, one other event had to take place. When would he finally confess his love for her?

Surely, he had strong feelings for her, did he not? He was attentive when she spoke and contributed to discussions. And every so often, he would glance in her direction when he thought she was not looking, a small smile on his lips. Yes, he did care for her, but how deeply remained to be seen.

Amy sighed and pulled her wrap tighter around her as a gust of wind tossed leaves across the road. Beside her walked Miss Antonia Wimple, the newest student at the school. Antonia was fourteen and as nervous as a squirrel at a picnic. And just as cute. She had a button nose, round blue eyes, and honey-blonde hair, giving her the appearance of a living doll. *She* would not be forced to suffer as Amy did. Why, by the time the girl reached marrying age, men would be throwing themselves at her feet and declaring their undying love without hesitation.

And what of the advice Mrs. Rutley had given her? Amy would find the answer she needed inside her? What rubbish. Oh, her headmistress often spoke in riddles, and that could be endearing, but Amy just wished Mrs. Rutley would say outright what she meant. Especially when the subject was as important as Amy's situation was now.

She could say the same for Mr. Deverell. Why could he not be forthright? He walked around his words like a man circling a fire pit. What was it with the residents of Chatsworth and their secrecy? Amy would need a Bow Street Runner to learn the truth about... well, anything of substantial importance!

Hearing a whisper, Amy turned her attention to Antonia, who had a terrible habit of talking to herself. Why, people would begin thinking the girl was daft if she continued such behavior.

It was about time she, Amy, drew this young new student out of her shell. "What was that?" Amy asked.

Antonia came to a halt and sighed. "I want to go home. My mother and Mrs. Hollywise—she was my governess." She shook her head. "That doesn't matter. But they did a fine job teaching me all I need to know about being a proper young lady. Why send me away to a school to learn it all over again?"

Her shining eyes tugged at Amy's heart. Many girls shared Antonia's anxiety about being sent away, herself included. Amy's first month at Mrs. Rutley's School for Young Women had been excruciating. If Jenny Clifton and Ruth Lockhart, both older students who were now off and married, had not taken her under their wings, Amy would have run away by the end of the first week!

"I was as frightened as you when I first arrived," Amy said, giving Antonia a warm smile. "But once you're settled, once you are accustomed to the school and all it has to offer, you'll find it very agreeable. You'll make new friends and create wonderful memories—stories you can share with others later in life. Few girls like us, those from the merchant class, are lucky enough to attend such an excellent school. You should embrace it."

This seemed to cheer up Antonia, whose frown disappeared, replaced by a smile. "I hadn't considered that. Thank you."

They continued their walk and soon entered the village proper. Due to the chilly weather, the High Street had few pedestrians.

"You'll find that Chatsworth has a great deal to offer," Amy said as they came to a stop in front of the butcher's shop. "You'll be surprised how many shops there are. There is Mrs. Alton's millinery. Mr. Mistral owns the

bookshop. Mr. Wallace is the cobbler—he took over the business after Mr. Hill left. And Mr. Finch is the butcher. Although you’re not likely to need his services. Over there is Mr. Locke’s shop. He’s a hatter. And Mr. Pattyworks runs the haberdashery. Those are just a few of the shops.” She paused to think. “Oh, and we have a theater as well. There it is, at the far end of the street. Now, do any of those places interest you?”

Antonia looked around them. “There’s just so much from which to choose. May we visit the bookstore? I adore reading.”

Amy grinned. “Of course we may. It’s farther along the way. Follow me.”

They walked past many shops, stopping from time to time to look at displays or peer through windows.

When they reached the bakery, they entered and emerged several minutes later, each with a fresh scone topped with butter and jam in her hand. “Mr. MacQuerry uses a family recipe he refuses to share with anyone. Even Mrs. Shepherd cannot replicate them, and she’s the best cook I know.”

They nibbled on their scones as they crossed the street. “This is the theater I mentioned. In the spring, Mrs. Rutley will take all the students to tour the place and to watch the first play of the season. It’s a lovely break from our studies.”

Antonia tore a morsel off her scone. “Mrs. Rutley seems to be a very kind woman.”

“You’ll not meet any kinder than she,” Amy replied. “If you have any problem, go to her. She’s a good listener and gives very good advice. I’ve sought her counsel many times over the years.”

Although her advice concerning Mr. Deverell was of little help, she amended silently.

This made her wonder where Mr. Deverell was now. She should be pleased that he was helping some poor old widow, but truth be told, she wished he was there with her instead.

“There now, child. Why so sad?”

Startled, Amy turned to a woman with silver hair peeking out of a ragged bonnet. She wore a man’s tattered coat and heavy boots better suited to a soldier. The tips of her fingers poked through her woolen gloves. In her hands, she carried a wicker basket filled with mistletoe.

“Oh, no. I’m well,” Amy replied with a smile.

The old woman tilted her head. “There be only two reasons a young one like yerself looks like ye do now. Either she’s been scolded by her father, or a

man's troublin' her. I'd guess the second by the looks of ye."

Amy could not stop her eyes from going wide. How could this woman know? They had never met as far as she knew. And even if they had, Amy would not have confided such intimate details to someone she barely knew.

Despite this fact, however, Amy could not stop her tongue. "You've guessed correctly. My heart belongs to a handsome man, but he has yet to reciprocate. Or at least he's failed to voice how he feels."

The woman gave a knowing nod and set the basket of mistletoe on the ground. "It's all right, love. Ye're not the first woman to find herself in such straits, and ye certainly won't be the last. What ye need is a bit of Christmas magic. And I got somethin' here that'll give ye just that."

Amy frowned. Christmas magic? How preposterous. But she said nothing as the old woman removed something from inside her coat and unwrapped the cloth to expose what was hidden inside.

"Mistletoe?" Amy asked.

"Not just any mistletoe, miss," the old woman said. She lowered her voice and pushed her hand forward. "*Magical* mistletoe."

Amy took the collection of leaves in her hands and was surprised at its weight. It was carved from wood and had been painted, yet the detail was so fine that it appeared real. But how could such an object be magical?

As if Amy had spoken the question aloud, the old woman answered, "It's said that a prince from a faraway land was pining for the heart of the woman he loved. But 'cause she didn't return that love, he called on his chief magician, who created that very item for him. On Christmas Eve, he hung it 'bove a doorway. Then, as the couple stood beneath it, he kissed her, and his wish was granted. He won her heart."

"I'm no one special," Amy said. "Why would this work for me?"

The old woman gave a toothless grin. "I'm sure it'll perform its magic for a woman just as well as any man. Even if she ain't no a princess. All it needs to make it work is that her wish comes from her heart. It can't come from no greed or dishonesty."

Doubt filled Amy. She was no longer a child, but a woman. And stories of magic were meant to ease children to bed at night. Still, what if there was some truth to it? She had heard of good luck charms before. Surely most were fanciful tales. Yet could not a handful be true?

And the woman did sense Amy was having trouble. Perhaps there was something to the mistletoe after all.

“Am I to understand that it grants wishes? Whatever I ask for, I’ll receive?” The old woman nodded, and excitement filled Amy. This could solve all her problems. “How wonderful! Please, how much are you asking for this fantastic relic?”

For a moment, the old woman looked Amy up and down. “I was meant to sell it to a gentleman today for a hundred pounds.”

Amy’s heart dropped. A hundred pounds? Where would she find that kind of money? Did the woman not see she could not afford it? Or that Amy so desperately needed it?

“But I be thinking ye’d make better use of it. Seein’ as it’s Christmas time and all, I’ll sell it to ye for nothin’ more’n a single pound.”

Amy reached into her reticule before the old woman came to her senses. “I knew you would find me worthy,” she whispered as she pressed the money into the woman’s hand.

Rewrapping the cloth around the mistletoe, Amy asked, “When should I use this? What I mean is, is the magic stronger closer to Christmas or will it matter?”

With a grunt, the old woman retrieved her basket. “Which day’ll ye be seein’ him? Christmas Day or Christmas Eve?”

“Christmas Eve for sure,” Amy replied. “But possibly both if we can manage it.”

The old woman chuckled. “Well, I’ll be. I was just gonna to say that its magic’s most potent on Christmas Eve.” She patted Amy’s hand that held the mistletoe. “That’s a true sign yer meant to have this.”

After thanking the woman profusely, Amy led Antonia down the footpath, the magical item tight in her grip.

As they walked, she considered how she would go about getting her wish. Leaving it hanging in a doorway would have others using up its magic. But if she simply held it over Mr. Deverell’s head, perhaps he would readily agree to anything she asked. Perhaps she could even convince him to go with her to America!

No. She could not use it for selfish gain. Instead, she would ask it to make Mr. Deverell admit that he was in love with her. From there, they could discuss the possibility of moving to America.

Yet there was also another reason one stood beneath mistletoe, one that was far more alluring—to receive a kiss. The mere thought of her first kiss excited her. And what sort of kiss would she receive? Would Mr. Deverell

give her a peck on the cheek? Or would it be on her forehead? Perhaps he would kiss her on the lips!

She secretly hoped for the last.

Entering Mistral's Bookstore, she followed Antonia around the shop without looking at any books herself. Her thoughts were still on Mr. Deverell and the Christmas Eve miracle. How wondrous it would be when after using the mistletoe, he called everyone's attention to announce their engagement and their plans for going to America.

Mrs. Rutley would be so happy for them, as would everyone in attendance!

"I'm ready to leave," Antonia said, breaking Amy from her pleasant thoughts.

"Did you not wish to make a purchase?" Amy asked.

Antonia shook her head. "Not today. But perhaps next month I'll have enough."

They exited the shop and made their way along the footpath, the winter wind stronger now than when they had gone inside.

"The man who called on you," Antonia said, "will you marry him?"

Amy sighed. "I believe so."

"You only believe you will?" Antonia asked, frowning. "You're not sure?"

Amy held up the wrapped relic. "It's why I purchased this. I hope to have more certainty."

Antonia wrought her hands together. "Do you really think it will work?"

It was a fair question, and Amy had her doubts. Yet, still, the story behind it was amazing. A story of which legends were made. "Though I think the notion of magic and such is nonsense, there are two things that make me believe this could work. One, the story behind it. It was far too wondrous to be false. The second is the woman. She could have easily made a fortune today but took mercy upon me by allowing me to purchase it for a pittance. So yes, it will bring me the magic I seek."

They were soon on the road that led to the school, the mistletoe clutched to Amy's breast. For the low price of a single pound, it would be put to good use. And although Mrs. Rutley had advised her that the answer was already inside her, that all she had to do was find it, Amy refused to wait so long.

CHAPTER FOUR



When Tobias arrived at Foxly Manor, he was led to the drawing room where Henry, Lord Walcott sat in a white wingback chair, reading a book. Sixty, with a dome of silver hair and deep wrinkles around his eyes, the earl had a pleasant air about him. To see him without a smile was a rare sight, and he was always welcoming whenever he and Tobias met.

“Mr. Tobias Deverell,” the butler announced.

Lord Walcott closed his book and smiled. “Deverell, how good to see you. Deacon, have a tea tray brought up, please.” Once the butler was gone, he indicated the chair across from him. “Sit.”

“Thank you,” Tobias said as he sat in the matching chair.

“Each winter, I find it takes a stronger fire to keep me warm,” the earl said with a glance at the roaring fire in the grand fireplace. “Perhaps it’s just another way to confirm that I’m getting old.”

Tobias laughed. “You’re not alone. Father says the same every time winter sets in.”

The earl smiled. “I imagine he would, given that we’re nearly the same age.” He leaned back in his chair. “I know you didn’t request this meeting to discuss the weather or the malady of growing old, so why not get to what brings you here today?”

“I would like a bit of advice,” Tobias replied. “About Miss Amy Felton.”

Lord Walcott’s eyebrows lifted. “She is one of the students from the school, is she not? The one you’ve been calling on quite a bit over the past few months if rumors are to be believed. Are you courting yet?”

Tobias sighed again. “In a way, yes.”

“In a way?” Lord Walcott asked as the butler set a tea tray on the low table between them. “I’ll pour. Thank you, Deacon. You may go.” Once the butler had bowed his way out of the room, the earl continued. “Are you and Miss Felton having difficulties? Surely, you plan on asking for her hand soon?”

“I would like to do so, yes,” Tobias replied, accepting the teacup from the earl. “It’s just that we... we want different things.”

Lord Walcott took a sip of his tea. “You’ll have to be more specific, Deverell, if I’m to give you any advice worth taking.”

And so Tobias did. Reluctantly at first, but soon the words were flowing from his tongue like rain from a gutter. Until that moment, he had not realized how much of a burden this all had been. He explained Miss Felton’s desire to live in America, a stark contrast to his wish to remain in England.

“She does not seem to understand how important the Church is to me. If she did, she would put away the notion of moving to America once and for all.” He lifted a hand and sighed. “Did you know that a former schoolmate of hers has taken a position on a ship of all things?”

“Oh, yes. Miss Lockhart. Or rather Mrs. Bannermann. I’m very aware of her situation.”

Tobias frowned. “Don’t you think it an odd arrangement for a woman?” He did not give the earl a chance to reply. “But I’m not here to discuss such things.” Frustrated, he set his cup on its saucer and relaxed back into his seat. “I had hoped to make my intentions with Miss Felton known at dinner on Monday, when my parents are visiting from Dover. Now, however, I wonder if I should delay that announcement. I must be absolutely sure she is the one I’m meant to marry.”

“And her reason for wishing to move to America?”

Tobias sighed. “Two former students work at an orphanage. Miss Felton believes every child should have someone to care for them.” Lord Walcott raised a single brow. “Of course, I do as well. But you must understand, my work is more important in the grander scheme of life.”

Lord Walcott sat quietly studying him, his brows knitted in thought. Would he not respond? In the past, whenever Tobias approached the earl, he always responded with ready words of encouragement.

Doubt washed over Tobias. Had he come across as a bumbling fool?

“Do you care for her?” Lord Walcott finally asked.

Tobias nodded. “I do.”

“Do you love her?” the earl asked. “I know the question is very personal, but it must be asked.”

Clearing his throat, Tobias glanced over his shoulder as if expecting someone to be standing behind him. A man did not come right out and confess strong feelings for any woman.

“Men are not relegated to the gallows for such an admission, Deverell,” Lord Walcott chuckled.

Tobias sighed a third time. Lord Walcott must have thought him tiresome with all his sighing, but Tobias could not help himself. And the earl was waiting for an answer.

“Yes, I love her. Very much so.”

Lord Walcott crossed an ankle on the opposite knee and folded his hands in his lap. “As a clergyman—or rather one who will be soon enough, once you’ve finished your studies—you must have intimate knowledge of the Good Book, correct?”

“It’s the main source of study, yes,” Tobias replied, amused.

“And what of that special gift you received from Mr. Styles?”

Tobias could not help but beam with pride. He had shown Lord Walcott the beautiful, dark-brown, leather-bound Bible with its encouraging inscription just last month—a gift from the vicar of the local church. And Tobias’s mentor. “What of it?”

The earl smiled. “I believe the answer you seek is in that very book you study.”

Tobias frowned in thought. There was wisdom in the earl’s words. How could Tobias have been so blinded? The answer to all life’s questions can be found in that book. How silly he had not considered it before. How did one lead people to the truth when he did not understand it himself?

“Yes,” he said finally. “Yes, you’re right. Can you...” How embarrassing that a seminary student was asking for guidance from a layman. “Can you direct me to a chapter and verse to study?”

Lord Walcott’s laugh was kind as he rose from his chair. “I’m afraid you must find it for yourself, my friend.”

Although he was a bit disappointed, Tobias also stood and shook the earl’s hand. “Thank you for the advice, Walcott. I’ll begin searching the moment I return home.” A twinge of sadness tickled the back of his mind. “Well, after I meet with Mrs. Hartzel, of course. I promised to speak to her today.”

The earl sighed. "She has suffered much since her husband died. I imagine your compassion and guidance have been a guiding light in her otherwise dark world."

Lord Walcott walked Tobias to the door. Once in his carriage, Tobias considered all the earl had told him. Tonight, he would study and find the answers he needed.

The thought of being separated from Miss Felton made him feel ill. Suddenly he imagined a life where she was not in it. How miserable he would be. Yet, he needed an answer on how to proceed for both of them. Surely, the Good Book would provide it. He could not even fathom what he would do if he found nothing in the one place that promised him encouragement and consolation.

CHAPTER FIVE



The two days since Amy had last seen Mr. Deverell seemed like years. She counted every hour—nay, every minute!—until she and Mrs. Rutley would dine with his parents. Given it was Saturday morning, she now only needed to wait fifty-five hours and twenty-three minutes—twenty-two minutes. Twenty-one minutes—to be an engaged woman. And she'd be engaged to the most wonderful man in the world!

Amy sighed and placed the last pin in her hair. So much time had been wasted in anticipation of his confession of love. For so long, she thought he was putting her off. Men were not known for their candor when it came to their feelings. She had not had the magical mistletoe before, so how could she have expected him to act any differently?

Granted, she had hoped he would express his true feelings for her before a proposal of marriage. That had been her dream for as long as she could remember. After all, marrying for something other than love was just so... old-fashioned.

Well, at least she could now be certain his declaration *would* come. Christmas Eve was far too magical a time for it not to happen. And the mistletoe only made it more definite.

At least she did not have to wait until Monday to see the man she loved. He would be calling at ten, the only time he had available in his busy schedule. And she did not mind. As a clergyman—or rather, one in training—he spent a great deal of time either studying or helping others. Amy savored whatever time he had to offer. Once they were married, they would spend every evening and night together for the rest of their lives.

She had selected a dress of soft yellow muslin with white lace around the

bottom hem and white embroidered flowers on the bodice. A gold ribbon was tied around the high waist, and a tiny gold bow hung from each sleeve.

Taking one last look in the mirror, she stood. “Well?” she asked Antonia, who sat on the trunk at the foot of Amy’s bed. “What do you think? Will he be impressed?”

Antonia nodded. “He can’t help but to be so. You look beautiful.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “I cannot wait until I have a suitor. It’s so unfair that eighteen is so far away.”

Amy laughed. She remembered being fourteen. That had been her first year at the school, and eighteen seemed decades away rather than a few years. Now, her days at the school were drawing to an end. Soon, she and Mr. Deverell would be married and off to America.

Well, as long as she could convince him to go. Which she would do today. Her plan was to speak of all the benefits of living abroad. Just last year, Amy had met two former students from the school, Theodosia and Unity, who now shared the same surname—Rollins. They had met a pair of American brothers, whom they married, and they told the most wonderful stories about life in that far-off land.

Then there were the letters she received from Ruth and her adventures on the high seas. If Mr. Deverell was so against living in America, perhaps he would fancy traveling. He could help so many more people if he did. Amy would agree to that way of life. And Ruth would most certainly provide them with a berth on the ship her husband captained. She had even said as much in her last letter.

Regardless of the choice Mr. Deverell made for their future, he could not choose to remain in England. The world was at their fingertips, and Amy would not be stuck in a rut like so many Englishmen and women.

A gentle knock on the door announced Mrs. Rutley. “I must go into the village, but Mrs. Shepherd has agreed to act as your chaperone in my place. Mrs. Bornhalt has gone to visit an ill sister, and I’ve no idea when she will return.”

Amy sighed in relief. Mrs. Rutley hired Mrs. Bornhalt to chaperone the students when needed—most often for parties or other gatherings where men would be present. When a suitor called to the school, one of the older students might attend. Most of them, however, had returned home for the Christmas holiday. Antonia and Amy would have departed sooner if their parents hadn't been scheduled to return from their respective journeys—the

Feltons in the Highlands of Scotland and the Wimples in Wales—until after the term had ended. And placing the expectation of a younger student chaperoning an older student was irresponsible.

Once Mrs. Rutley was gone, Antonia stood. “How did you and Mr. Deverell become acquainted?”

Now Amy’s sigh was wistful. “It was by accident, really. A dear friend and former schoolmate of mine, Nina Cromwell—she left the school last year to marry a textile merchant. Anyway, she and I had gone into the village to purchase new ribbons for our hats. It was his voice that captivated me—a deep, husky tone that took my breath away. When we came around the corner beside the theater, I saw him talking with another man. I had never seen anyone so handsome! My legs became weak, and I thought for certain that I would faint right there on the spot!”

Antonia giggled. “If you had, maybe he would have caught you. How romantic would that be?”

Amy clicked her tongue. “Proper ladies don’t fall into men’s arms.” Secretly, however, she agreed with her friend. “As I was saying, Mr. Deverell was clutching a Bible in his left hand and was saying to the man, ‘That is why we mustn’t be afraid to share the Good News. Let every man receive it.’ Well, as he said the last, he flung out the arm that held the Bible just as I was passing by and promptly hit me in the face with it. I ended up on my backside.”

“Oh, my!” Antonia gasped. “I assume he helped you stand.”

“He did,” Amy replied with a nod. “He apologized profusely and assured me it was an accident. As he pulled me up, I said, ‘If this is receiving the Good News, I have to say, it’s quite painful.’”

Antonia pressed her hand to her mouth and gasped. “You didn’t!”

“I did. And after that, he promised to call.”

Antonia clasped her hands together. “What a romantic story!”

Amy laughed and rubbed her cheek. “And painful!” She shook her head. “He kept his promise and called on me a few days later. With his studies and his work with the church keeping him occupied, I did not see him again for several months.” She let out a sigh. “And although it has not been very long...” Her words trailed off, and she glanced at the clock. “Well, never mind that. I should go downstairs. He will be here any minute.”

“But I want to hear more,” Antonia said.

“Later perhaps,” Amy promised.

As she descended the stairs, Amy was pleased to find Mr. Deverell already in the foyer with Mrs. Shepherd.

“Again,” the cook was saying, “I can’t apologize enough for my ramblings the last time you were here. But I can assure you, I won’t be rambling today. No, sir. You can count on that.”

Mr. Deverell went to speak, but then he caught sight of Amy. “Good morning, Miss Felton.” He bowed. “How wonderful to see you again.”

“Good morning,” Amy said, smiling. “And the pleasure is all mine.”

“You know,” he said, his tone thoughtful, “it’s a lovely day today. Would you care to take a stroll?” He turned to Mrs. Shepherd. “You don’t mind, do you?”

The cook beamed. “Not at all. I’ll fetch your pelisse and a bonnet, Miss Felton.”

Once everyone was ready, they walked through the main corridor to the door that led to the gardens at the back of the school. Mr. Deverell held the door, and Amy followed Mrs. Shepherd outside.

Although a light chill hung in the air, it was indeed a pleasant day. And when Amy took the arm Mr. Deverell offered, a sudden warmth that had nothing to do with the weather descended upon her. Amy glanced over her shoulder to see Mrs. Shepherd wearing a wide grin as she followed behind.

“So, tell me, Mr. Deverell, what are your plans for today? I imagine you’re quite busy.”

Mr. Deverell nodded. “I’ve been invited to luncheon with Mr. Styles at noon. At half past one, I’m to meet with a man to discuss his son’s christening that is to take place next week. After that, I’ve got a meeting with a woman at three. Then, I must find time to study. I was up late last night searching for the answer to a particular problem. Unfortunately, I came up empty-handed. But I’m sure that with a little more time, I’ll be led to the necessary passage.”

Amy smiled. His heart was so good! “Perhaps the widow will be able to help you.”

He paused. “Er... the woman I’m meeting is not the widow.”

“Oh?” Amy asked, frowning her brow. “Who is she, then?”

Mr. Deverell came to a stop and turned to her. “You must understand, Miss Felton. There will be times when I cannot share with you whom I’m meeting or why. It is the only way I can do what is necessary without bringing harm to those I’m helping. This is one of those times.”

Although she did not like what he had to say, Amy understood. If people were to seek the aid of a clergyman, they had to trust that he would be discreet.

Amy, too, had a problem. And in order to see it solved, she and Mr. Deverell had to discuss America.

“Were you aware that hundreds of people from all over the world step off ships in New York every day?”

Mr. Deverell frowned. “Hundreds every day? I find that unlikely. Weekly, perhaps, but surely not daily.”

“Oh, but it’s true!” Amy insisted. “Do you recall my friends, Theodosia and Unity? They told me. Did you know that some of the children in the orphanage were left once their family arrived?” She then added, “Did I tell you that the orphanage is funded by a church there?”

They came to a stop at the end of the footpath. Mrs. Shepherd still followed behind, but she kept a discrete distance away.

“Miss Felton, I don’t think—”

“Then there is my friend Ruth. I’ve mentioned her before, I’m sure. Did I tell you that her husband is the captain of a ship? They travel between England and New York often. We could always return to visit your family whenever you wish. They’ll even give us free passage, I’m sure.”

He sighed. “Miss Felton, this idea of going to America... it does sound nice, but it would be very hard on both of us. I mean, will you not miss your parents?”

Amy dropped her gaze. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“And what about me? As a second son, I must work twice as hard to make a name for myself. It’s even worse when I am always compared to an older brother who will become a baron when our father dies. At least I have a firm foundation here in the country of my birth. And with the Church. No, leaving England is unwise. For both of us.”

“I see,” Amy said, unable to keep the tears from welling in her eyes. She had been so intent on leaving England that she had not considered her family. Or what Mr. Deverell might desire.

Mr. Deverell placed a finger beneath her chin and raised her head, so she had to look at him. “But I promise to consider it,” he said.

Despite his words, it was clear he had already made his decision. His points were sound. How could she argue? He had his dream, and she did not want to crush it. Yet he seemed oblivious to the significance of her feelings.

Time was running out. Her parents would be here soon, and if he did not make a decision before then, she was doomed.

She considered telling him about Mr. Hamlin, but using guilt to manipulate him into a decision he might not genuinely want would be deceitful. And a marriage founded on deception would be worse than one arranged by her parents. Then a sudden thought occurred to her. She had been so concerned about using the magical mistletoe so he would confess his love for her that she had forgotten the obvious. Once she had him under the spell, she could convince him that going to America was his calling! He would not have the power to disagree!

“Thank you,” Amy said. “I know you’ll make the best decision for both of us.”

They stopped at the foot of the stairs that led to the veranda. “Do you truly believe so?” he asked.

Amy nodded. Oh, the poor man! He had no idea what was coming! “Indeed, I do.”

“If that is true,” Mr. Deverell said, grinning, “then I must admit that I’m impressed by you.”

Hearing a fluttering, Amy gasped seeing a bird surely no more than a day or two old on the grass. “He must have fallen but from where?”

With Mr. Deverell at her side, they both walked near a small tree where the black and white spotted bird continued to flap its tiny wings.

“Here now my friend,” Mr. Deverell said, taking it in his hands. “You are in good company.”

Amy’s heart soared as he offered the cupped bird to her. With a finger, she gently stroked its head. “We will find your nest.”

The two moved across the garden, and then Mr. Deverell motioned to a tree. “There.”

Amy watched as he reached up to a nest with three baby birds in it. Their mother must be looking for food and left them alone. Mr. Deverell returned the bird and then smiled at Amy. “I believe a good deed is done for the day.”

Amy sighed as they strolled back toward the veranda. There was no man more handsome nor kinder than Mr. Deverell.

Near the backdoor, he pulled out his pocket watch. “I must go. I cannot be late. Mr. Styles won’t be pleased. After all, he’s been my mentor since I started this journey.” He pressed his lips to her knuckles. “I’ll not see you again until Monday night. How shall I ever manage it?”

Mouth dry and her knees weak, Amy watched him walk away. “Just one more week, and he’ll tell me what I wish to hear.”

Mrs. Shepherd joined her. “Oh? And what’s that?”

Amy cheeks heated. “That we’ll move to America,” Amy replied, although that was not what she meant. One did not discuss love with just anyone! Even if it was Mrs. Shepherd. It was far too personal. “I’m sure he’ll agree.”

The cook sighed. “There’s no harm in hoping, but he just may say no.”

Amy went to correct her but thought better of it. There was no reason to make both Mrs. Shepherd and Mrs. Rutley look foolish. Instead, she thanked the cook and returned to her room, where Antonio waited expectantly.

By summer, Amy would be married and off to a whole new world.

It was just a shame how many others couldn’t see it.

CHAPTER SIX



Once again, Amy found herself back in Chatsworth, Antonia at her side. After enjoying a tasty luncheon prepared by Mrs. Shepherd, they had returned to their room to choose what Amy would wear to dinner on Monday evening. She would wear her favorite gown—a cream-colored silk with a cotton gauze overskirt.

Unfortunately, as she pulled the gloves she meant to wear with the dress, they caught on the corner of the table and tore a small hole in one of the fingers. Granted, she could mend them, but mending could never bring them to their previous loveliness.

Therefore, she had to purchase a new pair before Monday if she was to impress Mr. Deverell's parents. Imagine the horror if the baron thought she came from a family too poor to even purchase a new pair of gloves!

Yet that was not the only problem bothering her. Mr. Deverell had mentioned during his call that he wished to make a name for himself.

"Mr. Deverell mentioned that he wants to make a name for himself," Amy said to Antonia as they walked along the busy road. "He clearly believes himself inferior to his brother. Why can he not see that all the help he gives to so many proves he's already better?"

"Men are competitive," Antonia said with a firm nod. "Mother told me so."

They came to a stop outside the door to the haberdashery.

"What did she say exactly?" Amy asked.

Antonia shrugged. "That men make rivals of one another. Look at how much time they spend playing games of chance or betting on horse races. They're no different when dealing with women. According to my mother, all

men have some inner need to prove their strength at every turn. It's why wars are fought. But they don't want to win only by muscle but with social standing, too. It's why they have duels. They call it honor, but they're trying to confirm that they are better than others. It's all silly if you ask me."

"But Mr. Deverell's brother will be a baron. How can a vicar match the status of a title? He'll fail if he tries."

With a sigh, Antonia shrugged again. "Mother says that is why men drink. To ease their sorrow once they learn the truth."

A sense of overwhelming confusion blanketed Amy. She had never considered any of this before. What else did men do of which she should be wary?

No, Mr. Deverell was not like most men. He had a good heart and truly believed in what he preached. "Well, I have nothing to worry about," Amy said. "After all, he'll soon become a vicar. Everyone knows men of the cloth have no faults."

"Mother would agree," Antonia said, making both of them laugh.

Entering the shop, Amy walked over to a display of gloves, where she was greeted by a young woman perhaps two or three years older than she.

"Good afternoon," the woman said. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

Amy explained her needs, and the woman opened the case and pulled out several pairs of gloves. "These are made of cotton and will pair nicely with what you described."

Amy was not so sure. They were far plainer than she had hoped. "And those?" she asked, pointing to another pair.

"Ah, yes, these are far better in quality," the clerk said. "They are made of the finest silk. If you'd like, you can add a bit of ribbon around the wrist to match your gown."

Sliding them over her hands, Amy extended her arms out in front of her. "Yes, these will do nicely."

Antonia selected two colors of embroidery thread, and soon the two exited the shop with their new wares. From there, they visited the cobbler's shop, where Antonia tried on several pairs of ready-made slippers. In the end, she chose a pair of delicate kid slippers of indigo. "They'll go well with one of my morning dresses," she said as the clerk wrapped them for her.

It was just past three when they exited the cobbler's shop. The warmth of the day was beginning to fade. "We should return to the school," Amy

said, pulling her coat tighter as she looked up at the sky. "It's gotten colder, and it looks like it might rain."

As they approached Drake Street, where the infamous Rake Street Gambling Hell was located, Amy imparted some valuable wisdom upon her companion.

"Stop here," she said, just as the footpath ended. "This alleyway is known as Rake Street. Only the most heinous and roguish men and women of despicable morals venture into the gaming hell there." Antonia's wide eyes only fueled Amy's story. "You should not use this alleyway for any reason, even as a shortcut. And never associate with anyone who spends too much time there."

With her lower lip between her teeth, Antonia leaned forward. "May I at least take a peek?"

Amy sighed. "I supposed there is no harm. But we mustn't dawdle."

Taking a step forward, Antonia peered around the corner of a building. "There's a man and woman there now," she said, her voice filled with what sounded suspiciously like excitement. "He... he looks oddly familiar."

Amy sniffed. "It's just your imagination. Any man you know wouldn't be caught in such a place."

Antonia frowned. "No, I do know him. Is that not Mr. Deverell?"

With a growl at the girl's nonsense, Amy stepped to her friend's side and looked down the alleyway. Her heart clenched. A woman in a dress that was far too revealing stood on the landing that led to the gaming hell. Mr. Deverell stood at the bottom of the steps with his arm extended. In his hand was a single note.

The woman signaled for him to follow. When he hesitated, Amy released a sigh of relief. He would not give into such a temptation, would he?

Then tears misted her eyes when he ascended the stairs and followed the woman inside the gaming hell.

So, this was the woman he refused to explain. Was this how Mr. Deverell eased his sorrow? By jumping into the bed of a prostitute?

Apparently, Antonia's mother was correct that men had many flaws. But to believe clergymen were free of sins was laughable. Had some man bragged about this woman and Mr. Deverell wished to compete?

Amy's heart ached as she clenched her fist.

She would rather marry Mr. George Hamlin than marry a man like this!

CHAPTER SEVEN



Mr. Tobias Deverell was a firm believer that every man or woman could turn from his or her destructive ways if given the chance. A drunkard who neglected his family could put aside the drink. A prostitute could choose another line of work. A cheat could find other means to earn a wage. All they had to do was make the decision to improve their lives. As long as they had someone there to lend them a hand, of course. Changing one's ways, even for the better, was not always easy, but it was achievable.

In today's society, a man who favored drinking to taking care of his family was certainly frowned upon. But the ill treatment and disregard he received from others would never compare to that of the prostitute. She was treated far worse and judged much harsher by those who lived a more respectable life.

Those men who partook of her services rarely received such scrutiny, which only made matters worse. Even as they enjoyed what she had to offer, they had no respect for her or her plight. If anything, they only worsened her circumstances.

It was for this reason that Tobias found himself, for the second time this week, meeting with a woman by the name of Lulu. Whether that was her real name or a nom de plume, he had no idea, but that was what she called herself. Five and twenty years of age, Lulu was not an unattractive woman. Chestnut hair hung down her back in long ringlets. Her cheeks were an unnatural red. She had been in her current line of work for more than ten years, which was why Tobias had approached her the previous week with an offer. One he was sure she could not refuse.

“Go to London,” he had told her during their last meeting. “The charity will house and feed you. In exchange, all you must do is allow them to train you. You’ll learn a host of skills that will provide you with a way to earn money. An acceptable way. One in which you can be proud of the money you earn.”

She had promised to consider the proposal, and it was for her answer that he was returning today.

“I appreciate the offer, Vicar, I do,” Lulu replied, unshed tears brimming her eyes. “And I do wanna change me ways. But how’ll I ever get the money for a coach to get there? What I make now barely pays me room ’n board. Hell... beggin’ yer pardon... If’n I had that kinda money, I wouldn’t be here doin’ what I’m doin’ now, would I? I’d be livin’ in London already.”

Although her words sounded harsh, her tone was not. She wanted to leave this despicable life but was too afraid to take the first steps, he was sure. The unknown was a frightening place for those who had the means to change their lives, but it was more so for those without the means, those who felt lost and alone.

He had seen this same despondency before, during his first year at the seminary school. He and a group of other seminarians were sent to a brothel to convince as many of the women and girls there to change their ways. Tobias suspected the visit doubled as a test to see which of them would give into the temptation to lie with one of those women. But he had proven his strength, for the thought never crossed his mind.

Nor did it now. Lulu was a lovely woman in her way, but his heart already belonged to Miss Felton. There simply was no more room for another. Even if it was for a short time.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out some money. “This will pay for your travels,” he said as he pulled two one-pound notes from the little he had. “And will leave you a little left over.”

Lulu wrung her hands. “Before I take it, I’ve a few more questions I’d like to ask. This’s a big decision, Vicar. I can’t say yes just like that. Why don’t you come inside? It’s warmer in there.”

Tobias hesitated. What if someone saw him entering the gaming hell? And in the company of a prostitute?

No, the alternative was worse. Darkness hovered over this woman, if she remained here much longer, it would devour her. He had to trust that his light would keep him safe in such a dark place.

With a nod, he followed Lulu past the burly man who guarded the door. The foyer walls were decorated in red velvet drapes that matched the fabric on the chairs. They did not stop there, however. Instead, Lulu led them through a doorway into a room that looked much like a parlor. Thankfully, it was empty. And a roaring fire blazed in the fireplace.

“Here, sit with me,” Lulu said, patting the place beside her. “If my boss peeks his head in, he needs to think we’re discussing—”

Tobias raised his hand to keep her from saying it aloud. “I understand.” That didn’t mean he was comfortable with the situation.

They sat on opposite ends of a blue couch, Lulu folding her hands in her lap.

“Why do you find leaving here so difficult?” Tobias asked kindly. “And don’t tell me it’s because you can’t get to London. It’s an hour’s journey, so the cost cannot be what holds you back.”

She let out a heavy sigh as she looked down at her clasped hands. “This’s been my home for nearly ten years, Vicar. What if those charity people don’t like me? What if I can’t clean as good as other women? I ain’t never done a maid’s work. I’ve done a bit ‘o cleanin’ here, but that’s not the same as workin’ at a fancy house, is it? At least here I got people who know me and know what I can do.”

Tobias understood. He had struggled with similar concerns himself. In a different way, of course, but fear was fear. “The charity is run by very patient women,” he assured her. “As long as you are genuinely trying, as long as you’re putting forth your best efforts, they will do all they can to support you.”

Still, the worry remained in her eyes.

What can I say to convince her that this change is what is best for her?

Finally, the words came to him. “I believe in you, Lulu. I know you will do well. But what I think doesn’t matter one whit. You must believe in yourself for this to work.” He offered her the notes again. “The coach leaves tomorrow at a quarter past twelve. Take the money. How you use it is your choice. But so is your future.”

For the first time since their first meeting, Lulu gave him a genuine smile. “Thank you, Vicar. I’ll go tomorrow.”

“I’m glad,” Tobias said, standing.

As he turned to leave, Lulu placed a hand on his arm. “You’ve been a bright light for me, Vicar. I ain’t never met no one like you. I’ll be forever

grateful.”

Tobias went to thank her but was stunned into silence when she threw her arms around him. What she needed was affection that came from a place that was not carnal in nature. Therefore, he returned the embrace as she quietly sobbed into his shoulder.

“It’s so nice not to be judged,” she said as she accepted his handkerchief. “I ain’t no fool, Vicar. I know how dangerous it was for you to come here. But you’re the kind of man who puts others before himself.”

Tobias shook his head. “It has nothing to do with me. I simply go where I am needed. Even if it means entering a place that is seen as... objectionable.”

“No, I don’t think so. People and jobs can’t make people do things. You got something inside you, Vicar, and no one can tell me otherwise.”

Not wanting to argue the point, Tobias thanked her again and left. Soon, he was back on the High Street, pondering the day’s work. God willing, Lulu would find a new life. One far better than the one she lived now. He might have gambled in his own way, but the loss of money was well worth the dividends.

As a couple walked past, he smiled at their laughter. If all went well, he and Miss Felton would be that couple.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, good sir.”

Tobias turned to find an old woman carrying a wicker basket filled with mistletoes. Oh yes, Christmas would be there soon. He had been so occupied with his work that he had nearly forgotten.

“Good afternoon, madam. How may I be of service?”

The old woman gave him a crooked smile. “It might be me who can serve you, sir. I see by your look that you’re pinin’ for someone.”

Tobias smiled. He had encountered the woman for the first time many years ago in Gravesmith—when he was ten, in fact. And much more gullible. Her back was more stooped now, more wrinkles dug into her cheeks, and her jowls hung lower, but she was much the same as back then.

“Are you selling your magical mistletoes again this year, madam?” he asked. “Or perhaps a piece of bark from the first Christmas tree resembling one a young boy purchased from you in hopes his father would give him a puppy?” He pressed a coin into her hand, making her gasp in surprise. “For you.” When she reached for one of the mistletoes, he added, “I require nothing in return.”

“Thank you, kind sir,” she said as she slid the coin into her pocket.

Tobias returned to the carriage that awaited him. The day had been long, and the feelings of despondency that had been plaguing him had turned to hope. His thoughts soon turned to Miss Felton and the future they would share together. It would be an amazing life, and they both would be so happy!

The carriage came to a stop in front of Mandrel House, and Tobias was greeted by his butler the moment he entered the foyer.

“Your father awaits you in the parlor, sir,” Bartel said in a hushed tone as he took Tobias’s coat. “And he is not alone.”

“Oh?” Tobias replied. “Is Mother with him?”

Bartel shook his head. “She’s still out for the day. His Lordship is in the company of Mr. Taylor and Miss Emily Taylor.”

Tobias sighed. Mr. Johnathan Taylor was an old friend of his father’s, and the two men had it in their minds that Tobias and Miss Taylor should marry. Although Miss Taylor was a pleasant enough girl, Tobias had no interest in her. Not in that sense.

And she was not Miss Felton.

“Thank you for the warning, Bartel.”

Straightening his coat and adjusting his white collar, Tobias started down the corridor that led to the parlor and was relieved to find his father and Mr. Taylor standing in the doorway, shaking hands in farewell.

No two men could have been more different. Where Lord Deverell still possessed a head full of hair, mostly dark but with silver sprinkled in it, Mr. Taylor had nothing more than a ring of gray surrounding an otherwise bald pate. The baron was tall and slim. Mr. Taylor was stout and wide. Lord Deverell was clean shaved, but Mr. Taylor wore a bushy mustache. Their smiles, however, match in wideness.

“Ah, there he is,” Lord Deverell said as if he had not seen Tobias in years. “My wonderful son. He may not be the heir to my barony, but he’ll soon become a reverend. Which is nearly as good.”

This had both men laughing. Tobias, however, had to swallow a growl. He had not missed the slight hidden in his father’s words. Nor had Mr. Taylor by his guffaw.

Tobias was tired of being compared to his brother at every turn. Richard could do no wrong. And no matter how hard he worked, no matter what he did, Tobias always fell short. Yet he had a way to impress his father. Or soon would have. Once he was placed in his own church, he would grow it to overflowing. Then, he just might earn his father’s approval.

Mr. Taylor extended a hand to Tobias. “It’s good to see you, lad. And you remember my daughter, Emily?”

Tobias gave the girl a courteous bow. “Of course. It’s a pleasure, as always.”

“I was just telling Taylor we should have him and his daughter to dinner soon. Do you not think that an excellent idea?”

Clenching his fist, Tobias willed his frustration to calm. As much as he loved his father, the fact that the man had taken it upon himself to play matchmaker stoked Tobias’s ire. This was his home not his father’s. It was about time he reminded him of that fact.

First, however, he would need to decline in a tactful way. This dispute was between him and his father. There was no reason to bring these two into it.

“Although I believe it would make for a pleasant evening, I’m afraid my schedule is quite busy. Perhaps we can arrange another time that is better suited to us all.”

“Always the hard worker, I see,” Mr. Taylor said. He shook Tobias’s hand again. “Another time. It was good to see you, Deverell. I do hope you’ll be visiting Chatsworth again soon. Come, Emily.”

Once the pair were gone, Tobias’s father said, “I don’t think it wise for you to delay the man, Tobias. Miss Taylor is drawing the eye of many eligible bachelors. If you wait too long, you just might lose out.”

Tobias drew in a deep breath to keep from shouting. “I appreciate your concern, Father, but I have no interest in being a suitor to Miss Taylor. It appears you’ve once again forgotten that this house belongs to me. Therefore, I shall make decisions as I see fit.”

“I see you have no issues with using my words against me,” his father said.

Tobias knew his meaning. The house had been a gift from his father for completing the first leg of his studies at the seminary. This conversation was the very reason Tobias had been hesitant to accept it and the substantial allowance that came with it. He suspected his father would use it against him, and he had been right.

Chatsworth had been his choice for the pastoral stage of his journey to ordination. He was to insert himself into a community, under the guidance of an established priest—in this case, Mr. Clarence Styles—to practice the skills and knowledge he had acquired in his formal training.

Yet his father had mistakenly believed it was because of Tobias's interest in Miss Taylor that he had chosen Chatsworth. Tobias was quick to disavow him of that fact. He was here to study under his mentor, not because of a woman.

Meeting Miss Felton had been a pleasant—and unsuspected—addition to that calling.

“Very well,” his father said, his lips pursed. “But please tell me you don't still plan on marrying that schoolgirl.” He said this as if he were spitting out spoiled cabbage.

“I know you disapprove, Father, but I've come to care deeply for Miss Felton.” He sighed. “I had hoped to wait until dinner on Monday to tell you, but I plan to ask for her hand in marriage.”

His father frowned. “Does her father not dabble in mining and such?”

Tobias nodded. “He does.”

“Yet he owns no mines of his own, correct? And he owns just one tenant farm?”

Tobias nodded again.

“And what sort of dowry will she bring with her?”

“I've no idea, Father,” Tobias replied irritably. “I have yet to ask. I wish to marry her because I love her, not for convenience.”

His father pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not this notion of love again! You'll only be a lesser man if you succumb to your feelings, Tobias. How many times must I remind you of that fact? Oh, why do I bother? I forgot that without a title, you're more likely to choose a lesser woman with an equally small dowry because of this silly idea that a married couple should be in love before they marry.”

Tobias went to argue, but his father waved him to silence. “Let's not discuss it again. But I think keeping Miss Taylor in your sights would be wise. Her dowry, paired with your allowance, will be more than enough to keep you and your family living in style for years to come. At least, until you've worked your way up through the Church. Perhaps you can become the next Archbishop of York. That is where you'll get the most out of your studies.”

Tobias had to work hard to keep his voice from shaking; he was so angry. His place in the Church would be decided by God, not his father! “Miss Felton is more than enough for me. I'll not keep any other woman ‘in my sights,’ as you put it. I wish you to respect my decision, Father. And make

her comfortable Monday evening. If you find it too difficult, I may just have to ask you to leave.”

By the silence that followed, Tobias knew he had gone too far. His heart beat against his chest, making breathing difficult. But at least he had said his piece.

When his father finally responded, it was in that same false caring tone he always used when Tobias refused to see his way. “Then I’ll say nothing. But I’m only looking out for you. Know that.”

As his father returned to the parlor, Tobias went to his study. His father meant well. To him, success was demonstrated by how much wealth a person possessed. But Tobias cared for Miss Felton as much as—if not more than—he would likely care for his future parishioners. On Monday, his parents would see just how important she was to him. Once he proposed, they would have no choice but to welcome her into the family.

If Miss Felton accepted. But, of course, there was no reason for her not to do so.

CHAPTER EIGHT



With a great deal of anxiety and even more heartache, the weekend finally came to an end. As Amy prepared for dinner at the home of Mr. Deverell, she considered for the hundredth time changing her mind and remaining at the school.

Since her sojourn into the village—and the terrible scene she had witnessed, Amy had gone to Mrs. Rutley twice, pleading that they cancel. And twice, her headmistress had given her a choice. Either she explained why she wished to withdraw her acceptance or attend the dinner.

Although Amy felt she could tell her headmistress anything, with this particular matter she could not. The image of the man she had believed to be the most upstanding man she ever knew offering money to one of *those* women plagued her thoughts. And right out there in the open, without so much as a thought to discretion! How could she possibly speak to anyone of such debauchery from the man she loved? Or of her own foolishness of falling for him in the first place?

She had thought Mr. Deverell was different. That he did not give into carnal urges like other men. How wrong she had been! How could she have been so blind to such a rogue?

Now, she wondered about these supposed house calls to various women. Had it all been a ploy? Was he covering up the fact that he was meeting these women for secret trysts? Or was he paying them, too?

Regardless, Amy now found herself in a dilemma, one that added to her reasons why she had yet to tell Mrs. Rutley about what she had seen. She was angry at Mr. Deverell, to be sure, but her love had not waned one whit. Well,

perhaps a whit, but not much more. What did that say about her? Were her principles as twisted as his? Was she willing to put aside her moral standards to keep the man she loved?

Only nincompoops acted so rashly. If they were already married, and she had caught him soliciting a... a woman of loose morals, she would have to turn a blind eye. Now she had a chance to free herself from what would likely be a terrible marriage. So, why did she not simply run?

Because I'm a blunder-headed fool, that is why!

"Now, your gloves," Antonia said, interrupting Amy from her thoughts.

"Thank you." For a moment, Amy stared at the lovely gloves she had purchased only a few days earlier. She had been so excited to meet Mr. Deverell's parents. Had wanted to make a good impression. Now, she could not have cared less what they thought of her.

"I know you don't want to go," Antonia said. "But if you stay here, you just might regret it. What if you miss out on something important?"

Amy sighed heavily. "Perhaps so. If anything, I'll have the opportunity to break off our courtship." She hugged her young friend. "We'll speak when I return."

Making her way downstairs, Amy met Mrs. Rutley in the foyer. Soon, they had donned their jackets and were in the carriage. The winter sun was nearly gone as the vehicle trundled down the drive.

"Amy, you know you can trust me with anything, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you tell me what is troubling you." Mrs. Rutley took hold of Amy's hand. "Please."

Amy blinked back tears. "Perhaps later. For now, I just want to get past this dinner."

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at Mandrel House. A large brick, two-story building, it had remnants of ivy clinging to its brick facade. Amy had been there once with Mrs. Rutley. Now, however, a twinge of sadness overcame her, for she knew this would be her last visit.

A rather rotund butler greeted them at the door, and when they entered the foyer, Tobias stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Blast him! Why did he have to look so handsome?

"Good evening, Miss Felton. Mrs. Rutley. I'm so pleased you came. I trust the short journey here was without issue?"

Silence filled the air. Mrs. Rutley was likely waiting for Amy to respond,

but her mind would not create any words.

“The roads were satisfactory,” her headmistress replied as she allowed the butler to remove her jacket and took her hat.

The sound of footsteps made her turn. Lord Deverell was a tall, thin man with silver in his dark hair. His jawline was strong, much like that of his son.

So, that is what Mr. Deverell will look like in twenty years, Amy thought. But what did it matter? She would no longer be an acquaintance of his by the time he reached that advanced age.

Lady Deverell was a stunningly beautiful woman. Not much taller than Amy, she had honey-blond hair worked into the most magnificent coiffure. Her nose was slightly upturned, and she had twinkling blue eyes. When she greeted Amy and Mrs. Rutley, her smile sparkled.

“Tobias has told me so much about you,” his mother said. “You are lovely, my dear.”

Amy curtsied and willed her cheeks to cool. “Thank you.”

“Well, shall we share in a drink before dinner or head straight to the dining room?” Lord Deverell asked.

Mr. Deverell replied, “I believe we’re ready to sit, Father.” He offered an arm to Amy. “May I escort you?”

For a moment, Amy stared at that arm. Granted, he had not escorted *that woman* into the gaming hell, but that did not mean his arm was clean. But everyone was staring at her, so she accepted it anyway. Allowing him to lead her to the dining hall did not express agreeing to more.

The ornate table could seat eight. Mr. Deverell led Amy to a chair in the middle of the table. He took the seat on one side of her, and Mrs. Rutley took the other. Lord Deverell sat at the head of the table, and the baroness at the foot.

As a footman began to pour the wine, Lord Deverell spoke. “So, Miss Felton, I understand that your father is in the mining business.”

Tobias cleared his throat. “Father, I imagine Miss Felton would prefer not to speak of her father’s businesses. Perhaps you can speak to him about it.”

His father sighed and took a sip of his wine. Mr. Deverell gave Amy a wink.

Amy smiled before remembering that she was angry with him. His playful, innocent ways might trick a naive girl but not Amy. If Mr. Deverell thought he could conquer her heart only to fornicate with other women, he was greatly mistaken.

“Indeed, my father is involved with mining. But I recently overheard him discussing the possibility of purchasing several buildings to convert into inns. People are traveling much more these days and need places to stay after dark. Sleeping beneath carts might work for those without means, but more genteel people need a bed.”

Lord Deverell arched an eyebrow. “A wise man. I’ve also invested in several inns. Perhaps I shall discuss combining our resources as my son has suggested.”

Amy bit her lip. There would be no meeting between this man and her father. “I’m afraid Father prefers to work alone.”

This drew a frown from the baron. And a puzzled look from Mr. Deverell.

Mrs. Rutley tapped Amy’s leg beneath the table and said, “What Amy means is that her father likes to prove he can stand on his own two feet. But that doesn’t mean he’ll refuse offers for joint ventures. I’m sure he would be happy to meet with you, my lord.”

The soup course arrived, and the guests fell quiet as they ate. Twice, Amy peeked up at Mr. Deverell, who wore a worried expression. Waiting to speak to him about what she had seen was proving difficult. He had to know how deeply hurt she was. Yet as angry as she was, she could not bring up such a sordid topic at the dinner table.

Nor at any time, for that matter. A proper young lady did not discuss prostitutes with any man, more so one who held her heart. She would have to have a reason for breaking off their courtship, but she had yet to devise one.

Polite conversation began, and soon the main course was served. The roasted duck was tender, and the green beans buttery, but Amy tasted little of it. Lord Deverell had appropriated the conversation for two minutes straight, jumping from one topic to the next, and Amy struggled to keep up.

“Richard has to be the most business-minded young man I have ever known,” he was saying now, referring to Mr. Deverell’s older brother. “I doubt a father has ever been so proud.”

Amy glanced at Mr. Deverell and did not miss the look of sadness in his eyes. Perhaps she was too guileless, or maybe too gullible, but seeing how his father’s admiration for his heir hurt Mr. Deverell bothered her. Speaking on Mr. Deverell’s behalf would do no good. If anything, it would only make matters worse. So, she remained silent. But she wanted to give the baron a good tongue-lashing for his disregard for his younger son!

And what did it matter, anyway? Perhaps his father was aware of his obscene secrets.

Once the plates were cleared—Amy’s dish untouched, or nearly so—Amy wished to leave. She wanted to lie in bed and dream of what life could have been if Mr. Deverell could have controlled his urges. Then again, why should she punish herself for his misdeeds?

A chair scraped across the floor, and Amy looked up from her lap to see Mr. Deverell stand. “I’d like to make an announcement if I may. These past few months with Miss Felton have shown that a man knows when he has met the right woman. One who will remain at his side no matter what troubles they may encounter. One whose beauty is unmatched. No other woman in this world matches these criteria save one, Miss Amy Felton. And it is for those reasons that I would like to say that I plan to marry her. If she’ll have me.”

Excited whispers followed, and when the room fell silent, everyone looked at her expectantly.

After taking a nervous sip of her wine, Amy folded her hands in her lap. “And what of America?”

Mr. Deverell cleared his throat. “We’ll go once the children are grown. As I mentioned before, I must remain here and help my flock.”

Amy’s knuckles grew white as she clutched her hands tighter. “Perhaps you can dedicate your life to helping the Mary Magdalenes of the country,” she said in a near whisper. When she looked up at him, he appeared watery through her tears. “I’m sorry. I cannot accept.”

The look of devastation that crossed his features made her heart clench. She still loved him, but she could not accept a man who lived such a devious life.

Lord Deverell, however, was outraged. “What is this? The daughter of a simple man denies my blood? Explain yourself, young lady!”

“Enough, Leopold,” Lady Deverell said as she stood. “Come with me, my dear,” she said to Amy. “I believe we have a few things to discuss.”

Mr. Deverell stood. “Miss Felton, please tell me what is wrong, and I shall remedy it.”

Her heart ached at hearing the sadness in his voice. Yet Amy knew his taste for visiting prostitutes would likely never change.

With a quick glance at Mr. Deverell, Amy followed the baroness out of the dining room, down the short corridor, and into the parlor. A blue and

green couch sat across from two leather chairs in front of a large fireplace. The rug also had touches of blue and green but of a darker shade.

“Now, tell me what is troubling you,” Lady Deverell said once they were seated on the couch.

Amy lowered her head. Telling a mother what she had witnessed would only hurt her.

“You know, it’s not that unusual for a young lady such as yourself to be frightened of getting married. I was, yet that fear quickly passed once I settled into my new life.”

“It’s not that,” Amy said.

“Well, I’ll certainly not interfere if that is what worries you. My mother-in-law was a beast of a woman. I would never make my daughters-in-law endure what I was forced to go through. You can even ask Valina, Richard’s wife. I trust my sons to choose a wife who will be best for them.”

“I’m sure you and Lord Deverell have a lovely family, my lady. But my reason for refusing has nothing to do with you but rather your son.” She drew in a deep breath. “What he has done... what I witnessed has troubled me greatly. And because I respect you as his mother, I’ll not share what I saw.”

“I see,” Lady Deverell replied with a small nod. She took hold of one of Amy’s hands. “Your words assure me that you’re a young lady of good standing. Too many in your place would use this opportunity to tear down another. If you don’t wish to tell me, so be it. I’ll speak to Tobias. Perhaps he will tell me what you don’t wish to say.”

Wiping away the tear that had escaped her eye, Amy said, “Thank you. And thank you for understanding.”

When they exited the room, Mr. Deverell and Mrs. Rutley were waiting in the corridor.

“I’ve already made our excuses,” Mrs. Rutley said. “I suspected you wished to leave as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate it, Mrs. Rutley.”

As the butler helped her into her jacket, Mr. Deverell said, “Why did you reject me? Tell me so I may fix it.” He shook his head. “Is this about going to America? Perhaps we can visit there in a few years. Would that please you?”

With a sigh, Amy looked up at him. She would miss that handsome face. “It’s many things,” she said. “But America is the least of them. Farewell, Mr. Deverell. I wish you the best.”

The butler opened the door, and Amy and Mrs. Rutley made their way to

the waiting carriage. It was regrettable that Amy and Mr. Deverell would never marry, for he still held her heart. And the knowledge that her future entailed being wed to Mr. Hamlin only deepened her melancholy, intensifying the sorrow within her.

CHAPTER NINE



Tobias took a large swallow of his brandy as he stood beside the fireplace in the parlor. The events of the evening replayed in his mind, over and over again, as he tried to make sense of what had happened. From his standpoint, the dinner had gone relatively well. His guests enjoyed their fare, and although the conversation at times became strained, that was not uncommon when those in attendance were newly acquainted.

Miss Felton seemed to be happy enough. Granted, he did think it was odd that every time she caught him looking at her, she turned her attention elsewhere, but he understood how taxing meeting his parents must have been.

Well, perhaps understood was an incorrect term to use in this circumstance. He knew she was nervous, but it was as if she were purposefully ignoring him. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

Yet what confused him more was her reaction to his proposal. He had expected her to be overcome with joy and readily accept. But the opposite was true. Not only had she refused, but her words upon her departure had been mysterious, indeed.

What had he done to upset her so? Besides putting off going to America, of course. What was so important about going to that godforsaken place that she would choose it over him?

To say he was disappointed was an understatement. The future he had coveted for so long had been stolen from him in one fell swoop, and he was left uncertain as to how he would survive.

Oh, he would go on to serve at whatever church to which he was called. But she had been an intertwined figure in what he was meant to do. What if all his plans unraveled now that she was not a part of them? And was there

any hope of salvaging their relationship?

“I still cannot believe that girl rejected you,” his father said as he stormed into the parlor. He paced for several moments and then came to a stop. “Perhaps it’s a blessing. A stubborn wife is a troublesome one. You’re saving yourself undue stress by moving on without her.”

Tobias turned to face his father. “I’ve not moved on from her, Father. Not just yet. I cannot. I plan to call on her tomorrow. I must know why she refused.”

His father snorted, that all too common sneer on his lips. “No different from a dog with his tail between his legs. I’ve seen men lower themselves to a woman’s demands, and it never fares well.”

Finishing off the last of his brandy, Tobias set the glass on the mantel. “I care for her, Father, and I wish to learn what troubles her. What is so wrong with that?”

“Anyone can see why you are attracted to this girl. She’s a lovely specimen. But that only makes her all the more dangerous. And this nonsense about America. That alone should be a warning about her wild ways.”

Tobias clenched his fists at his sides. “She’s wanted to do this for some time now. Holding tight to a dream does not make her wild. If anything, it shows determination. And I admire her for her tenacity.”

With a laugh, his father shook his head as he poured himself a drink. “If this dream is so admirable, why not simply agree to go?” Before Tobias could respond, his father continued. “Because you know how foolish it is. I don’t understand you, Tobias. Your brother would never put up with such twaddle from Valina. Then again, you’ve never been as sensible as he is. Where did I go wrong?” He gulped down the drink and slammed the empty glass on the table beside the decanters. “I’m going to bed.”

His father’s footsteps echoed in the corridor, and Tobias went to refill his glass. Once again, he had failed his father by not measuring up to his brother. Richard was the envy of the *ton*. His ability to recognize when a flailing business could be turned into one that made a profit hand over fist was remarkable. And it did not matter what trade that business plied.

But his success did not end there. Valina was praised for her beauty and poise as well as her charitable contributions. Not to mention that she was the daughter of a German duke.

Still, not even Valina could compare to the beauty Miss Felton possessed. Tobias had not lied when he said he cared nothing for any dowry she had. He

loved her for who she was, not what he could bring with her. The question was, what had caused her to reject his proposal?

The door opened, and he turned as his mother entered the room. “Good evening, Mother,” he said, kissing her cheek. “May I pour you a drink?”

“Sherry, please,” she said as she sat on the couch.

Tobias joined her, taking the seat beside her and handing her a glass. “Did Miss Felton reveal anything to you?” he asked.

His mother sighed. “No. Though, I must say, that girl cares a great deal for you. She has a good heart.”

A surge of hope rushed through him. “Did she say as much?”

“Not exactly. She alluded to seeing you do something and refused to speak of it because it would upset me. Her willingness to keep a secret that might harm someone else conveys the kind of person she is.”

“That is because her heart is pure,” Tobias said. “But what could she have possibly seen that would cause her to reject my proposal? And in only a matter of days since I last saw her? I’ve done nothing of which I’m ashamed.”

“Perhaps you should think back to where you went and to whom you spoke.”

Tobias sat back in his seat. The last time he saw Miss Felton was Saturday morning. He had visited the Widow Hartzel. No, that had been Friday. He had luncheoned with Reverend Styles after seeing Miss Felton. Then he had called on Mr. Nelson to make the final plans for his son’s christening. Yesterday, he had met with Mr. Clemons, whose wife had died two months earlier. Then there was, of course...

“The gaming hell,” he said with a gasp. “She must have seen me there.”

“What on earth would you be doing at the gaming hell, Tobias?” his mother asked, her eyebrow arched high enough to nearly touch her hairline. “Tell me you haven’t fallen into gambling.”

“No. I wouldn’t do that. There is a prostitute there. I had to give her money.”

Realizing his mistake, he went to explain, but his mother was already chastising him. “Tobias Deverell, I’m appalled. Going to such a place is deplorable, to say the least. You, of all people, would be the last person I’d imagine using such... such services, but to speak so openly about it with your mother is going too far. I have always prided myself in how respectable you’ve become. What has come over you?”

Tobias pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mother, please. I'm a fool for words tonight, it seems. Allow me to explain. I've been ministering to a woman there by the name of Lulu." He went on to explain his offer. "I was there to give her the money to get her to the charity in London, so she may begin a new life. That is why I was there."

His mother set the sherry glass on the table and turned to him. "Your heart is in the right place, my son. But I would encourage you to find a different meeting place for the lost souls you hope to save. And before you ask, I'm not concerned that your actions will blemish me or our family as much as they will make others distrust you. But people talk. Very little gossip has no basis of truth." She took his hand in hers. "Go to her tomorrow and explain."

"Thank you, Mother. I will. I know I'll never live up to what Richard has done, but I hope to never disappoint you."

Her eyes went wide. "You've never disappointed me, my son. Nor your father."

"You perhaps, but father has nothing but praise for Richard. And perhaps it's because I'll likely never be rich. Despite what he believes, there is not much money in leading a church." He smiled. "At least I've inherited your kindness."

"Your father once was a very generous man, Tobias. But wealth can be alluring. It's my hope that by your actions, he'll be reminded of the man he once was."

"Then I'll do what I can to make him see," Tobias promised.

After his mother bid him goodnight, Tobias returned to his place by the fire. Tomorrow, he would go to the school and tell Miss Felton everything. Perhaps then she might reconsider his offer of marriage.

CHAPTER TEN



Amy stared out the window, the pattering of rain echoing through her head like a drum. Memories of the previous evening came flooding back to her, and not for the first time, her eyes misted. How could Mr. Deverell have taken up with one of those women? And without not a glimmer of guilt in his easy smile and twinkling eyes.

Amy was old enough to understand that some men had needs they chose to assuage outside of wedlock. Ruth and Jenny, her former schoolmates, had been clear on that point before they had married. Jenny had shared advice that her sister had given her, words of wisdom about life in a world that men controlled. And she had not bandied her words. Plus, if it were not so, the type of women who plied their trade at the Rake Street Gaming Hell would have no clients. Yet Amy had never suspected that Mr. Deverell was one such man.

And that proposal! It had been hollow, empty of the words of love she had so longed to hear. If he did not love her, what were his true intentions in marrying her? To cover his sordid secrets? To have her bear his children? Many vicars had wives, and those with whom she was acquainted were righteous women. Yet that was not always the case with the vicars...

Perhaps this was for the best. If she and Mr. Deverell had wed before she learned his secrets, she would have been bound by her vows to remain with him. In a loveless—and humiliating—marriage.

Without Mr. Deverell as a suitor, Amy was left with Mr. Hamlin. That thought alone made her shiver. But at least he did not frequent brothels. Or she hoped he did not.

The door opened. She did not want to talk to anyone, not even Antonia.

“Please, tell me you’ve not shared with Mrs. Rutley what we witnessed outside the Rake Street Gaming Hell,” she said without bothering to turn around.

“Antonia told me nothing,” came Mrs. Rutley’s voice.

Amy started and turned to face her headmistress, who offered one of her warm smiles. Usually, that would have been enough to bring Amy around, but today, it felt mocking rather than comforting. And Mrs. Rutley never mocked.

“Nor would I have allowed her to reveal what she told you in confidence. Not unless your life was in danger.”

With her heart filled with anguish, Amy dropped her gaze. “I do want to tell you what is bothering me, but I cannot. It’s far too shameful.”

Like so many times over the past four years, Mrs. Rutley pulled Amy into her arms. “No matter what you believe you have done—or anyone else, for that matter—I’ll never stop caring for you. Now, unburden yourself.”

Amy sighed as she sat on the edge of the bed, Mrs. Rutley joining her at her side. “I saw something that shook me to the core, Mrs. Rutley.”

“Something you witnessed Mr. Deverell doing?”

Amy nodded.

“And have you expressed your concern over what you saw?” Mrs. Rutley asked.

Twisting her skirts in her hands, Amy shook her head. “I have not.”

Mrs. Rutley took Amy’s hands in hers. “One thing you must learn in life is that when you have a problem with another person, you must be open with them. Tell them what you’re feeling and explain why. Always use a calm, firm tone. Don’t let your anger or resentment or whatever emotion you’re feeling at the time take control. Doing so only muddles the message. What you may find is that your worries are unfounded. And even if you don’t, at least he’ll know how you feel. But if you allow whatever is bothering you to fester, your soul will become as diseased as any wound that is left unclean.”

Amy considered her headmistress’s words. “What if I confront Mr. Deverell and he wishes to continue what... what he’s doing? What then?”

An image of her explaining her concerns and Mr. Deverell laughing at her hurt entered her thoughts.

“I’m a man, Miss Felton. And as such, I’ll seek pleasure with anyone I wish. That is what we men do.”

“You have an important decision to make,” Mrs. Rutley said, breaking

Amy from her thoughts. "If you choose to confront him, you must be willing to listen to what he has to say. There may be information you haven't yet received or a perspective you've yet to hear. Either way if he's willing to hear you out, you must be willing to do so in kind. Once all has been revealed, you'll then have all the pieces of the puzzle. Only then can you make a sound decision."

Mrs. Rutley stood. "And now would be a most opportune time."

With her heart in her throat, Amy asked, "Now? Why now?"

Her headmistress smiled. "Because he's in the drawing room waiting to speak with you. And he seems to be out of sorts. Come, let's go see him."

"He's... he's here?" She glanced down at her day dress. "But I'm not dressed properly for a caller!" She touched her loose hair and grimaced. "And my hair! I must look a fright." She had brushed it that morning but had done nothing else with it.

"You look lovely," Mrs. Rutley said, laughing. "Here, we can tie your hair back with a blue ribbon. It will match your dress."

Once the ribbon was in place, Mrs. Rutley walked toward the door. Amy caught her by the arm. "I mean no offense, Mrs. Rutley, but can Antonia chaperone? What I wish to discuss with him is a private matter, but she already knows."

Mrs. Rutley gave a small nod. "I suppose she can. This one time."

Grateful, Amy followed Mrs. Rutley downstairs. They found Antonia speaking to Mrs. Shepherd in the kitchen, and she readily agreed to sit with Amy while she met with Mr. Deverell.

When they entered the drawing room, Mr. Deverell turned away from the large window that looked out over the gardens, and Amy's heart twisted. Mrs. Rutley had been right. His face was etched with worry.

"Good morning, Mr. Deverell," Amy said.

He hurried to her. "Thank you for seeing me. I've spent the entire night fretting. We must speak."

Amy nodded. "We do. Antonia, I'm sure you'll enjoy that book of poetry someone left on the window seat."

Antonia frowned for a moment before widening her eyes. "Oh, yes, of course. I do love poetry."

"Please, sit," she told Mr. Deverell as she indicated the sofa.

He nervously rubbed his hands together as he waited for her to sit. Then he took the place beside her.

“I just wanted to say—”

“I believe there has been—”

They both laughed, and he said, “Please, you first.”

Swallowing hard in an attempt to bring moisture into her dry mouth, Amy worried her bottom lip. She had not even had time to rehearse what she wanted to say!

“I...” This was more difficult than she thought! What she needed to do was speak from her heart. If she did that, her words would come. “I saw you at the gaming hell on Saturday. With a particular woman. Please, don’t deny it.”

“I cannot deny it,” he said, although he was not as smug as her imagination had contrived. “But there is a reasonable explanation for why I was there.”

Amy raised a hand to forestall him. “I may be young, Mr. Deverell, but there is only one reason a man meets that type of woman in a place like Rake Street.”

His laugh stoked her ire. How dare he mock her pain!

“I’m sorry, Miss Felton, but there is more than one reason. I was there ministering to Lulu—that was the woman’s name, Lulu. I was helping her escape that life.”

“But I saw you give her money.”

Mr. Deverell shook his head. “It was to help her get to London, not for... well, not for anything else. I learned this morning from Mr. Elverson at the inn that she was on the coach bound for London this morning. There, she’ll find a new and better life.”

He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. She immediately felt as if nothing bad in the world could ever harm her. And more than anything, she felt... loved.

“I hope you believe me, Miss Felton,” he said, searching her eyes. “I cannot bear you believing me capable of such a heinous misdeed.”

Oh, what had she done? “I’m so sorry for doubting you,” she said, blinking back tears. “I do believe you.”

A dreamy sigh came from Antonia, but Amy ignored it.

“I cannot promise to never return to Rake Street,” Mr. Deverell said. “But if I must, I’ll inform you first. How about that?”

Amy could not help but let out a small laugh. “Not many men would be so forthright about sharing that with the women they’re courting.”

“No, I suppose they don’t, at that.” He drew in a deep breath. “Now that we’ve cleared that up, will you reconsider my proposal?”

The happiness that had come over her faded, with worry taking its place. “I do care for you, Mr. Deverell. Very deeply.”

“As I do you.”

Her heart raced. She wanted to say that she loved him, but not before he expressed his love for her first. Yet that could be accomplished on Christmas Even with the mistletoe she had purchased.

She paused. What if wishing for his love paired with his agreement to go to America was too greedy? Could she lose out on both wishes?

“Once all has been revealed,” Mrs. Rutley had said, “you’ll then have all the pieces of the puzzle. Only then can you make a sound decision.”

“I don’t wish to wait until our children are grown to go to America,” she said, the words falling from her lips like water over a waterfall.

Mr. Deverell released her hands, stood, and walked over to the fireplace. “I realize this is an important dream, and it pains me to be the one who crushes it. But you must understand. So many have told me that I’m a bright light in their darkness. If we were to move, that light might fade. And what good will I be then?”

Amy sighed. She could not ask him to stop doing what he loved, but was there a compromise they could make?

As if hearing her thoughts, he said, “I believe I know how we can resolve this. Come with me tomorrow to call on the Widow Hartzel. See what I do, so you can understand how much my work means to me.”

“I’d like that,” Amy said, rising from the sofa to join him. “But I would ask you for something in return.”

“Of course.”

“I wish to share the letters I’ve received from Unity and Theodosia,” she said. “But you must be willing to hear what they say.”

“I swear to you that I will listen earnestly. And once we’ve shared, perhaps then we can come to an agreement that will work for both of us.”

Amy breathed a sigh of relief. This was what she needed. Once he saw how important moving to America was to her, after seeing what he did here could be done anywhere, he would understand it was the best choice for them both.

“I’ll be by tomorrow at eleven to collect you,” he said, kissing her hand again.

“I cannot wait,” she said.

There was silence but in it, Amy could feel her love for him grow. Yet, she suspected she was not alone. For his eyes shone and then her heart beat in excitement when he said, “I must confess, that I feel...” Amy held her breath. This was it, the confession of love she longed for. “That we make a great team.”

Her heart sank. What he said was true but not what she wished to hear. “Thank you. I must admit, we do work well together.”

Mr. Deverell smiled. “The situation in front of us, we shall come to an agreement together. As a team of sorts.”

Agreeing with him, Amy then walked him to the door. Once he was gone, Antonia sighed beside her.

“How romantic! What do you think he’ll say when you read him those letters?”

With a grin, Amy replied, “He won’t be able to resist going to America. The twins can be very convincing. They were able to make me see what that place has to offer! “

Antonia clasped her hands together. “And what of his feelings?”

Amy smiled for she knew with her magic mistletoe all would be well. “Friday is Christmas Eve. And it is upon that night, he will shower me with his declarations of love.”

And a wonderful kiss, she added silently, a thrill racing down her spine.

“You seem very confident,” Antonia said. “Are you sure you can make it happen?”

Thinking of the magical mistletoe in her room, Amy nodded. “I am absolutely positive,” she said.

Now that she knew the truth behind what she had seen, she was more certain than ever that everything would work out exactly as she wanted, well before her parents’ arrival in January. And one day her story, instead of the prince who commissioned the mistletoe, would be told.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Whatever contentment Tobias had earned after his call to Miss Felton disappeared upon his return home. Bartel, who was always there to greet him upon his arrival, was nowhere to be seen. That usually meant something was amiss.

“Oh, sir, I’m so glad you’re here,” the butler said as he hurried into the foyer. “We feared you’d be gone all day.”

“What is it?” Tobias asked as he pushed away the panic that tried to overtake him. “Has something happened? Where is Father? Is he well?”

“No, no,” the butler said. “My apologies for my overreaction. It’s just that Reverend Styles has been waiting for nearly two hours. I offered to give you a message, but he insisted on waiting.”

Tobias groaned inwardly. After all that had happened with Miss Felton, he had forgotten about the meeting he and the vicar had scheduled last week.

“Thank you, Bartel. And where is my mother?”

“With the Reverend in the drawing room, sir.”

With swift steps, Tobias made his way to said room. “My apologies for making you wait, Reverend,” he said as he entered. “I have no other excuse except that I forgot.”

Reverend Styles was a tall, slim man with steel-gray hair and an easy smile. “I must admit that the company has made the wait pleasant.”

Tobias’s mother stood. “Not as pleasant as it was for me,” she said. “I’ll leave you two to your meeting. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Styles.”

The vicar rose from his seat and bowed. “Not as nice as it was for me. Good day to you, Lady Deverell.”

“So,” Mr. Styles said as he sat again, “Tell me how things are going in Chatsworth.”

“Quite busy, I’m afraid,” Tobias replied. “I’ve called on some of our residents who’ve lost a loved one and helped a woman start a new life in London.” He did not mention Lulu’s previous occupation. What she was before no longer mattered. Plus, he was not doing these good deeds to gain Ms. Styles’s approval. This was his calling. His rewards, if there were any, would come later.

“Very good,” Mr. Styles said. “And this young lady who has caught your eye?”

Thoughts of Amy made him grin like a schoolboy. “Miss Felton is well. We had a bit of a disagreement, but we’ve worked through it.”

Yet had they? Although he had promised to have an open mind when he read the letters her friends wrote, he doubted what they had to say would change his mind. And when they confirmed that America was not for him, what then?

Once she’s seen the good I do here, he assured himself, all argument about leaving would finally be put to rest.

“The reason I requested this meeting, Deverell, was to discuss your plans for January. Once you’ve finished your studies and been ordained, we have a church ready for you to lead.”

Excitement coursed through Tobias. The image of a grand church filled with dozens, if not hundreds, of people he would serve appeared in his mind. “Is it in Manchester?” he asked. “Or perhaps Dover where my parents live?”

Mr. Styles frowned. “Neither. You’ll be in Wilton.”

Tobias’s heart twisted. “Wilton? I’ve never heard of that place.”

“It’s a village located an hour or so from Birmingham,” Mr. Styles explained. “Attendance there tends to be low—only ten or so on any given Sunday. But we truly believe that with you there, that number will grow. Why, you may even have as many as fifty in no time!”

Ten? With a church of that size, Tobias’s father would all but laugh at him. And what would Miss Felton think of such an arrangement?

He could imagine that conversation. “*See here, my darling. We may only have ten today, but in a decade or so we might be able to reach a couple dozen. Isn’t that exciting?*”

“You don’t appear pleased,” Mr. Styles said.

Tobias dropped his gaze. “I’m honored, of course, but I had hoped to lead

a... well, a larger flock.”

Mr. Styles chuckled. “Why? Because you hope to help more than ten people? Or are you trying to impress others?”

Unable to lie, Tobias sighed. “To impress others. Or rather my father. His expectations of me are quite... lofty.”

“I see. And what about this young lady—Amy? Are you trying to impress her as well?”

Tobias shook his head. “She wishes to go to America.”

Mr. Styles became quiet, and Tobias wondered if the vicar would simply walk out of the room in disgust. To his horror, the man stood, and Tobias followed suit.

“The work of a clergyman has nothing to do with gaining the approval of others. You have no idea how much I’ve done without even a simple thank you.” He placed a hand on Tobias’s shoulder. “If you’ve accepted this path with the sole purpose of dazzling others, perhaps this is not your true calling. If that is the case, I would urge you to consider if the Church is truly the life for you.”

The vicar extended a hand. “You’re a bright light, Deverell. But I fear that, one day, that light will be extinguished. Not by others but rather by the burdens—and expectations—you place on yourself.”

“I appreciate your wise counsel, sir,” Tobias said. “You’ve given me a great deal to consider.”

Tobias walked the vicar to the door. Mr. Styles turned and said, “Write to me when you’ve reached a decision.”

Once the vicar was gone, Tobias returned to the drawing room. What his mentor had said was true—the reason for him beginning this journey was to please his father. That had driven him to hope for a large church of hundreds to lead. But what did it matter if he helped five or a five hundred as long as he was doing what he was called to do?

And then there was Amy. He wanted so much to share his life with her, to express to her how much he loved her. Yet his father had warned me that such a confession only led to disaster.

“Did you speak to Miss Felton?” his mother asked as she entered the room.

“I did. We came to an agreement. Of sorts.” He went on to explain about the plans they had made for the following days. “I’m hoping she sees how important my work is and thus agrees to remain here in England.”

His mother gave a nod. “That would be nice, but have you considered what you will do if she does not agree?”

Tobias walked over to the fireplace, staring into the flames. “I’ve thought of little else.”

“Then, what will you do?”

Tobias found himself at a loss for words, uncertain of how to respond to the situation at hand. His quest for an appropriate reply consumed his thoughts, keeping him awake well into the late hours of the night.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Mrs. Bornhalt was as thin as a wooden post. She wore glasses perched at the end of a nose that could have been used as a quill. Her hair should have been streaked with gray rather than its mousy brown, given that she acted far older than her nine and twenty years.

But what annoyed Amy the most about the chaperone was that she had talked incessantly since her arrival at Courtly Manor. The woman had spent the past quarter of an hour going on about her recent visit with her *ill* sister.

“The problem with Susanna is that she refuses to rest,” the chaperone was saying with a not-so-delicate sniff of disapproval. “Thankfully, with my insistence, she finally agreed to stay in bed while I saw to what needed to be done. And that husband of hers!” Another sniff, this one angry. “He has no consideration for her or her health. Men aren’t accustomed to taking care of themselves, I know, but even they can put on a kettle for their own tea when the need arises.”

Amy was uncertain what to make of the woman’s illness. From what she had heard thus far, this Susanna had written to Mrs. Bornhalt, complaining that her husband was driving her mad. As the story unfolded. Amy learned that the sister lived in a fine house with a host of servants. Her duties included conferring daily with the cook followed by the housekeeper before going shopping or calling on friends. Why the husband would have to put on a kettle at all was beyond her. The wife certainly did not. But Amy was not about to ask. That would just add more fuel to the fire and have Mrs. Bornhalt going off on another tangent.

“That is why you must be careful who you marry, my dear,” Mrs. Bornhalt continued. “Her husband’s insistence that she entertain herself all

day with buying dresses and other nonsense was just too much for her to bear.”

Amy was unable to hold her tongue. “But is that not the life most women envy?”

“Life, is it?” the chaperone asked. This sniff was mocking. Who knew a simple sniff could convey so many emotions? “Too much shopping is a cause of excessive exercise. Exercise in itself is important, certainly, but all that walking! What woman wants calves the size of melons? Plus, it creates a great deal of anxiety. All those choices, I tell you. Everything in moderation, you know. Even shopping. A woman should be spending her days doing quiet activities, such as sewing or painting. Perhaps even reading. And, of course, only certain subjects. The sciences may seem interesting, but they are far too complicated for the feminine mind. That is a subject better suited for men.”

Amy stifled a growl. If the chaperone had been a hundred, perhaps Amy could understand her old-fashioned beliefs. But women were becoming more involved in areas once relegated to men. There was *Émilie du Châlet*, who had worked with Voltaire. She had translated Isaac Newton’s *Principia* into French. And that was a hundred years ago!

In the past twenty years, Caroline Herschel had been *paid* to assist her brother, who was now the King’s personal astronomer. Why, she even discovered a comet herself and still worked there today!

Well, Amy would see that Mrs. Bornhalt was dismissed from her position. Once she informed Mrs. Rutley of the nonsense the woman spouted, there would be no other choice. Mrs. Rutley was far too forward thinking to allow such a woman to influence her students.

When someone knocked on the front door, Mrs. Bornhalt stood, directing Amy to do the same.

“Follow me,” the chaperone said.

Mrs. Shepherd, who had already answered the door, gave Amy a wink.

Mr. Deverell bowed. “Good afternoon, Miss Felton. It’s lovely to see you again.”

Amy could do nothing about the heat that entered her cheeks. “And you as well. May I present Mrs. Bornhalt? She will be chaperoning today.”

Again, Mr. Deverell bowed. “Pleasure, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure.” At least Mrs. Bornhalt did not sniff this time.

Once they were seated inside the carriage and were trundling down the

drive, Mr. Deverell said, "I've informed Mrs. Hartzel that you would be with me during this call, and she looks forward to meeting you." He turned his attention to Mrs. Bornhalt. "I thought Miss Felton should see what my work entails."

"A wonderful idea, Mr. Deverell. Witnessing acts of charity will help all young ladies understand the plight of those in need."

Amy said a small prayer that the woman would not monopolize the conversation, and, to her relief, she did not.

They rode in silence for a short time before arriving at a two-story manor house. The brick had been painted white and the trim black. Perfectly trimmed hedges lined the drive on both sides, and a fountain bubbled in the grassy area at the front of the house.

A liveried butler in his middle years with silver strands streaking his otherwise dark hair answered the door. "Mrs. Hartzel is waiting for you in the parlor," he said in nasal tones.

Mrs. Hartzel was in her early fifties with hair the color of walnuts and eyes of the lightest blue. On her plump fingers she wore several gold rings, each displaying various gems.

"Welcome, Mr. Deverell," she said in a pleased tone. And before Mr. Deverell could make introductions, she turned to Amy. "And you must be Miss Amy Felton. Oh, she is a sight, isn't she?" She then looked at Mrs. Bornhalt. "And you are?"

"Mrs. Bornhalt, Miss Felton's chaperone."

"Ah, yes. It has been so long since I've needed a chaperone, I nearly forgot. Well, shall we sit? Trentwood, will you please have a tea tray brought in?"

The butler bowed and left the room.

Amy and Mrs. Bornhalt went to a couch covered in white fabric with red flowers. Mr. Deverell took a seat beside Mrs. Hartzel in one of the two matching red leather chairs.

"How have you been faring this week, Mrs. Hartzel?" Mr. Deverell asked.

Mrs. Hartzel smiled weakly. "I can't seem to acclimate myself to Walter being gone. The children are busy with their own families, of course, so they rarely come to visit anymore. But that is what they do, is it not?" She sighed. "I'm finding life far lonelier than I would've ever imagined."

Amy's heart ached for this woman. To have the one person who had been

a constant companion for the past thirty years die had to be difficult. The fact she was wealthy would not change that fact.

“But your calls always brighten my day, Mr. Deverell.”

Amy smiled. *He does make everyone’s day better*, she thought. Her admiration for him grew. He was kind and inquisitive, and judging by the smile Mrs. Hartzel wore, he truly made her happy.

Now she understood why Mr. Deverell enjoyed what he did and his reasons for wanting to remain in England. It was as if she had been allowed a glimpse into an area of his heart she had not been allowed to see before.

“Have you left the house at all?” Mr. Deverell asked. “Not just out to the gardens but into the village?”

Mrs. Hartzel dropped her gaze to the handkerchief she had knotted in her fingers. “Not since Walter’s death. What would I do there? I need nothing nor want anything.”

Mr. Deverell touched her arm. “I suggest you do some charity work. Not only will it give you a reason to leave the house, but it will also help others. Charity work can be very rewarding and can lift anyone’s spirits.”

Mrs. Hartzel sat up straighter. “Yes,” she murmured, frowning in thought. “Yes, I believe you’re right. I have been cooped up in this house for far too long. You know, Lady Fairbanks mentioned a group of women who meet up once a week to sew blankets and other items to donate. Perhaps I can join them. I do enjoy embroidery and sewing.”

“I think that is a fine idea,” Mr. Deverell said, beaming at her.

As the conversation continued, Amy found her mind wandering. What Mr. Deverell was doing was all well and fine. And he was building relationships with many people. But there was no reason he could not continue this same work in America.

Once he’s read Unity and Theodosia’s letters, he would agree.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the widow asked, “What will you do once your schooling is complete, Miss Felton?”

Amy smoothed her skirts. “I’d like to travel to America.”

“You’re going away?” Mrs. Hartzel asked, clearly surprised.

Mr. Deverell pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ve discussed the possibility, yes, but we’ve yet to come to a final decision.” He paused. “You’re well traveled, Mrs. Hartzel. Is it as great as some claim?”

The widow’s eyes shone. “Walter and I traveled there... oh, I’d say it was seven years ago. We stayed only three weeks, but I could have remained for

three years if given the chance.”

This made Mr. Deverell’s eyebrows rise. “And why is that?”

“It’s a fresh, new place,” the widow replied. “New York is a marvelous town and rivals all the great towns of the world. London and even Paris, for example. I had expected to find a savage place but instead encountered a culture haven all its own. We saw a play at the Cherry Lane Theater, had tea at Bosie’s Tea Parlor, and purchased several hats and gloves that were very lovely. I even enjoyed a country dance at the home of Mr. George Clinton, their vice president. It was a shame I never met his wife, but she died several years earlier. I did chance to meet the daughter of the previous vice president, Miss Theodosia Burr. She’s well educated and believes that more women are deserving of learning beyond embroidery and playing the pianoforte.”

Amy could not help but smile. This was not the same Theodosia who had attended the school and who had written her so many letters, but she sounded very much the same. Perhaps she would ask to call on the astute young woman once they were living there.

“The world is a changing place, Mr. Deverell, and England is falling behind the rest of the world. There are many women who own property in America, unlike here, where it is as rare as snow in July. I believe more women will leave this country in search of other lands and a different, more fulfilling, life.”

Mrs. Bornhalt gasped before quickly covering it with a cough. Mr. Deverell made no comment as he stood, his hands clasped behind him. “I must return Miss Felton to the school, but I’ll call on you again next week.”

Mrs. Hartzel walked them to the door. “I’m so happy to have finally made your acquaintance, Miss Felton.” She leaned in closer and whispered, “Don’t let anyone stop you from doing what you want, my dear. Life is too short. Travel if that is what your heart desires.”

“Thank you,” Amy whispered back.

On their journey back to the school, Mr. Deverell sat with a frown on his lips as he stared out the window.

Biting at her lip, Amy considered what to say. “Mrs. Hartzel seems knowledgeable. And she’s met some very important people.”

Mr. Deverell snorted. “She spoke of hats and gloves, of all things.” He turned to the chaperone. “Mrs. Bornhalt, a lady can find such things in Chatsworth—or any shop in England—can they not?”

Mrs. Bornhalt gave one of her sniffs. “Absolutely. And might I add that

journeying by ship is long and exhausting. Too many women have fallen ill traveling to America. Then there is the exuberant shopping they'll experience while in New York. My sister would have been far worse had she been there!"

Amy stifled a groan and turned her attention to the passing landscape as Mr. Deverell and Mrs. Bornhalt continued their degradation of life abroad.

Well, let them think what they will! Amy thought fiercely. The letters that awaited them would change Mr. Deverell's mind and make him see sense. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



As the carriage traveled toward Courtly Manor, Tobias replayed the fiasco of their call to Mrs. Hartzel. Tobias's plan had turned against him. The widow had outright sided with Amy! What began as a friendly invitation to show Amy how he was needed in England had turned into Mrs. Hartzel going on and on about the woes of society. Plenty of woes assailed today's world, certainly, but what the widow spouted was outrageous.

At least Mrs. Bornhalt possessed a bit of sense and had seen the foolishness of it all. Granted, she was far too stiff and formal for his liking, and her expression always made her appear as if she were sucking lemons, but she had a good head on her shoulders.

Unfortunately, the chaperone's opinion likely held little weight when it came to that stubborn young woman. It was as if Amy listened to no one's sound advice, his included. Women owning property, indeed! What would the fairer sex know of running an estate? A household, certainly, was an expectation, but could they deal with the delicate intricacies of tenant housing and farms? Not likely.

Tobias paused his thoughts. Did New York City have tenant housing and farms? Mrs. Hartzel had said it was as large as London, but perhaps she had exaggerated. Its streets were likely all unpaved!

It never occurred to Tobias how little he knew about American cities. After all, besides Amy's interest in that godforsaken place, he had spent little time considering it. His time and energy were spent in England, for that was where he would make his name as great—if not greater than—that of his brother. And then his father would be proud of him.

One boon of Mrs. Hartzel incessant chatter was it allowed Tobias time to consider the letters Amy wanted him to read. He would listen, for he had promised to do so. But once she finished, he would gently explain—or in this case explain again—why remaining in England was the best decision for them.

He had to make her see that once they were married, he would be making the decisions for their family. And if his calling was to remain in England, that was where they would stay.

For the briefest of moments, he wondered if all this strife was a sign that he and Amy were not meant to be together. Yet he pushed it aside the moment it appeared. He loved her and no one else. Life would not be the same without her. Which was another reason he tried so hard to convince her to stay. If she decided that going to America was more important than remaining here with him, he would lose her forever.

Well, no relationship was devoid of disagreements. Once they worked through this problem, the future would be paved with a long and happy life together. The carriage came to a stop in front of the school. Tobias was relieved when Mrs. Rutley greeted them at the door. Once the chaperone excused herself to lie down in a guest room, Tobias followed Mrs. Rutley and Amy to the drawing room.

“I’ll go get the letters,” Amy whispered before hurrying away.

That left Tobias alone with the headmistress.

“So, Mr. Deverell,” Mrs. Rutley said as she indicated a place on the blue and gold sofa, “how was your excursion?”

Tobias sighed. “I suppose it went well enough. Mrs. Hartzel seemed in better spirits today, but I fear her encouragement of Miss Felton’s wishes to live abroad emboldened her. I understand that some of your students have moved there and another lives aboard a ship. I imagine that must be a great disappointment.”

The headmistress smiled. “They are all married and have found love, Mr. Deverell. By all accounts, they are happy with their lives, which is all I want for every girl who walks through my doors.”

This made Tobias frown. “Surely, you don’t encourage such behavior?”

Before Mrs. Rutley could respond, Amy returned, taking the seat on the opposite end of the sofa. Her smile lit up her face. And caused his heart to race. If only he could tell her how much he loved her despite their differences in opinion. To hold her and inhale the sweet fragrance that was all her own.

Yet his father's voice spoke that same warning again. *You'll only be a lesser man if you succumb to your feelings.*

Amy placed the letters in the space between them. "These are some of the letters I mentioned. The first is from Ruth Bannermann. She's the one who is married to a captain. Would you like me to read them or would you rather?"

Tobias took the top piece of parchment. "I'll read them," he replied, doing his best to hide his reluctance. Mrs. Bannermann, by all accounts, was a hellion who should be repenting for her sins, not gallivanting around the seas like a man.

Sighing, he unfolded the paper and began to read. She was in New York City when she wrote this letter. A few lines in particular caught his attention.

Sadly, so many dreams have been ruined. The number of women who have lost their husbands is astounding. Some died during the journey here. Others left their families to travel west only to lose their lives along the way. Then there are the ones who ran away with another woman. With no money to book return passage to England, or to pay for accommodation here, these poor souls are left to live on the streets.

Although Theodosia and Unity cannot accommodate them all, they do what they can. We work together to give them safe passage to England in exchange for work. If I could, I would charge them nothing, but Luke and I lack the funds to pay for the food and water necessary to make such a journey.

Tobias set the letter aside after finishing it. Perhaps this Ruth had redeeming qualities after all. He picked up the next letter, this one from Mrs. Unity Rollins. The first part of the correspondence spoke of the latest fashions in hats, but what followed piqued his curiosity.

The reverend who founded the orphanage is kind, but he's also quite old. As his health worsens, visits from him and his congregation decrease. As do the donations that go to the running of the place. Theodosia would like the children to attend church more often, but ten blocks is a long way for sixty

children to walk, especially when thirteen of them are infants. And the winters here only worsen the problem.

The letter fell from his hand into his lap. "Sixty children?" he whispered. "And thirteen are infants?"

The situation was dire. The thought of those poor boys and girls suffering bothered him. No spiritual guidance? And the decrease in funding meant less food and clothing for them.

Standing, he walked over to the window that overlooked the gardens of the school. There was no green left, and the scenery was as dreary as the words he had just read.

Could he go there to help the children? Yet if he did, he would lose any chance to make a name for himself in England. Besides, his calling was clearly here. The light he brought to the people did not require traveling great distances. Plus, he knew no one in America. He would be as lost as any new arrival and thus no good to anyone.

"What do you think?"

Tobias's heart ached when he turned to face her. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. Yet he would not lie. "What your friends do is heartening, but I'm needed here. And I need you here with me."

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. "So, there is no chance at all for us to go?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. There are orphanages here. Widows. We can remain here and see to the needs of our neighbors. I realize America has its share of those in need, but the needy are everywhere. Here, I can make a name for myself and do much more good than I can in a place where I'm an unknown. But we can work through this. If you agree to marry me, that is."

Oh, how saying those words hurt! He did not want to give her a choice. Why could his father not make an agreement with Mr. Felton rather than Mr. Taylor?

With a nod from her headmistress, Amy rose and joined him at the window. "I must know," she said in a near whisper, "how much you care for me before I give you my answer."

Tobias frowned. "Of course, I care for you."

"But to what extent?"

Although Tobias understood Amy wished him to express his love for her,

he could not. He refused to appear weak, especially to her. And in front of Mrs. Rutley. “I care for you a great deal.”

She dropped her gaze. “There is a man, Mr. Hamlin. My father wants me to marry him.”

Tobias took a step back. “What is this?” he demanded. “How long have you known about this arrangement?”

“Several weeks.”

“And you’re just now telling me?” he snapped, unable to keep the rage from his tone. “And do you have an interest in this man?”

Amy looked taken aback. “Of course not. He disgusts me. I did not mention it sooner because I had hoped—”

“To see if I would agree to this excursion of yours first?” he asked, his hands clenched at his sides. “So, when I refused, you’d have someone else to marry you? Is that it? Well, you’re now free to do so, Miss Felton. We’re finished.”

Storming out of the room, he grabbed his coat where it hung from a coat stand. Amy came running up to him, her tear-stained cheeks tugging at his heart.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I do want to marry you. But if you would only—”

Tobias raised a hand, and Amy clamped her mouth shut. “These past weeks, I’ve seen what a selfish woman you truly are. Not once have you considered what I want. What I need. I’m tired of arguing. It’s time we parted ways before we make both our lives miserable.”

Without waiting for her response, he hurried from the house to the waiting carriage. As the vehicle pulled away, he glanced out the window. His heart tore in two. Amy stood on the portico, watching him. Even from his distance, he could see she was sobbing.

Although guilt filled him, Tobias pushed it aside. They would never be happy together. Either he hurt her by making her give up her dream or by ending their courtship. At least the latter allowed them both to find someone else.

If there was someone else he could love as much as he loved Amy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Sitting alone in her bedroom on Christmas Eve, Amy turned the wooden mistletoe in her hands. Her strategy had been to set in motion all that would come to pass tonight, including her confession of love to Mr. Deverell. And with the magic of the mistletoe, he was meant to respond in kind.

But all that had changed when Mr. Deverell stalked out of the school like an angry warrior off to battle. Now, Amy would likely never see him again. And by her actions—or rather her lack of action—she had ensnared her future with that of Mr. Hamlin.

A man she did not love.

Or even like.

And she had nobody to blame for her shortsightedness but herself!

If she had the ability to turn back the clock, to go back in time and change what had occurred that day, Amy would not have kept her affection for Mr. Deverell a secret. Instead, she had held on to her feelings like a toddler clutching a kitten. Too tight a grip, and it suffocates. Much like their relationship. And any chance of telling him how she truly felt for him was gone.

Oh, but you're a stubborn fool, Amy Felton! she growled inwardly. Everyone had the right to their dreams, certainly, but her unwillingness to consider his had made everything she had hoped for topple to the floor like a pile of stones.

And now it was too late to right her wrongs. She was already dressed for Lord Walcott's party, where she would be forced to smile and pretend that all was well with her life. While harboring her disappointment and shame for

how she had treated poor Mr. Deverell. But she would accept her punishment with poise and grace.

And disappointment in herself.

She had chosen a white gown with a blue lace overlay especially for him. Her hair was tied back with a blue ribbon, and blue paste gems dangled from her ears and wrist and lay around her neck. If Amy had been given the choice, she would have remained in bed until her parents arrived in January, but Mrs. Rutley would never have agreed.

The door opened, and that very woman entered the room. The headmistress's green gown was printed with blue forget-me-nots, and blue flowers dotted her coiffure. Amy had always thought Mrs. Rutley a lovely woman, but tonight she was absolutely beautiful.

"What have you there?" Mrs. Rutley asked, nodding toward what Amy had once considered a great treasure.

"I bought it from a woman in Chatsworth. She claimed it has magical powers that become strongest on Christmas Eve. I had hoped to use it to..." She sighed. Mrs. Rutley did not need to know how silly she had been. "Let's just say that I am now seeing things more sensibly these days and have come to realize that I was tricked. No, I should not blame the poor woman for my foolishness. I was so blinded by what I wanted that I readily accepted the nonsense she spouted. Therefore, the fault is mine for not thinking clearly. I'm really too old for believing in magic."

Mrs. Rutley put out a hand, and Amy placed the mistletoe in her palm. "I would not worry too much. Last year, that same woman tried to sell me an elixir she claimed would make me look ten years younger. If I had been your age, I might have believed, but I've learned my lesson in much the same way you did. Such Christmas magic is nice to imagine, but unfortunately, it does not exist."

Going to Amy's chest of drawers, Mrs. Rutley opened the top drawer and then closed it. "There. It's put away. Perhaps you can use it another time."

"I've ruined everything," Amy said, tears filling her eyes as she came to stand before her headmistress. "It's too late to make things right with Mr. Deverell, is it not?"

Mrs. Rutley took Amy's hands in hers. "Don't fret, my dear. There is always hope. Why not write to him tomorrow morning, telling him what's on your heart?"

Amy paused. Would he accept her explanation? Or would he toss her

words into the fire, along with any hope of a life together.

There was only one way to know for certain. “Yes, I believe I shall.”

“Good. Now, we must leave. I’ll never hear the end of it if we’re late.”

In the foyer, Mrs. Shepherd helped them with their pelisses. Antonia, who was watching on, would be spending the evening in the kitchen helping the cook make jam tarts. And sharing in a bit of gossip, Amy was sure.

“Now, you two enjoy yourselves,” Mrs. Shepherd said. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you to mind your manners, Amy. But you’ll watch out for rogues, won’t you?”

Amy laughed. “I promise I’ll be on my best behavior. And if any rogues approach me for a dance, I’ll politely decline.”

Mrs. Shepherd beamed. “Good girl.”

Once Amy and Mrs. Rutley were settled into the carriage, it pulled away from Courtly Manor, a pair of lamps dangling from the corners to light the way. Amy’s mind returned to the letter she would write to Mr. Deverell the following day. She would express her sorrow for how they had left things and for her mistreatment of him. And she would tell him how much she cared for him. Perhaps she would finally admit that she loved him. If all worked out, if he accepted her apology, perhaps his anger would be assuaged, and they could restore what they had once shared.

Amy looked out at the many stars that twinkled in the night sky. She recalled when she was much younger, and her mother had told her that anyone who wished upon a star would have their wish granted. And although the memory made her smile, Amy now understood that magic did not exist. Not in the stars and certainly not in a carved piece of wood. No matter how well made it was.

It was funny how desperation makes a person trust in things she would not have otherwise. But what did she expect to happen? She had placed her dreams of moving to America above the love she had for Mr. Deverell. She only got what she deserved.

Amy sighed heavily. Too bad she had not realized that truth sooner.

Thirty minutes later, they had arrived at Foxly Manor and were entering the large foyer just as Lord Walcott was calling the guests to make their way to the ballroom. At least fifty people, ranging from Amy’s age of eighteen to elderly couples with hunched backs, began the short walk down the corridor.

“Miss Felton,” Lord Walcott said, his smile warm and welcoming, “I’m so glad you came.”

Amy dropped into a curtsy. “Thank you, my lord. And thank you for inviting me.”

“Oh, trust me. The pleasure is all mine.” He turned to the headmistress. “Mrs. Rutley, I would like to speak to you. Once Miss Felton is settled, of course.”

The ballroom at Foxly Manor was an opulent white room with gilt trim and two chandeliers. One wall had a line of six windows, all with gold velvet drapes. Although darkness hung just beyond the light that shone through the glass, Amy knew the windows looked out over the back gardens.

On a raised platform sat a four-piece orchestra playing quiet music. Once the dancing began, the music would become much livelier and would remain so until the end of the night.

Mrs. Rutley led Amy to a line of chairs. A footman approached, and both women accepted a glass of wine from his tray.

“Now, I’ll go speak to Lord Walcott,” Mrs. Rutley said. “I trust you’ll not wander off now, will you?” Without waiting for Amy to respond, she winked and walked away.

Amy watched the other guests, all wearing bright smiles and dressed to the nines. Their cheerful voices only made her heart clench tighter. She and Mr. Deverell should have been there together, celebrating their courtship and their mutual love for one another.

Sighing, she took a sip of her wine. Well, at least she could enjoy this fine vintage.

A woman came to sit beside her, and Amy swallowed back a gasp. “Lady Deverell,” she managed to stutter. “I did not realize you would be in attendance this evening.”

Mr. Deverell’s mother smiled. “Lord Walcott is an old friend. Although it has been a few years since I’ve attended one of his parties, I have to admit they are always quite entertaining.”

Amy offered a half nod, only to quickly realize her lapse in proper etiquette. “My apologies, my lady!”

She went to stand, but Lady Deverell placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Let’s not worry about formalities, shall we? But if you don’t mind, I would like to talk to you about Tobias.”

Amy took a nervous drink of her wine. “Very well.”

“He’s not shared much with me about what took place the last time you met, but you should know that he greatly regrets his reaction.”

Amy stared into her glass. “He’s not at fault, my lady. I was the stubborn one, for I didn’t take into consideration what he wants for his life. And that was unfair of me.”

Quiet fell between them. Would the baroness agree? Or would she chastise Amy for treating her son so terribly?

But rather than being cross, Lady Deverell smiled. “Give him a few days to cool his temper. He’ll come around. And he truly does care for you.” She looked across the room and sighed. “It appears my husband is already on his third glass of port. I should go remind him that we still have several hours left at this party.”

She stood and turned to look at Amy once more. “I’m quite sure you’re meant to be my daughter-in-law. And when that day comes, I’ll be a very happy woman.” And with that, the baroness walked away, leaving Amy to her thoughts.

Taking a sip of her wine, Amy watched as Mrs. Rutley and Lord Walcott stood near the entrance to the ballroom, their heads close together. Ruth had confided in her that the two were close friends. Seeing them together only solidified that fact.

Amy sighed again. Asking would be in bad form, so she would not do so.

If only she had thought to write her letter to Mr. Deverell before she left the school. Then she could have asked his mother to take it to him. Yet she would have to wait. Just like she did with everything in her life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



A fire crackled in the large fireplace in the drawing room of Mandrel House as Tobias sipped on his brandy. His parents had left for Foxly Manor an hour earlier to attend the same Christmas Eve party he and Amy were to attend together. Lord Walcott would have his hide for disregarding his invitation, but Tobias simply was not in the mood.

Why had he acted as he did, storming out of the school like a petulant child not getting his way? If he had responded thus when he was a boy, his governess would have reddened his bottom so he could not sit for a week!

Tobias had been so focused on what *he* wanted, what *his* future held, that he had not considered what a life shared with Amy should be like. Nor had he considered her dreams in his scenario.

Despite his outrageous reaction, the letters from Amy's friends in America had appealed to him in a way he had not expected. His fears had kept him from voicing his thoughts, and not only because he feared traveling abroad.

When she had asked him what he felt for her, his insides had twisted into knots. Was his fear of his father's scorn so great that he would strangle every emotion he possessed? Or did something else drive his unwillingness to tell her what she clearly wished to hear?

He glanced down at the Bible in his lap. Lord Walcott had told him what he needed was inside that book. Yet after hours of devouring page after page, the answer still eluded him.

"Well, well, Tobias," a voice boomed through the room, startling Tobias from his thoughts.

He looked up to find his brother standing in the doorway. "Richard?" he

asked, standing. “What are you doing here, man?”

“I heard you’re about to ruin your life,” his brother said, grinning as he poured himself a drink. Taller than Tobias, Richard had their father’s dark hair and eyes.

Tobias laughed. “You heard?”

Richard waved a dismissive hand. “Well, not heard but read.” He dropped into one of the brown leather chairs. “I received the most mysterious letter. It was unsigned, and I didn’t recognize the hand, but it said I could be of use to you.” He laughed. “And the ruining your life was a direct quote from that missive. Now, Brother, tell me what sort of trouble you’ve gotten into.”

For a moment, Tobias could only stare at his brother. Someone had written to him? And how, exactly, was he ruining his life? He tried to rack his brain to think of anything he had done recently that would have required this sort of help, but nothing came to mind. “I haven’t been in any sort of trouble, Richard. I pay my taxes like the next fool and don’t squander my money in gaming hells. I can’t imagine...” He paused. “The only problems I’ve faced recently have to do with a young lady with whom I’ve become close, but surely no one would write to you and mention—”

“Most young ladies are trouble, Tobias,” Richard said with a deep chuckle. “Let’s start there and see where it leads us. Is this the young woman you mentioned in your recent letters?”

Tobias nodded. “Miss Amy Felton, yes. But I can’t imagine—”

“Go on,” Richard interrupted. “Is the happy couple arguing?”

“Well, yes, we are but—”

Richard sat up in the chair. “Out with it, then. I didn’t come all this way to drink your brandy.” He downed the last from his glass and went to refill it.

With a sigh, Tobias explained his situation, leaving out nothing. When he was done, he said, “We’re well matched except for one thing, but I’m at fault for our current troubles. You know how adamant Father is about showing weakness. Yet Miss Felton hounds me at every turn to say the words. And then there is this issue of going to America. If I leave England, how will I ever create a legacy that matches yours?”

With a chuckle, Richard shook his head. “Is that what all this is about? You’ve compared yourself to me? Tobias, I married Valina because it was expected of me. I carefully choose my investments for the same reason. Do you know why men smile and offer me a quick hand in greeting?”

“That is an easy answer. It’s because they admire you for your standing

and the wealth you'll possess once Father is gone."

Richard snorted. "There, you see? You'll never compare to me, and for that I'm glad."

Tobias blew out his breath. "So, you admit it, then?"

"I do," Richard replied. "Men greet you not because of your wealth but because of your character. You have a woman willing to marry you for your heart, not for what you possess. I say you'll never compare to me, but what I truly mean to say is that I can never compare to you. You, Brother, have surpassed me."

Tobias could only stare in utter amazement. He had never thought of his life in that way. Yet the more he dwelt on it, the more it made sense. That did not change his calling, however. "I appreciate your kind words," he said, "but what about my work here with the Church? I've been told many times that I am a beacon of light to many. I'm building confidence with people here. If I go elsewhere, I must begin again."

Richard picked up the Bible Tobias had placed on a side table and riffled through the pages. "Indeed, you will have to begin anew." He thrust the book toward Tobias. "But I believe the answer to what you seek has been here all along."

Tobias frowned as he took the Bible from his brother. "But I've already looked—" His words stopped short when he opened the cover and read the inscription inside, written by his mentor, Mr. Styles.

The light inside you burns brightly and will help many who are lost in the darkness. It is not confined to a building, nor a particular town, but will forever remain with you wherever you go.

Tobias's jaw dropped. Had Lord Walcott not advised him that the help he needed could be found inside this Book? He had not considered it would be the inscription itself that would hold the answer for which he had been searching for so long!

Tobias had believed his calling was to minister to the people here in England. He had been so convinced of this fact that when presented with another option, he had ignored the possibility that his calling had changed.

The light so many said he possessed was not meant to be guarded in one place. He would take it with him wherever he went.

But first, he had to get to Amy before all was lost.

“Thank you, Brother,” he said as he put out a hand. Richard did not hesitate to shake it. “Forgive my rudeness, but I must get to Foxly Manor. Lord Walcott is hosting a party and—” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Father and Mother took the carriage. I must have one of the horses saddled.”

Richard laughed. “Did you think I walked here? My carriage is ready and waiting. Take it.” He placed a hand on Tobias’s shoulder. “Go. Find your woman. And continue being a better man than me. For I do admire you. More than you realize.”

Tobias could not help but beam. But although his brother’s admiration was all well and good, it was that of Amy that he wanted more.

He hurried to the front of the house and found that, indeed, a carriage was waiting. He called up directions to the driver as he leapt inside, closing the door behind him. His heart raced with excitement. Once he arrived at the party, he would confess everything to Amy, including his desire to have her dreams be his. And his true feelings for her. Let his father think what he would!

The vehicle moved at a snail’s pace, or so it felt, despite the fact that it wobbled in its hurry to reach its destination. When they pulled up in front of Foxly Manor, Tobias did not wait for the carriage to come to a complete stop before leaping out of it.

When he knocked on the front door, he was greeted not by a liveried butler, but by Mrs. Agnes Rutley.

Before he had time to register surprise, Mrs. Rutley was pulling him into the foyer, saying, “Why, Mr. Deverell, how wonderful to see you! I’ve no idea where that butler has gone, but may I take your coat? I’m sure you don’t want to be any later to enjoy the festivities than you already are.”

“There’s no need—”

“Oh, posh!” she said as she tugged at his overcoat. There was a heavy odor of sherry on her breath, which gave the perfect explanation when she had stumbled and fallen against him.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Deverell,” she gasped as she tugged at his coat. “I lost my balance.” Her worried expression pulled at his heart.

“No trouble at all, Mrs. Rutley, truly. It was only an accident, I’m sure.” He looked past the headmistress toward the faint sounds of music coming

from the direction of the ballroom. “Is Miss Felton with you?”

Mrs. Rutley smiled. “Why, yes, she is. But I understand that your mother is waiting in the library to speak to you. I’ll show you the way, shall I?”

Tobias frowned. His mother? What would she be doing in the library of all places?

“There is no need,” he said. “I know where it is.”

When he entered the library, however, he found it empty. Strange. Perhaps his mother had gone to get a glass of wine from the party. As he waited for her to return, he perused the various tomes on the shelves.

Then a shadow fell over him...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The orchestra played a lively tune as men and women lined up for a country dance. Despite the lively banter and frolicking around her, Amy was not inclined to join them. No matter how much she tried, she could not shake Mr. Deverell from her thoughts. He should be in front of her with his hand extended in an invitation to join her in the line. But instead, she stood there alone. At least no other gentleman had approached her yet. Rejecting an invitation to dance was frowned upon, but she was in no mood to join in the festivities.

Her attention was drawn to Mrs. Rutley as she joined Amy. “I found the most fascinating book in Lord Walcott’s library,” the headmistress said, smiling. “I didn’t think it prudent to take it from the room without asking His Lordship first, so I left it on a table beside the door. I know you’re not enjoying yourself. Why don’t you go and have a look at it? You recall where the library is located, do you not?”

Amy nodded, although she was baffled by Mrs. Rutley’s behavior. Why would she suggest Amy leave a party in search of a book? If she, Amy, had even considered such a thing, her headmistress would have had her writing lines as a form of punishment!

“I do,” Amy replied.

Mrs. Rutley beamed. “Excellent. You run along. I must speak with Lord Walcott, but once I have, I’ll join you.”

Perplexed, Amy rose from her chair and exited the ballroom. As much as she enjoyed reading, the last thing she wanted to do was do so now. Yet it was better than watching everyone else enjoying themselves.

The butler, who stood at attention beside the front door, gave her a smile

as she walked past him. The library was situated just past the main staircase. Light streamed through the open door, and when Amy entered the room, she caught sight of a figure standing in front of one of the many bookshelves.

“Mr. Deverell?”

He turned, a look of surprise on his face. “Miss Felton?” He hurried to her and took her hands in his. “I’m so pleased to see you! There is so much I must tell you.”

Amy dropped her gaze, hoping to hide the blush she could feel heating her cheeks. “I’m very glad to see you, too.”

“These past weeks,” he continued, “I’ve been an utter fool! Rather than listen to you, I made every excuse possible not to do so.”

“Not only you,” Amy replied as she looked up into the eyes of the man she loved. “I’ve been just as foolish.”

“Not as foolish as I.” He paused and shook his head. “No, I shan’t argue about who caused the most strife, for doing so cannot change the past. But I’ve come to an understanding. It took me a great deal of time, far longer than it should have. Do you remember when I told you that others often mention a light they see inside me?”

Amy nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“That light led me to you, Miss Felton... Amy. And I’ve learned that this light is love itself. It cannot be contained inside a building. Or within the boundaries of a country. I can carry it with me wherever I go.” He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “If you still wish to go to America, then we can go together. Because as much as my light glows when I’m alone, it shines even brighter when I’m with you. Not only do I want to marry you, but I will do so in love. For I do love you, Amy. I’ve just been too stubborn to admit it to you.”

Her legs nearly gave way at his admission. This was what she had waited a lifetime to hear. But she had confessions of her own to make.

“You’re not the only stubborn one here,” she said, her heart pounding so hard she thought it would burst from her chest. “I only considered my dreams and paid little heed to yours. Though what you say pleases me, if you truly wish to remain here in England, then do so. For I will always stand beside you.”

“Amy,” he whispered. “We shall go to America, for the orphanage and church are in need of help.” Amy felt her heart soar once again.

“Then we shall,” she said. “I must admit I became so desperate that I

even purchased a mistletoe to help me.”

Mr. Deverell tilted his head. “Mistletoe?”

She sighed. “You’re going to think me a complete and utter dolt—”

“I would never use such a word to describe you,” he interrupted indignantly.

“Allow me to finish if you please.” She could not help but smile as he pressed his lips together. “I purchased a small mistletoe made of wood from an old woman...” She went on to explain the encounter, including—quite embarrassingly—its supposed magical properties. “But it no longer matters. I want to be at your side no matter where you go. Or where you stay, if you so choose. As your friend, as your wife, and more importantly, as the woman who loves you.”

Saying the words aloud left her feeling giddy. They had the exact effect she had imagined. No, it was more wonderful!

“Miss Felton,” he began and then paused. “What is this?” Reaching into his pocket, he removed a familiar object. “A sprig of mistletoe made out of wood?”

Amy gasped. “Did you purchase that from the old woman in the village?”

Mr. Deverell shook his head. “I swear to you that I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

“How strange.” Amy took the mistletoe from him. “It’s exactly like the one I bought in every way. I wonder if it’s the same one. No, it couldn’t be. Mrs. Rutley put it away for safekeeping. But how did it end up in your pocket?”

Mr. Deverell took back the mistletoe and grinned mischievously, his eyes sparking. “I don’t know, nor do I care.” He lifted it up above their heads. “It’s here and must immediately be put to good use.”

Amy’s heart pounded wildly when he wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her against him. She thought for certain she would faint. Her mouth went dry as he lowered his head and kissed her. She had imagined that her first kiss would be a gentle peck, one that could only be described as chaste. Like kissing the cheek of a maiden aunt or a cousin one had not seen in a long time.

But this was nothing like that.

His kiss was hungry, devouring, and she was surprised to find herself returning his fervor. Her body was as light as a feather, and she was sure it would float away on a gust of wind.

Although she had hoped their kiss would last forever, it was a disappointment when it came to an end.

Mr. Deverell returned the mistletoe to her, and Amy said, “There is magic, but it does not reside in talismans or ornaments such as this. Rather it comes from the love in our hearts.”

He smiled. “I agree. And my heart is filled with all the magic in the world because of you.”

Amy considered lifting the mistletoe herself this time in order to express her love again but thought better of it. She had already been far too forward as it was!

“In a few weeks, I’ll speak to your father. When he gives us his blessing, we’ll begin the plans for our wedding, and I’ll book passage to New York.”

“But Mr. Deverell—”

He placed a finger to her lips. “We’ll build a new life there. Together. And I’ll hear no argument from you. And if we’re to be married, you must call me Tobias.”

She was elated at the thought of addressing him so intimately. “Then you must call me Amy.”

Voices rose in the corridor, and Tobias—how strange it was to use his Christian name!—took a step back. “We should go join the party. Our engagement hasn’t been announced, and the last thing either of us needs is a scandal.”

Amy giggled. “Can you imagine?”

“Honestly, no,” he replied with a chuckle.

“There they are,” a familiar voice said.

Amy and Tobias turned to find Mrs. Rutley and Lord Walcott standing in the doorway. Amy thought she would burst into flames with the embarrassment she felt over being caught alone with Tobias.

“I thought I saw you come in here just a moment ago,” Mrs. Rutley said with a slow nod. “I’m pleased to see you weren’t left alone. Come, Amy. Let’s leave the men to talk.”

Confused, Amy nodded and followed her headmistress out of the room. “Look what Tobias... erm... Mr. Deverell found in his pocket.” She opened her hand to display the mistletoe, and Mrs. Rutley took it.

“I wonder how many of these are out there,” Mrs. Rutley said meditatively. “There must be hundreds, if not thousands, of them around the country. Around the world, even.”

“I suppose so. Still, I think I’ll keep it. By the way, all is well between Mr. Deverell and me. Did I mention that he proposed?”

Mrs. Rutley’s brows rose. “Did he now?”

“He did. And better still, we confessed our love to each other. That is Christmas magic. Isn’t it marvelous?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to ask,” Mrs. Rutley said, “but please tell me you don’t believe it was that trinket that brought about all this magnificent luck.”

Amy laughed. “Likely not. You were right all along, Mrs. Rutley. The answer I needed was inside me. How strange. Our love was the magic we needed this Christmas.”

Mrs. Rutley stopped and embraced Amy. “Indeed, it was. And the best thing about all this? That magic will continue on for the many years ahead of you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Christmas came and went. Then the day came when Amy paced the drawing room at Courtly Manor. Her parents were due to arrive an hour ago. Not only were they late, but Tobias was, too. Where was everyone?

“You’ll wear a hole in the carpet with all that pacing,” Antonia said as she rose from an armchair. “I hate to leave you here alone, but I’ll be late for my next lesson. And you know what a stickler Mrs. Gouldsmith can be for punctuality.”

Amy laughed. “Oh, I know quite well,” she replied.

Mrs. Gouldsmith tutored the students in decorum and manners. According to her, there were no holidays when it came to comportment.

“You are either a proper young lady or tawdry,” she was wont to say. “You cannot be both.”

Although they were not close, not anywhere near to how close she and Ruth were, Amy still liked the young new student.

“Yes, do go,” Amy said, giving the girl a hug. “But before you do, I want to say something. I’m so happy we met and became friends. And always remember, your time here is much shorter than you think it will be, so make the most of it. You’ll be surprised at how much you learn here can be applied to the world outside those doors.”

Antonia glanced at the door. “Will you write to me? I want to hear all about your new life.”

“I will,” Amy replied.

After the girl was gone, Mrs. Rutley entered, Amy’s parents following behind her. Amy had not even heard the bell.

“Ah, there she is,” her father said as he opened his arms to her. “It seems you’ve grown these last few months. And what has you smiling so broadly?”

Her mother laughed. “Come now, George. Don’t tease her. But she is glowing, isn’t she? I suspect that our daughter is in love. Is that not why all girls smile?”

Her father frowned. “I suppose that is true. Or at least that is what I hear.” He glanced around the room. “And where is this young man who has so charmed our daughter?”

Mrs. Rutley directed Amy’s parents to the couch, and Amy sat between them.

Glancing at his pocket watch, her father said, “We’re on a tight schedule, Mrs. Rutley. I haven’t seen my home in several months and want nothing more than to bring my journey to an end.”

Amy wrung her hands. This was not going as she had planned. Not in the slightest. But then Mrs. Rutley winked, and the door opened.

“Apologies for my tardiness,” Tobias said as he hurried into the room. “I had to call over to the home of the Widow Spencer.”

Amy let out a sigh of relief. “Father, this is Mr. Deverell, the man I mentioned to you before.” She turned to Tobias. “Mr. Deverell, my father, Mr. Asher Felton.”

The two men seemed to size each other up as they shook each other’s hands.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” Mrs. Rutley said before withdrawing.

The room fell silent with only the sound of the cracking wood in the fireplace and the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Amy thought she would burst from the waiting. If she could think of just one topic for discussion, she would have brought it up, but her mind was as blank as a clean slate.

Finally, Amy’s father sighed, standing. “So, young man, what are your intentions with my daughter?”

Well, that is certainly one way to take the bull by the horns, Amy thought wryly. Then again, her father was never one to skirt around a subject. It was one reason he did so well when conducting business. People appreciated his forthrightness.

“I plan to marry her, sir,” Tobias said without hesitation. “To honor and love her and provide for all her needs.”

“I understand you’re finishing your seminary studies and plan to become a clergyman. Is that true?”

Tobias stood up straighter. "Yes, sir. I leave for London in two weeks to make it official."

Amy stood and joined her father. "Please, Papa, may we have your blessing? May we marry?"

Her father studied her for several moments. Amy held her breath as she awaited his decision. Was this how prisoners felt standing before the magistrates?

Then he gave her a half smile. "I can see how happy he makes you, and that is all I've ever wanted for you. Of course, you have my blessing."

Pleasure filled Amy, and she had to force herself to return to her seat rather than running to throw herself into Tobias's arms. The door opened, and Mrs. Shepherd entered, carrying a tea tray. Mrs. Rutley joined them not long after. For the next hour, they chatted about the upcoming months.

Today, Amy was to return home with her parents. At Lady Deverell's insistence, the wedding would take place in June when the spring flowers were in full bloom. They would marry at the Deverell estate in Gravesmith and leave immediately after for New York City.

As the hour drew to an end, all stood, ready to leave.

"May I have a quick word with Mrs. Rutley and Mr. Deverell before we go?" Amy asked.

Her father nodded. "But do be quick. We must leave as soon as possible. You know I don't like to travel during the winter. One never knows when the weather will change and make passage impossible."

Her mother kissed her cheek. "I'll make sure Timothy gets your luggage tied to the carriage, dear." Timothy was one of their footmen. "We'll wait for you outside. Don't be long."

"I won't," Amy said, smiling.

Once her parents were gone, Amy turned to Tobias. "So, you'll come to visit next month?"

He nodded. "I will. Being away from you won't be easy, but knowing we'll be together for the rest of our lives makes our separation bearable." He turned to Mrs. Rutley. "Thank you."

The headmistress waved a dismissive hand. "There's no need to thank me, Mr. Deverell. I did nothing of any consequence."

With one last longing look at Amy, Tobias left the room.

Amy wiped a stray tear from her eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"What is there to say?" Mrs. Rutley said.

She led Amy to the foyer, where a teary-eyed Mrs. Shepherd stood waiting. “It seems like it was only yesterday that you arrived,” the cook said as she blotted her eyes with a handkerchief. “And now you’re leaving. Now, you behave yourself.”

“I always do,” Amy replied with a smile.

Amy followed Mrs. Rutley onto the portico. The winter wind chilled her cheeks as she looked at the waiting carriage. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me, Mrs. Rutley.”

“It has been my honor and privilege to have you here,” the headmistress said. “You arrived here a girl and you leave a woman. Your dreams are ahead of you, and I have no doubt that you’ll experience every one of them.”

With tears sliding over her eyelashes, Amy embraced the woman who had been like a mother to her over the past four years. “Goodbye, Mrs. Rutley.”

Mrs. Rutley tightened her hug. “Goodbye, Amy. Until we meet again.”

Wiping at her eyes, Amy joined her parents in the carriage. As her father spoke of the inn where they would be staying for the night, the vehicle lurched forward. Amy paid him little heed as she stared out the window, her gaze falling on the large oak tree beside the drive. Beneath it stood Mrs. Rutley and Mrs. Shepherd, two of the strongest women Amy had ever known.

With a raised hand bidding farewell, Amy beamed as Mrs. Rutley reciprocated with a wave of her own. And although Amy would return in six months for the ceremony, she would never forget all that her headmistress had done for her. The gratitude she held for all that Mrs. Rutley had done would forever remain etched on her heart.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



June 1810

Not wishing to put off their journey, Mr. And Mrs. Tobias Deverell spend their honeymoon in Belfast, Ireland, the very port city from which they would begin their new journey together to America. They had arrived five days earlier and spent their time enjoying long strolls on the beach, sharing tea at the various cafes and teahouses the city had to offer, and eating the most romantic dinners in a private corner of the restaurant attached to the inn.

Although Amy enjoyed their time there together, she was all the more excited for today. In just four short hours, they would board a ship to America.

As they stood hand in hand on the beach, Amy closed her eyes to listen to the waves rolling across the sand. The warm summer wind made the tiny hairs that peeked out from her bonnet tickle her cheeks. Seagulls squawked as they glided above them, searching for any morsel of food left unattended by unsuspecting diners who had brought a picnic basket. And sometimes they stole food right out of a diner's hand.

"What is on your mind?" Tobias asked.

Amy took a deep breath of salt air and turned to face her husband. "Us. Today, we set off on a new adventure, and I know we'll have many more after." She smiled. "It's odd, but since Lord Walcott's Christmas Eve party, when we confessed our love for one another, I've found that my love has only grown stronger. I would never have thought that possible."

Tobias grinned, the wind blowing a wave of his dark hair across his

forehead. “Oh, I can attest to it being possible, for I feel the same.” He pointed toward the sea. “Our love is like that horizon—always stretching forth and never-ending.”

“I like the sound of that,” Amy said, leaning her head against his arm.

As so many times before, Tobias wrapped his arm around her and pressed his lips to hers, not caring who saw them. They were once a couple who had created a trench between them. Yet the love they shared, once expressed, had secured their hearts and built a bridge to bring them back together again.

And when the kiss ended, Tobias took her hand in his. They began the stroll toward the docks. Soon, they would board the ship that would lead them to their new life.

The magic of Christmas was love, and it continued to guide their every step long after the holiday was gone.

EPILOGUE



Amy wondered if her legs would ever find her balance again. After twenty-nine days on a ship, the now docked vessel still felt as if it were still at sea to Amy. They had encountered two violent storms, and each time, Amy could not help but imagine what it would be like to be sucked under the surface as the ship sank. What had she been thinking sailing across an ocean larger than all Europe and expecting to make it alive!

It had all been silly to worry so much.

Standing near the gangplank, waiting for their turn to disembark, Amy drew in a steadying breath. She was here now, that was what mattered. And Tobias was at her side. They had made it safely, had shared in an adventure few got the chance to experience.

“Here, let me help,” Tobias said. “You seem a bit unsteady on your feet.”

She smiled as she touched his proffered arm. She enjoyed the feel of his muscles beneath the fabric, even though she no longer had to guess what they might look like.

Her cheeks heated. What was she doing thinking of her husband’s arm muscles? She turned her attention to the large group of people waiting on the dock. There had to be at least a hundred, their heads bobbing this way and that in search of whichever passenger they awaited. Several were already embracing their loved ones.

The docks of New York City differed greatly from those of Belfast. Where Ireland was quietly reserved, this new place was full of vitality. And very loud. Amy struggled to keep from covering her ears at the din. Not that she minded. It was all a part of the new adventure.

“Are you nervous?” Tobias asked.

“I must admit that I am,” Amy whispered in reply. “But I’m also excited. I’ve never seen so many ships docked in one place before! And the people! There are so many!”

When it was their turn, they made their way down the gangplank, following those before them until they reached the dock. Slipping her arm through that of Tobias, Amy heard more clearly the weeping and tearful greetings of those around her.

It was beautiful to behold.

They pushed through the many people, and when they reached the far edge of the throng, Amy stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing a familiar face.

“Ruth.”

The redhead had not changed much in the last four years since they last saw one another. Her hair hung down her back in long ringlets just as it always had, only now she covered it with a triangular piece of cloth. No bonnet or hat for Mrs. Ruth Bannermann. At least some things did not change.

“Oh, Amy, you did it,” Ruth said as she threw her arms around Amy. “You came, just like you promised you would. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Amy sighed happily. “As am I. You seem taller, and your hair is longer. Oh! Mrs. Ruth Bannermann, may I present my husband, Mr. Tobias Deverell.”

“Ah, the clergyman,” Ruth said as she pushed a hand toward Tobias. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Reverend.”

Tobias did not hesitate to take her hand and shake it. “The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Bannermann. I’ve heard so much about you. It’s nice to put a face to the name.”

“Just call me Ruth. Mrs. Bannermann just seems so formal. You’ll be surprised how informal people can be here.” She grinned widely. “It suits me well.”

“Then I’m just Tobias,” he replied with a laugh.

“Where are the twins?” Amy asked.

Before Ruth could respond, Unity and Theodosia Rollins came hurrying up. The pair had married brothers and had considered themselves twins despite the fact they were not related by blood. Both had curly brown hair, high cheekbones, and large brown eyes. They even wore the same dresses. Although Theodosia was taller than Unity, they did resemble one another

quite a bit.

After further introductions—and a great deal of hugs—Ruth took Amy by the hand. “You’ll love New York City. I leave for France in two weeks, but we’ll spend as much time together as possible before I go. Oh, and there is someone I would like you to meet.”

Another woman Amy did not know joined them. She, too, had bright red hair, but unlike Ruth, she kept it in a proper coiffure.

“I know you’ve heard me mention Abigail Swanson on more than one occasion.”

Amy could only gape. She most certainly had heard stories about this woman. One who had spent the majority of her time at Courtly Manor terrorizing many of the other students, especially Emma Hunter, now Lady St. John.

But no one would believe the smiling young woman who stood before her had once worn a scowl. “It’s so wonderful to finally meet you,” Abigail said as she embraced Amy without hesitation.

“It’s... it’s so nice to meet you, too,” Amy said, still stunned. Everything she had heard about Abigail had been terrible. How could someone so mean change this much?

Abigail seemed to hear her thoughts. “Oh, yes, she’s heard the stories,” she said with a glance at Ruth. “I’m a different person from the one who attended Mrs. Rutley’s School for Young Women.”

“So I see,” Amy said. “But... and I don’t mean to sound unkind, but why are you here?”

Ruth laughed. “That’s a very long story that involves the twins and a certain woman missing her ship set for Germany. Come. We’ll get something to eat, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Amy glanced at her husband, who gave her an amused smile. “You go on,” he said. “I’ll see to our bags. I’ll meet you at the hotel for dinner.”

When the other women moved away, Amy moved in closer. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He kissed her. Thoroughly enough to make her reconsider going with her friends. “Go and catch up with your friends. I’ll be waiting for you.”

That now familiar warmth spread through her insides, and Amy smiled up at the man who she loved more than anything. “And I cannot wait to join you.”

The End

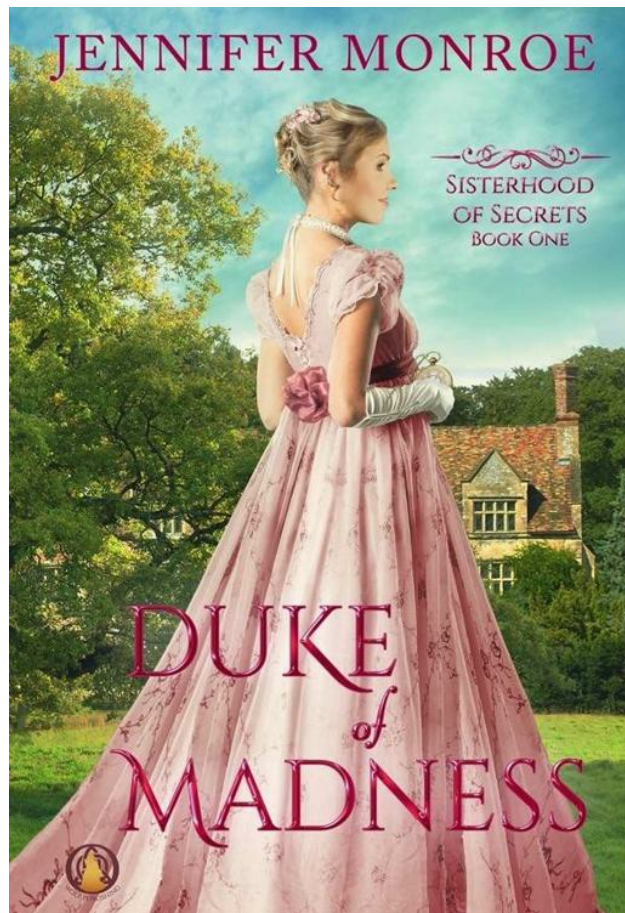
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CHRISTMAS FORGIVENESS

A ROYALS & REBELS NOVELLA

MEREDITH BOND



Christmas Forgiveness by Meredith Bond

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ABOUT THE BOOK

He goes from haunting her nightmares to being the man of her dreams.

Klaus Kottenfurst has been sentenced to live out the rest of his days on his father's estate but a reprieve has been granted him for a few precious weeks over Christmas. He goes with the goal of impressing his uncle, the prince, so much that he is willing to lift his sentence before he has to return home. But Klaus never expected to meet the younger sister of one of his victims, nor the feelings that come with interacting with the beautiful, gentle young woman.

Sophia North is thrilled that her sister married for love. She quite likes her brother-in-law as well. What she can't stand is living in their house with them constantly fawning over each other. She's got to find a husband fast. When she attends a friend's house party over Christmas, she encounters the one person who haunts her nightmares—the man who threatened her sister's life. Is it possible there is more to this man than what she's seen so far?

Sophia can't imagine feeling anything more than anger at Klaus, so why is she suddenly having softer feelings for him? Can Klaus ever be forgiven, if there is the slightest chance, he'll do everything he can earn that forgiveness.

Enjoy *Christmas Forgiveness* with this enemies-to-lovers holiday novella by Meredith Bond. This fifth book of the Royals & Rebels series is most easily enjoyed if you've read the books of the main series first: *In Lieu of a Princess*, *Princess on the Run*, and *A Prince Among Spies*.

CHAPTER ONE



Klaus Kottenfurst galloped as far as he could, pushing his horse harder and faster down the paths between the fields, leaping over low stone walls and hedges alike. He reveled in the feeling of freedom it brought him, especially because he knew that freedom was only a figment of his imagination.

He wasn't free.

He was confined to his father's estate and had been ever since he'd returned from England nearly two years ago. He also knew that he was extremely lucky to still be alive, to have *only* been sentenced to live indefinitely on this estate. If anyone else had done what he'd done, they would have been hanged, drawn, and quartered within moments of stepping back onto the soil of their homeland, Aachen-Düren, a small country just north of France.

Klaus hadn't returned voluntarily, but under armed guard after being escorted to his ship in Dover by no fewer than ten British soldiers. Six had stayed on the British shore while four had continued with him on his journey back to his country. All his life he'd wanted to be important enough to have an armed escort, but he'd imagined that they would have been there to protect him from others, not the other way around.

His uncle, the Prince Heinrich of Aachen-Düren, had been lenient in sentencing Klaus to a lifetime of confinement when he so easily could have taken his head—thus was the punishment for one who had tried to kill the Prince's two children, Prince Nikolas and Princess Louisa. Being the only son of the Prince's brother allowed Klaus such clemency. He had an odd feeling of profound relief tinged with appalling guilt every time he thought of

how lucky he was that his life had been preserved.

But how was this—living a life of confinement, never to be allowed to leave his father’s estate—how was this truly living, especially for a young man so filled with hopes and dreams and the wherewithal to make them a reality? The problem, of course, was that he’d lost his way somewhere as he’d walked along the journey of his life.

Klaus could even pinpoint the very day that he’d begun to veer off course. He knew the precise hour. But there was nothing he could do about it now. The past was past, and now he paid the price. He’d learned his lesson, but he was still repenting for his stupidity, for his naivete—no, it was worse than that, and he knew it.

If only he could turn back time. If only he’d actually followed his initial inclination to speak to his father... but no, he’d allowed the devil to lure him away from that straight path and onto one that, he was told, would lead to wealth and power. If only he hadn’t listened, none of this would have happened. If only he’d opened his mouth and said something to his father, told him—but no, instead he thought he had the answer, no matter how distasteful it was. He’d thought the only way to achieve his goal was to get rid of his cousins.

Eventually, he’d accepted the whisperings of the devil as truth and allowed his desires to dominate not only his actions, but his thoughts and dreams as well. And with that, he’d begun to see his cousins as the only thing standing in his way. And so he’d tried to get rid of them, to have them killed. But they were too clever for him—and thank God for that! He knew now that he would have hated himself even more if he’d actually been successful, despite the consequences of his failure.

If he’d only spoken to his father... if only he’d told him the truth from the very beginning—the refrain ran through his mind every day and every hour. But even now, he still had not told his father the truth. Perhaps when the man was lying on his deathbed, Klaus would be able to tell him. Perhaps he would tell him then and ask for his forgiveness.

Klaus rode hard until his horse was lathered and snorting, his breath a white mist in the cold of the late November day. He tried to ride out his guilt, but no matter how hard he rode, no matter how far he ran, it still clung to him. Would he ever be rid of it? He thought not, and it was nothing more than he deserved.

Finally, he turned his poor horse toward the house. Reaching the stable,

he slipped off the horse's back, leading him to his stall. After removing the saddle while the horse refreshed himself with a long drink of water, Klaus picked up the brushes from the shelf and began to groom him. The stable hands knew not to even attempt to do so themselves. Klaus was taught well, knew his horse was his responsibility, and even beyond that, the animal deserved the very best care he could get.

"Ah, there you are!" Markgraffin Kottenfurst or Lady Kottenfurst, Klaus's mother, said in English as she came into the stable wearing a gray woolen cloak lined and edged with ermine.

"Here I am," he answered in the same language, hardly looking up from his task.

"Your father wishes to have a word with you," she told him.

At that, Klaus did look up. "And he sent you to tell me?"

She laughed. "No. I just happened to see you ride in." She turned to leave the stable again but stopped and turned back around. There was a mischievous grin on her face as she said, "It's important. I wouldn't delay too long if I were you."

He looked at her. "Now you have me curious."

"Ah-ha," she said with a laugh. "Then, come along."

Klaus handed the brushes to a groom who was nearby and followed his mother back to the house.

"Is it urgent or can I bathe and change first?" he asked her as they stepped through the front door.

She turned and put a loving hand on his cheek. Smiling up at him, she said, "Bathe. You stink of horse and sweat." She gave his cheek a pat with a little giggle and went off to her own affairs.

Klaus could only smile and shake his head. He loved his mother more than anything, but that didn't mean he understood her or her sense of humor.

Half an hour later, he found his father in his study, seated behind his huge mahogany desk.

"Ah! Finally. I've been waiting for you," Markgraf Kottenfurst said in his native German. He, too, seemed to be in an unusually good mood. He stood as he smiled at Klaus and indicated that his son should take a seat by the fire.

"Mama said you had something important you wished to discuss with me?" Klaus asked, responding in German as well and seating himself in one of the navy-blue wingback chairs.

Instead of answering him, his father handed him a piece of paper. It held

his uncle's royal seal on the bottom, but there was no need for that, as Klaus recognized the Prince's own handwriting immediately. He read it through, frowned, and then read it again. When he looked up at his father, who had taken the chair across from him, he was still frowning.

"I don't understand. How could this be? I was confined to this estate by royal decree," Klaus said.

"Yes, and royal decree can release you as well," his father told him. He was still smiling. He also held a glass of port in his hand and indicated that the one sitting in front of Klaus was for him. Klaus hadn't even noticed that his father had placed it there; he'd been so absorbed by the letter from his uncle.

Klaus ignored the liquor for now. "But..."

"Read it through again if you must. But do note that it says you are only given leave to attend this house party and are to return straight here unless—"

"Unless what?" Klaus looked through the letter once again. He didn't see anything there about awarding him his freedom.

"I'm thinking that if you comport yourself well, impress your uncle that you truly regret what happened, and behave with kindness and maturity toward your cousins that you will be released," his father said, lowering his eyebrows to convey the seriousness of what he was saying.

Klaus frowned as well. "Do you think...?"

"I do. If you behave as if you deserve it."

"Do you think that I might be given my estate back? My title?"

"Now, now, son, don't get ahead of yourself. You are being given leave to attend a house party. If you behave well, you might be allowed your freedom once again. Do not push for more. Be grateful you are being allowed this much," his father said, losing his smile.

Klaus nodded. "Yes, of course, but..." He looked at the letter once again. "I cannot believe Nik—"

"Actually, it was Nik and Isa, both, who specifically requested that you be allowed to come," his father said.

"What? But that can't be!" Klaus jumped to his feet and began to pace the room. "After what I did to them? I can't imagine that they didn't request that I swing from the nearest gallows." He stopped and faced his father. "Unless that is what they have planned for their holiday entertainment?"

Markgraf Kottenfurst burst out laughing. "No! No, not at all. Apparently, they are both strong believers in Christmas forgiveness."

“Christmas miracles, you mean,” Klaus said, sitting back down.

His father shrugged. “That too, I suppose. Do you think you can do this? Can you go and be among your cousins and their joy and be happy for them?”

It didn’t take a great deal of thought to figure that one out. “Yes! But of course, yes!”

“Well then, let’s drink a toast to Christmas and your impending freedom.” Klaus’s father lifted his glass, and Klaus did likewise.

“To Christmas!”

CHAPTER TWO



Sophia North was painting in the music room when her sister, Lou, found her. With its large windows overlooking the south side of the house, it had the best light of any room on the ground floor of Melfield Abbey.

“That’s very pretty,” Lou said, coming and looking over Sophia’s shoulder.

Sophia stood back and looked critically at her watercolor. It was of a city covered in snow. A gray trodden street with a few black smudges to represent carriages slashed across the painting, and she’d just begun the bright red brick of St. Basil’s Cathedral. It didn’t look too bad, considering how long it had been since they’d been in Moscow.

Her older sister tilted her head. “Do you miss it?”

“I miss Mama and Papa,” Sophia said honestly.

Lou enfolded Sophia into her arms, ignoring her painting smock and the brush still in her hand. “I miss them, too.”

As Sophia gave Lou a quick squeeze, she could feel the bump of her sister’s pregnancy press against her own abdomen. They moved apart.

“I came to ask about Christmas,” Lou said, changing the topic.

“What about it? I’ll be fine—”

“I don’t want you here alone,” Lou interrupted her.

“Well, I wasn’t invited to the Detmores’ Christmas party.”

“No, but you *were* invited to Nik and Hope’s.”

“If I’d known how sensitive Miss Detmore was, I would never have said anything about her flounces,” Sophia started, remembering the hurt when she’d received a letter from her friend, Miss Pentworth. The girl had gone on and on about all the gentlemen she was hoping to meet at Miss Detmore’s

house party. She'd been so certain that Sophia had been invited as well, but a quick check with the butler and Sophia's brother-in-law confirmed that there had been no invitation. Sophia still hadn't written back to her friend with that painful explanation.

"It doesn't matter, Sophia, truly," Lou said, rubbing Sophia's arm consolingly. "While you may not have been invited to Miss Detmore's, none of your friends can boast about being invited to a house party that will be attended by the Prince of Aachen-Düren. You will have so much to tell Miss Pentworth in your next letter to her."

"But I don't—"

"Sophia, I am not going to leave you here by yourself while Anthony and I go to Everston for Christmas. It's just not going to happen."

Sophia opened her mouth to argue with her sister, but Lou held up a hand to forestall her. "Why don't you want to go?"

"It's not that I don't want to—I like Prince Nik, Princess Isa, and everyone, but..."

"But?" Lou prompted when Sophia paused.

How did she explain to her sister that she felt so left out when she was among so many happy couples? Lou and Anthony had met when Lou had—at Sophia's insistence—pretended to be Isa when the princess had gone missing over two years ago. All they'd known at the time was that Princess Isa had gone to search for Prince Nik when he'd been declared dead. Princess Isa had known in her heart that her brother wasn't gone from this world. What she hadn't known was that he was in hiding because his cousin, Graf Adenheim, had tried to have him murdered. Adenheim had then come after both Princess Isa and Lou.

Princess Isa had met Lord Ranleigh, now her husband, at that same time. They now had a sweet baby boy, Ricky. And Prince Nik had met and fallen in love with Lady Hope Clemens while she'd helped him discover who was trying to kill him and his sister. Prince Nik had finally graduated from Oxford, and two years after their engagement, Prince Nik and Lady Hope were now, finally, going to marry. This house party was the English celebration of their upcoming nuptials, which were going to be held in Aachen-Düren early next spring.

Sophia sighed. "All I want, Lou, is to try to find a husband. I can't do that at Everston."

"Well, you can't do it sitting here all alone, either," her sister pointed out.

“No, but I was thinking that perhaps I could ask Miss Pentworth to apologize to Miss Detmore for me and perhaps ask if I might join—”

“You cannot go to that house party!”

“But—”

“Sophia, I won’t be able to be there to chaperone you. You would not be able to go even if you are invited.” Lou was beginning to sound exasperated, but Sophia felt no less frustrated.

“Hope and Nik are going to have a New Year’s Eve ball where the *haut ton* will be present, although I doubt Miss Detmore has been invited. In fact, I am certain a number of people will actually leave her party for the ball, for who would turn down an invitation from a prince—except a silly young lady named Sophia North?” Lou was really beginning to lose her patience as she raised her voice.

Sophia just kept her gaze down on her hands clasped in front of her. “I hadn’t heard about the ball,” she said quietly.

Lou let out a loud breath. “Yes, there is going to be a ball.” She was sounding calmer already. Thank goodness she didn’t maintain her anger for long.

“There will still be the three weeks prior,” Sophia said.

“Yes, and you will just have to do your best. My mother-in-law will be there, and... I do not know who else, aside from Nik, Hope, Isa, and Ranleigh. Presumably, there will be a number of members of Hope’s family in addition to her brother and mother. Perhaps there will be some nice, eligible gentlemen—a cousin of Hope’s.”

Sophia sighed. “I haven’t heard that she has any cousins. I do like Lady Melfield, though. A sweeter, kinder woman there never was.” Sophia remembered how the lady had come to Lou’s defense so often when they’d been living at Buckingham Palace, and it had been her who’d convinced Anthony to look beyond his immediate hurt at having been lied to and think only of how he truly felt about Lou. Without her, Lou and Anthony would never have married.

“Well, we will find out who will be there, won’t we?” Lou said with meaning.

Sophia raised her gaze to meet her sister’s eyes. “I don’t have a choice in the matter, do I?”

“No, you do not.”

“And you’re sure you should go in your condition?” Sophia asked,

making one last attempt to get out of attending the house party.

Lou laughed; it was so obvious what Sophia was doing. “Yes, I’m only five months along. It’s perfectly safe for me to travel. And I’m looking forward to speaking with Isa about... well, everything involved in having a baby, and seeing her little Ricky who we haven’t even met yet.”

Sophia nodded. “Maybe he can be my dinner partner,” she said with a smile.

Her sister chuckled. “I think he’s still a little young for that. He’s only fourteen months old.”

CHAPTER THREE



Klaus and his parents were greeted by the Earl of Everston and his mother. Their home was an impressively large manor set near a home wood on one side, extending—Klaus didn't know how far—to the other with fields and fields now, of course, covered in snow.

“Welcome,” Lord Everston said, bowing to Klaus's parents as they descended from the traveling coach they had hired to take them from Dover across the width of Britain and quite a distance north.

“Markgraf, Markgräfin, it is so wonderful that you have been able to join us,” Lady Everston said. “It has been too long since we've seen each other.” She curtsied slightly, smiling at them both.

Klaus stepped down from the coach and noticed the lady's smile falter just a touch. “And Graf Adenheim, how lovely,” she said with a great deal less enthusiasm.

“It is an honor to have been invited, my lady, but I am no longer Graf Adenheim. I am merely Lord Klaus, I suppose, in the English tradition.” He looked to his parents for confirmation. His mother nodded, and his father gave him a slight shrug.

“Oh, er, of course. Well, it is much too cold to be standing out here. Please, do come in,” the lady said and ushered them into the grand foyer of her home. He stepped into the rotunda with pale-blue and white marble floors. The silk flowers on the central wooden table matched the colors but were accented with sprigs of seasonal greenery complete with bright red berries. A grand staircase drew the eye to one side with its dark wood balustrade and a blue carpet running up to soften one's steps.

Klaus wondered why no one saw fit to inform their host and hostess that

he had been relieved of his title since the events from over two years ago. It was going to be a bit awkward if he was going to have to keep telling people as he met them about his new title—or lack thereof. On the other hand, he supposed this entire house party was going to be awkward. He hadn't seen his cousins or his uncle since he'd been confined to his father's estate.

His musings were interrupted by the warm greeting his parents were receiving from Nik and his intended, Lady Hope Clemens. Oh, indeed, this was going to be very, very awkward. Not only had Klaus tried to have Nik killed those many years ago, but he'd actually courted Lady Hope and thought they had an understanding of one another. He only learned later that she was only pretending to be interested in him to help Nik figure out who was attempting to murder him.

Klaus had fallen right into her web, and she had extracted the information from him with her venomous charm. It still embarrassed him to think how easily he'd fallen for her beautiful smile and expressive eyes.

"Well, Klaus," his cousin said, turning to him. Nik put out a hand and Klaus only hesitated for the briefest of moments before he took it, giving Nik a slight bow at the same time. "Welcome. I'm happy you could make it."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate the invitation," Klaus said, giving a little chuckle at his own joke. He turned and bowed to his cousin's fiancée, noticing that she did not put out a hand for him to kiss. "Lady Hope, it is a delight to see you."

"Lord Aden- er, Klaus. Welcome." She nodded to him, not even gracing him with a curtsy. Well, he supposed he didn't deserve the respect, but it stung a touch, nonetheless.

"Yes, I suppose it might take a little getting used to. On the other hand, you did call me by my given name for a short time, at least," he said, giving her a polite smile.

"Quite a long time ago," she agreed.

"Yes. I suppose it would be better not to recall those days after all," he said.

"I think we will be leaving the past behind us," Nik said.

"I am going up to refresh myself," Klaus's mother said, cutting into their conversation. "Klaus, would you care to come up as well and see where your room will be?"

"Er, of course, Mother. It is an excellent idea. If you will excuse me." He bowed to Lady Hope and his cousin and followed his mother up the stairs as

she walked in the footsteps of the housekeeper.

When they reached the top of the stairs, she paused so they could walk side by side. “I think it will only be awkward the first time you meet everyone. We will all be able to relax after that, I’m sure.”

Klaus could only sigh. “I do hope you’re right.”

“Well, it can’t continue to be awkward for the entire three weeks, I’m certain.” She gave him a reassuring smile before running a loving hand down his arm.

He was shown to his room, which looked out onto the back of the house. From his window, he could see there were lovely gardens behind the house. The flower beds were all covered with snow, but the paths had been smoothed over so one could walk there without difficulty.

After being cooped up in a traveling coach and a ship for nearly three weeks, Klaus was more than eager to go outside and get some exercise. His trunk had already been brought up, so he rummaged through it to find a pair of buff breeches and a blue coat. He would have to make use of one of the Everstons’ footmen to act as his valet later, but that was all right. He was perfectly capable of dressing himself for now. He just wanted to get out of his traveling clothes and go for a good brisk walk.



Klaus stepped out into the frigid December air, paused, and took in a deep breath. It felt good. This was the air of freedom. This was the air of possibilities.

He jogged down the steps of the balcony and onto the garden path. He was right in the center of the garden, so it didn’t matter which direction he turned. Randomly, he turned left and took off, walking at a brisk pace. Goodness, but it felt good to be somewhere other than Kottenfurst! After two years, he was sick of the place. Well, he would most definitely be on his best behavior here. He had to convince his uncle to release him from his imprisonment before these three weeks were up.

As he walked, he was surprised to see a figure ahead of him. There was a lady out enjoying the garden as well this afternoon. All he could see from behind was that she seemed to be slender and not very tall. She had on a felt hat that perfectly matched her bright red woolen cape. She wasn’t walking

very quickly, so it didn't take him long to catch up to her.

Not wanting to startle her, he called out from behind, "Good afternoon."

The woman turned, and Klaus could see that she was a young woman and quite beautiful. She had delicate features with rounded cheeks and large eyes. She smiled at him as he came forward.

"Another intrepid adventurer," she said with a smile.

He laughed. "You do not mind the cold?"

"Not at all. I quite like it. What about you?"

"I can't say that I like it, but after being cooped up in a traveling carriage for weeks, I am more than happy to brave the plummeting temperatures."

"Ah, you've just arrived then. For the house party?"

"Indeed. And you?"

"We arrived late last night. I believe we were the first ones here, aside from the Prince and Lady Hope, of course."

Klaus nodded. "This is rather awkward, but as there is no one to introduce us, would you be scandalized if I introduced myself?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Miss Sophia North," she said with a little curtsy.

"Ah, Lady Melfield's sister. I am Lord Klaus."

Her smile faltered. "Lord Klaus? Are you a relation of Prince Nik?"

"His cousin. I used to be Graf Adenheim, but, well—" He gave a little shrug.

"*You* are Lord Adenheim?" she practically growled. "You... you... ugh!" She snapped her mouth shut and strode off past him so fast her cape whipped across his legs.

Klaus could do nothing but stand there and watch the infuriated young woman storm off.

Well, so much for a pleasant walk in the gardens, he thought. All of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than a strong drink, preferably alone in his room. As he made his way there, he wondered if he might be excused from dinner that evening. It might be best if he were to take it—and, in fact, all his meals—alone in his room.

CHAPTER FOUR



“You would not believe who I just met!” Sophia said, barging into Lou’s bedchamber.

Her sister and brother-in-law were standing by the fireplace looking very odd. Anthony had spun around to face the fire the moment Sophia had walked in and was now running his hand through his hair, like he always did when he was thinking about something.

“Sophia! You must knock before you enter a room!” he said, not even turning around to speak to her.

“I’m sorry, but do you know who is here?” Sophia said, coming over to the fire to warm her hands.

“You are shaking! You must be frozen. Why on earth did you go for a walk in this weather?” Lou said.

Anthony turned and walked toward the window, allowing her access to the warmth of the fire.

“It is not because of the cold that I’m shaking,” Sophia told Lou. “I just met Lord Adenheim, although he is calling himself Lord Klaus now because he has lost his title. But Adenheim! The man who tried to kill you!”

“Yes, I know who Adenheim is,” Lou said, calmly talking Sophia’s hands in her own very warm ones.

Anthony came back toward the fire. “You can’t be surprised that Adenheim, or Lord Klaus, I suppose, is here. He is Nik’s first cousin.”

“Yes, but he tried to kill Prince Nik! And Princess Isa! And Lou!” Sophia nearly shouted.

“Please, keep your voice down, Sophia!” her sister scolded her.

“I’m sorry,” Sophia said, lowering her voice. “I’m just terribly upset—not

just at meeting him, but that he is here.”

“I can see that,” her sister said. She gave Sophia’s hands a little squeeze. “But you still must learn to control your emotions.”

“Oh, please do not tell me it is unladylike to—”

“I would not tell you that. I don’t know whether it is or not, but I do know that shouting isn’t going to change anything. Lord Klaus is here, which means that either Nik or his father wanted him here.”

“Which means that you must be civil to him,” Anthony said, finishing what Lou was going to say.

“Yes,” Lou agreed.

“But he tried to—” Sophia began again.

“He did not, in fact, attempt to kill your sister,” Anthony pointed out, putting a hand on Lou’s shoulder. “He tried to scare her and make it look as if he were trying to kill her, but he never actually harmed her.”

“What about the kidnapping? Is that not harming her?” Sophia asked, working very, very hard at keeping her voice down when really she wanted to scream out in anger and frustration.

“I wasn’t harmed by that, only frightened because I didn’t know where I was being taken,” Lou said.

“I can’t believe you are defending him!” Sophia said, beginning to feel very exasperated.

“I’m not. He did some very bad things, but that was over two years ago, and he has been imprisoned since then,” Sophia’s sister said.

“Has he?” Sophia asked. She’d never heard what had happened to Lord Adenheim after the whole ordeal. She knew he’d been shot by Prince Nik, but that was all she’d heard.

“Yes. And clearly, he was stripped of his title,” Lou said.

“Probably lost the land as well,” Anthony pointed out.

Sophia sighed heavily. “And now he is here.”

“To help celebrate his cousin’s wedding, just like the rest of us,” Lou said, giving her a little smile. She leaned into Anthony, who wrapped his arms around her.

“I wonder who else will be here,” Sophia said, voicing her thoughts.

“Lady Everston told me it would only be the royal family—obviously, including the Kottenfursts. The ball will be for the broader society,” her sister told her.

Sophia nodded. She had calmed down.

“Now, do you think we could have our privacy?” Anthony asked only a little testily.

“Oh! Yes, of course. I’m sorry.” Sophia nodded to them both and left the room. She could hear her sister giggling as she pulled the door closed.

It was so awkward living with her sister and her husband. They acted like they hadn’t been married for two weeks, let alone two years. It was extremely disconcerting. It was more than clear they wanted to be left alone to do whatever it was married couples do, but Sophia had had to share the news of Lord Klaus’s presence.

She’d hoped that being here would have tamed her sister and Anthony’s need to be inside each other’s pockets—thank goodness Melfield Abbey was a large house so she could escape their near constant displays of affection. Everston Hall was as well, but it was very soon to be filled with people. Well, it was a good thing she liked the outdoors and didn’t mind the cold.



The following afternoon, Sophia was sitting in the drawing room, nibbling from a cold platter of meats and cheeses with a few of the other ladies.

“I can’t tell you how lovely it is to be back in England,” Lady Kottenfurst was saying to Lady Everston.

“Do you have a great many activities planned for us?” Dowager Lady Melfield asked their hostess.

“Actually, at Nik’s request, we’ve left the schedule open with only a few events planned—aside from the ball, of course,” Lady Everston answered while offering the plate of cheese to Lady Melfield.

The lady helped herself to more. “Really? Why do you think he asked for there to be fewer activities?”

“I believe he simply wants there to be more open, free time for family members to catch up with one another. It has been so very long since they’ve seen each other,” Lady Hope answered for her mother.

“Indeed, it has,” Lady Kottenfurst agreed. “On the other hand, sometimes it’s less stressful to chat with others when your hands are busy, or you are out for a walk or a ride.”

“That’s exactly what I thought as well!” Lady Melfield agreed.

The sound of carriage wheels crunching through the snow stopped Lady

Everston from whatever she was about to say. Lady Hope jumped to her feet to peer out the window.

“It must be Isa and Sam,” she said, turning back around and heading for the door.

Everyone followed her out and down to the entry hall, where the door was thrown open to welcome the Ranleighs. Sophia noticed Lady Everston sent a footman toward the back of the house, presumably to inform the gentlemen, who must have either been in the game room or Lord Everston’s library, of their arrival.

Sophia crossed her arms over each other and wished she had a shawl with her. She remembered she’d left her coat, boots, and other outerwear near the back door in anticipation of going for a walk a little later. She wondered if she could—

“Come in! Come in out of the cold!” Lord Everston’s voice called out, cutting into her thoughts, as he strode through the hall and out the door to greet the newcomers.

Princess Isa was ushered in, holding little Ricky in her arms, followed by Lord Ranleigh. There were hugs and coos for the baby all around.

Sophia held back at first but was so entranced by the wide-eyed little boy in the princess’s arms, she couldn’t resist. “Princess Isa!” she said, moving forward the moment Lady Hope shifted a little to one side.

“Sophia!” Princess Isa gave her a one-arm hug.

“And you must be Ricky. My, what a big boy you are,” Sophia cooed at the terrified looking child. His enormous blue eyes were darting this way and that at all the people surrounding them. But he was the most adorable little thing, with his chubby face and fine blond hair standing straight up in places after his mother had pulled off his hat. Sophia had the hardest time keeping her hands from pinching those sweet cheeks.

“Oh!” Lady Everston said loudly just behind Sophia. “Everyone, everyone, please,” she called out. “I just received word that His Majesty’s coach will be here in just a few minutes.” She turned to a footman. “Gather the staff. I want everyone lined up outside to greet His Majesty.” The man nodded and ran off to do her bidding.

Princess Isa just laughed. “Papa is going to get quite a welcome.” She turned to the baby. “*Opa wird bald hier sein. Oh, er wird dich einfach lieben!*”

Sophia laughed. “How could a grandfather not love his only grandson?”

“He told me so many times in his last letter how much he is looking forward to meeting Ricky,” Princess Isa told her with a brilliant smile.

CHAPTER FIVE



Moments later, the door was thrown open once more, revealing the entire staff lined up on the front steps extending out to the drive—they must have come out through a servants' entrance—and four large coaches coming down the drive. Three headed toward the stable, and one peeled off toward the door.

Everyone moved outside to join the staff in welcoming the Prince. Sophia stood on her tiptoes in order to see over Princess Isa's head. Luckily, she wasn't very tall, but Sophia wasn't either. She was excited. She'd heard so much about the Prince, but she had never met him before.

The man who stepped out of the coach as soon as the steps were let down looked like an older version of Prince Nik. He was slender and handsome with the same piercing blue eyes as his children. All the servants dipped into a low curtsy or bow, and then everyone standing behind them did as well.

"Welcome, Your Majesty, to our humble home," Lady Everston gushed.

"Thank you, thank you," the Prince said, turning a beaming smile on their hostess. "It is so wonderful to be here." He turned to Lord Everston and shook his hand. "My lord, thank you so much for hosting this wonderful gathering."

"It is my honor, Your Majesty," Lord Everston said. "Please come in, come in."

They all moved back inside, where it was warmer. And thank goodness, the foyer was a large one.

"Ah, and there he is! My grandson," the Prince said, putting out his arms toward Princess Isa and the baby. Little Ricky didn't look entirely convinced that he wanted to leave his mother's arms, but the Prince just stopped and

said, *“Fürchte dich nicht, Kleiner. Ich bin dein Opa.”*

It must have been the familiar language, the same one his mother used when she spoke to him, that changed the baby’s mind, for he reached toward his grandfather. Everyone let out a laugh of relief and happiness as the baby went to the Prince.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sophia saw Lord Klaus slip down the stairs. He’d paused halfway to watch the touching scene. Sophia was certain he’d come to greet his uncle, and she wanted no part of Lord Klaus’s presence. She turned and left the scene as quietly and unobtrusively as she could, heading toward the back door. She would greet the Prince properly later.



Isa’s arrival with her son caused the greatest commotion with everyone cooing over the baby. Honestly, Klaus had never seen so many adults acting like they’d never seen a baby before.

He paused, making eye contact with his uncle. Klaus had planned on greeting him warmly and thanking him for allowing him to attend, but the moment the Prince caught sight of Klaus, his smile disappeared immediately. His uncle’s lips pinched together in anger before he turned away, deliberately ignoring Klaus’s presence. Well, that was a clear enough indication of his feelings. Klaus supposed it had been Nik who’d insisted on Klaus being present at this gathering.

He slipped by, heading to the conservatory without anyone even noticing. It wasn’t difficult despite the crowded foyer.

With a sigh of relief, he closed the door behind him. It was only when he opened his eyes once again that he noticed Miss North glaring at him from the other side of the glass door leading out into the garden.

As soon as he saw her, she turned and started walking away. Despite not having an overcoat, he went after her.

“Miss North,” he called. “Miss North, you can’t simply ignore my presence here.”

She paused at that before turning around to face him. “Watch me,” was all she said, before spinning on her heel and continuing on.

Klaus didn’t know why he wanted so much to pursue her. He didn’t know what it was about this girl that intrigued him so. Why in the world did he feel

as if he owed her an explanation? If he owed one to anyone, it would be her sister, who he had terrorized.

He never meant to truly harm her either. Everything he had done to her was actually meant to help the girl. If someone was out to kill Prince Nikolas, they would go after the princess, too. If Lucinda North, now Lady Melfield, had been pretending to be Princess Louisa, then he had to pretend to try to kill her, too. It was all a game. A pretense.

He only wished he could explain that to her sister—of the beautiful face and expressive eyes, even if the only expression she showed him was one of anger and disgust.



Later that afternoon, Klaus's father found him reading in his room.

"Is this where you've been hiding since we arrived?" Markgraf Kottenfurst asked after Klaus bid him enter.

"I'm not hiding. I'm reading. And I have not only been here, but in the garden and the conservatory," Klaus told him.

His father raised an eyebrow. "Did you take your dinner in the garden or conservatory last night?"

Klaus frowned. "No, I had a tray here. I thought it would be more pleasant for everyone if I did so."

"Klaus," his father sighed, perching on the other chair in front of the fire. "It is not polite what you are doing."

"Really? I thought avoiding making others uncomfortable a most polite thing to do."

"I will not deny it. You will make some feel uncomfortable at first, but the only way for them to get beyond that is to see you and speak with you."

"Get used to me?" Klaus asked, fiddling with the pages of his book.

"Well, yes."

Klaus just shook his head and opened his book once again.

"Look, you will never impress your uncle or convince him to allow you your freedom if you hide away from everyone during the entire party."

"Do you really think he'll grant me my freedom? And if he does, will I actually be able to take advantage of it or will I just have to face this wherever I go—for the rest of my life? If that is what I can expect, then

maybe I'd be better off staying at Kottenfurst."

"No one ever said it was going to be easy, Klaus. You will have to pay for what you did—"

"For the rest of my life?"

"Perhaps for the rest of your life. Or perhaps for only a short time. It depends on how you conduct yourself. But I can tell you that hiding away isn't going to make anyone treat you any better. So, either come out of this room and be social or leave. Go back to Kottenfurst and be prepared to stay there for the rest of your life." His father got up and walked out of the room.

Klaus didn't want to stay at his father's estate for the rest of life. If he never saw the place again, he would be happy. But that didn't make going downstairs and being social any easier.

How did one sit and be pleasant with people you tried to have murdered only a few years ago?

CHAPTER SIX



Sophia waited until the last moment to join the others for drinks before dinner. Everyone had arrived today, so it was going to be a much larger group. It was rather a shame. Last night's dinner had been surprisingly pleasant.

Lord Everston, Lady Hope's brother and their host, was an extremely pleasant gentleman who told wonderful tales of his travels. He and Anthony had the greatest time trying to outdo each other with more and more outlandish stories. It had been great fun, and Prince Nik had joined in with some wild tales of his own from Aachen-Düren. Even Lord Kottenfurst had been prevailed upon to add one from his days in France. Never had Sophia laughed so much.

Sadly, tonight was going to be completely different with the arrival of Prince Heinrich, and Princess Isa and her family.

No, tonight was going to be a very, very different sort of evening all together, and not one Sophia was particularly looking forward to. She could only hope that Lord Klaus would once again choose *not* to join them.

"Ah, here she is," Sophia heard her sister say as soon as she entered the drawing room.

Lou was standing with Prince Heinrich, Prince Nik, and Anthony. Sophia joined them and then curtsied low to His Majesty and His Highness.

"Your sister was beginning to get worried," Anthony said, with a slightly admonishing tone despite the polite smile on his face.

"I do beg your pardon. My hair took longer than I expected," Sophia said, making up the excuse on the spot.

"Ah! And here, finally, is Klaus as well," His Majesty said loud enough

for the entire room to hear him.

Lord Klaus had, indeed, just walked into the room. He must have been right behind Sophia on the stairs.

He paused to bow to the room at large.

“I am so happy to see that you are feeling better, Nephew,” His Majesty said.

Lord Klaus looked surprised for a second, but then he nodded his head. “Yes, I am, Uncle. Thank you for your concern.” He walked over to join them. “I do hope you had a pleasant journey here?”

“As pleasant as it could be. I’ve had worse,” His Majesty said with a little chuckle.

Lord Klaus smiled politely. He then turned to Sophia. “Did you have a pleasant walk in the gardens this afternoon?”

She was a little taken aback that he mentioned it, but she nodded. “I did, thank you.” She had actually been watching Prince Nik to see what his reaction to his cousin’s appearance had been. He was clearly going to be an excellent politician because his expression told her absolutely nothing.

“Oh, did you go for a walk today? You should have told me. I would have gone with you. The doctor said I should get some light exercise every day,” Lou said.

“I will most definitely tell you the next time I do so. Lady Everston’s gardens are quite lovely, even in the snow,” Sophia said.

She wasn’t happy that Lord Klaus had told everyone he’d seen her. She hadn’t wanted Lou to know she was going outside for fear it would make Lou sad thinking of their parents. That was why Sophia did it—the cold reminded her of when they’d lived in Berlin and, later, Moscow. It reminded her of her parents and was, therefore, in a way, comforting.

“You are a hearty soul if you enjoy walking outside in this weather,” His Majesty commented.

Sophia shrugged and gave him a smile. “I suppose I am, then.” Why, she wondered, hadn’t Klaus continued to pretend to be unwell? It had been so much more pleasant when he wasn’t here. She still couldn’t believe he’d had the temerity to attend this house party at all.

“We were always encouraged to go outside for a walk when we were growing up, no matter where we were or what the weather. Rain, snow, or blazing sun,” Lou told the group.

“Well, then, you both must be quite hearty,” Prince Nik said.

“It gave us the opportunity to learn more about wherever we were living at the time. There is no better way of getting to know a city than to walk it,” Sophia pointed out.

“I couldn’t agree more.” His Majesty nodded.

“And when have you ever walked a city, Father?” Prince Nik asked, turning on Prince Heinrich with a laugh.

“Oh, well...” He bluffed and blustered for a moment, then leaned in toward Prince Nik, saying in a stage whisper, “I actually go for walks quite frequently, but I do so in... what is the word in English? *Verkleidet*?”

“In disguise,” Lord Klaus offered.

Lou gave a little laugh. “Oddly, the word incognito is the same in English and German.”

“Ah! I should have just used that instead,” His Majesty said, giving her a big smile.

Dinner was announced.

Sophia saw Lord Klaus turn toward her as if he were about to offer to escort her to the dining room, so she quickly turned in the opposite direction. “Your Majesty, would you be so kind as to walk with me?” she asked the older gentleman before Lord Klaus had a chance.

“I would be delighted, my dear.” The Prince took Sophia’s hand and placed it on his sleeve. “I’ve heard you speak passable German,” he said, leaning down to speak to her as they proceeded to the dining room.



That was very neatly done, Klaus thought to himself as he started to follow his uncle and Miss North out the door of the drawing room. She saw that he was about to ask to escort her and very cleverly got out of having to accept.

He paused to allow Isa and her husband to go ahead of him and noticed an older lady who he hadn’t seen before. She was unaccompanied, which was odd as well.

“Lord Klaus, have you met my mother, Lady Melfield?” Lord Melfield asked from behind him.

“No, I have not had the pleasure,” Klaus said, bowing to the older woman.

“It is very good to meet you,” she said nodding.

“Have you no one to escort you to the dining room, my lady?” Klaus asked, glancing around.

She just gave him a little smile. “I believe I was invited to make up the numbers. With your uncle being unaccompanied, there were one too many gentlemen.”

“Mother, you were not merely invited for that reason,” Lord Melfield said, chiding her.

“Oh, you know that I was, and it’s perfectly fine. I am enjoying the company excessively,” she said.

“Well, then, please allow me?” Klaus said, holding out his arm.

She nodded and placed a hand on top of it.

Klaus assisted the lady into a seat at the table and then took the one next to her since there didn’t seem to be anyone telling people where to sit. He also thought that perhaps she might be the friendliest face here. Certainly, she was the only one who hadn’t been directly affected by his machinations of a few years ago. Miss North hadn’t been either, but she clearly felt offended by his presence despite that.

The conversation flowed throughout dinner, in an informal way that would have been quite pleasant if Klaus had been included. No one, however, directed any conversation his way. In fact, he noticed that very few even looked at him.

At one point, Lord Ranleigh was speaking about some horses he was thinking of purchasing. Klaus thought he might have something to add, but when he tried to catch the gentleman’s eye, even to do something so innocuous as agree with him, he noticed the man deliberately slid his gaze straight past him. Klaus closed his mouth again and decided to keep his comments to himself.

“I feel that it will get easier,” Lady Melfield said softly.

He turned toward her. “I beg your pardon?”

She sighed and put her fork down to reach for her wine glass. “I believe the others will get used to your presence and it will get easier. Everyone is just a little on edge, that’s all. Er, sensitive to your presence,” she added.

Klaus nodded. “I appreciate your thoughts on the matter, but I don’t know that it *will* get easier. It’s why I didn’t even come down for dinner last night. My father insisted that I join this evening, however.”

“And he was absolutely correct. As I said, it will take a little time, but they’ll get used to your presence,” she said after taking a sip of her wine.

“I almost wonder if I should just bring the subject out into the open so that it can be spoken of and then, hopefully, forgotten,” he commented.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Much better to just let that lie right where it is. Just be a little patient. Approach people cautiously but do approach them. Speak with your cousins and Lou and show their spouses that you mean no harm. They will get past it. You’ll see.”

“You are extremely kind, ma’am. And may I add, wise?”

She gave his hand, which was sitting on the table, a little pat. “I’m old and filled with useful experiences.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



The following morning, Sophia was happily sitting in the drawing room with her sister, Lady Everston, Lady Hope, and Lady Melfield. They'd been discussing the events of the last Season and marriage prospects for Sophia when Princess Isa walked into the room.

"Oh, Isa," Lou said, "I'm so happy to see you. I was going to seek you out if you hadn't joined us."

"Oh, really?" Princess Isa said, sitting down and helping herself to the tea set out in front of them.

"Yes, I was wondering if I might quiz you on having a baby?"

Sophia started. Her sister was going to ask her about childbirth? She really did not want to hear this! Sophia stood. "In that case, I think I'll go elsewhere."

Lady Hope jumped to her feet as well. "I think I'll go with you."

Lou laughed at them. "Why? You might learn something, and someday you both will be in this same position."

"Yes, but not anytime soon," Sophia pointed out.

"Possibly quite soon for you, Hope," her mother said with a happy smile.

Lady Hope looked a little terrified.

"I believe some of the men are preparing to go out for a ride," Princess Isa said. "I would have joined them, but Ricky is going to be finished with his breakfast soon, and I wanted to spend some time with him."

"A ride?" Sophia asked. "Perfect. I'll join them."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Lady Hope agreed. "I'll meet you downstairs in fifteen minutes?" she asked Sophia.

Sophia nodded, and they both fled from the room before anyone else

could say anything. She changed into her riding habit in the fastest time ever and was just in time to join the men as they were heading out the door. “Do you mind if we join you?” she asked Lord Everston just as Lady Hope was coming down the stairs.

“No, not at all!” he said with a smile.

“Are you sure, Sophia? This is probably going to be a long ride,” Anthony said, looking at her dubiously.

“Yes, absolutely,” she said.

Her brother-in-law turned to their host. “You wouldn’t have a very gentle mount for her, would you? She’s just learned to ride not too long ago.”

“Of course! We’ll put you on Sweetling,” Lord Everston said with a smile.

“Thank you. It wasn’t so very recently. I’ve been riding since last summer,” she told him as they followed the others out to the stable.

“She finally gave in and asked to learn after her second Season,” Anthony told Lord Everston with a little chuckle. “After realizing that she was missing out on opportunities to meet gentlemen.”

“And be social with others,” Sophia added, giving Anthony a glare. He really had no right to tell others about her shortcomings. Maybe this was why she had received so few offers of marriage last Season. Her brother-in-law was going behind her back telling the other gentlemen all her failings. She huffed and fell back to walk with Lady Hope.

The mare she was assisted onto was a beautiful, dappled white horse. She was a little taller than Sophia was used to, making the ground look so very far away.

“All right, Sophia?” Anthony asked, walking up on the roan gelding he’d been given to ride.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Perfectly fine.” She gave him a smile to prove that all was well, but she could feel her heart beginning to pound in her chest. She could do this. Sweetling was named for her sweet, gentle way. She would be fine.

“She really is very gentle,” Lady Hope said, coming out on her own roan.

Just as they were about to ride out, Lord Klaus joined them, already mounted. “Mind if I join in?” he asked.

“No! Not at all,” Lord Everston said brightly—perhaps with a touch too much enthusiasm.

Sophia wasn’t sure how Lord Klaus had slipped past her and the others to

mount his horse, but here he was all set to go. She hoped Anthony or Lady Hope would ride beside her.

The estate was a large one, and they rode all the way to the very end of the property, past field after field. The tops of plants stuck up through the meager snow covering the ground, making it all look so sad.

“Do you enjoy the country or London more, Lady Hope,” Sophia asked as they rode along.

“Oh, definitely London,” the young lady said, then added with a smile, “But you must call me Hope!”

Sophia returned her smile and nodded. “Then you will call me Sophia,” she answered.

“It’s so wonderful how close Nik, Isa, and Lou have become—especially Isa and Lou,” Hope commented.

“It is! I was worried Princess Isa would be angry at Lou for pretending to be her, but she was actually happy.” Sophia laughed. “She once told Lou that she could step in for her at official events anytime she wanted.”

Hope laughed. “I don’t doubt that. I don’t think Isa particularly likes being a princess.”

“No, but now she has the opportunity to live a normal life with Lord Ranleigh,” Sophia said. She was so happy for her friends.

“Yes. And you and your sister have gained quite a family,” Hope said.

“We are extremely lucky!”

Their conversation fell silent as the men continued their discussion on the planting of wheat, barley, and other crops. Apparently, Lord Klaus had said something that had gotten the other men all excited, but Sophia hadn’t been paying attention.

“That’s a fascinating idea, Lord Klaus,” Lord Ranleigh was saying when Sophia returned her attention to the conversation.

“How did you come up with the idea?” Lord Melfield asked.

Lord Klaus just laughed. “Just observing the farmers at Kottenfurst and speaking with them. And, I have to admit, I spent quite a bit of time with them out in the fields helping to bring in the yield.” He gave a little shrug. “What else was I to do when I was confined to the estate. I helped.”

“But not only with the management of the estate, but with the actual farming as well?” Lord Everston asked.

“Yes, both. My father has never taken a very active role in the management of his estate—too busy doing other things,” Lord Klaus said,

keeping his gaze straight ahead on the fields they were approaching.

Lord Everston gave a little chuckle. "I am fully aware of that."

Lord Klaus turned and looked curiously at their host. "Are you?"

The man just smiled and turned back toward the fields himself.

"So, since I was at Kottenfurst and could go nowhere else, I worked," Lord Klaus finished.

"Well, it sounds as if you've spent your time well," Lord Melfield observed.

Sophia supposed it was good that the men were all getting along with Lord Klaus, but she still hadn't forgiven him for all he'd done to her sister, Prince Nik, Hope, and Princess Isa. She supposed she shouldn't hold a grudge, but that was just the way she was—stubborn.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Klaus entered the drawing room that evening prepared for another awkward meal. It had taken a great deal of willpower just to get himself out of his room and downstairs. Being a pariah was not his most favorite thing.

He was shocked, therefore, when moments after he'd walked in, Ranleigh was by his side.

"Ah, just the man I wanted to see," his lordship said.

Klaus tried his best to keep the surprise off his face. "Good evening," Klaus said, schooling his expression into a pleasant one.

Ranleigh gave a little chuckle. "Good evening. Do, please, excuse my horrid manners."

Klaus smiled. "Not at all. It's not as if we haven't seen each other recently."

Ranleigh laughed again. "Come and get a drink before I interrogate you."

Klaus had just been about to set off to do just that, but Ranleigh's words stopped him cold. "Interrogate me?" Was he going to actually ask him about why he'd tried to kill his cousins? How he'd done it? How long he'd been planning his scheme? He'd been asked those questions countless times in the last two years, and he'd been planning on how he'd evade them again ever since he learned he'd been invited to this gathering.

"Yes," Ranleigh said, not losing the smile from his face. "You are clearly much more knowledgeable about estate management than I am, and I've been attempting to make sense of it for over three years now. Somehow, there's something that I'm just not getting, which is extremely frustrating because I've always considered myself to be a reasonably intelligent person."

Klaus had felt his heart rate calm through Ranleigh's explanation. Estate management. That he could handle with ease. Answering questions about what happened years ago in a room containing the victims of his schemes, not so much. Klaus returned the man's smile. "Of course. I would be happy to. I do need a drink, however, and..." he stole a glance around the room. "Is my uncle not here?"

"No, we received word that he might be late in joining us," Lord Everston said, coming up to him as well.

"Really?" Klaus asked.

"He's working. Apparently, he's been at it all day receiving dispatches and sending off runners back to Aachen-Düren. It's a good thing he brought his own people. I think my mother would have had some difficulties if he'd sent off her own footmen to the Continent, or even Dover," Everston said with a little laugh.

"Goodness, I wonder if there is something serious happening," Klaus said, frowning.

"Oh no, apparently, this is a normal day for him." Everston gave a little shrug.

"I suppose the ruler of a country can't easily take time off," Ranleigh said.

"Yes, I guess you're right," Klaus agreed. He was offered a drink from a tray containing a variety of drinks. He took a moment to look around the room. Somehow his eyes found Miss North right away. She was standing with Lady Hope, Nik, and Isa. They were all laughing about something. She must have felt his stare because she turned and caught his gaze. Immediately, the smile slipped from her lips and anger sparked in her beautiful hazel eyes. She quickly turned back toward the others, pulling her lips back up into a smile, but he could tell it was forced.

"That's the finest whiskey I've ever tasted," Ranleigh said, pulling Klaus's attention back and nodding toward the small glass filled with an amber liquid.

"Now that sounds intriguing," Klaus said with a smile, and took the glass.

He was grateful for the libation as Ranleigh proceeded to do exactly as he'd threatened—interrogate him thoroughly on estate management. Even Everston lost interest after ten minutes and wandered away saying, "You are a patient man, Lord Klaus."

He and Ranleigh laughed as their host left them to seek out more

interesting conversation.

A few minutes later dinner was announced.

“We will have to continue this conversation later,” Ranleigh said with a sigh.

“How about tomorrow?” Klaus offered.

“Yes, that would be perfect. I believe we are going to be forced outdoors to collect greenery for Christmas, but before that, perhaps? In the morning?” Ranleigh asked eagerly.

“After breakfast,” Klaus agreed.

Isa was standing nearby, clearly waiting for her husband to escort her into dinner. Klaus gave her a smile, and she had the grace to at least acknowledge it before turning away.

“Lord Klaus,” the younger Lady Melfield said, wandering up to him.

“Good evening, my lady. Is your husband not escorting you into dinner?” he asked, looking about for the gentleman.

“No, he is escorting his mother this evening.”

“Oh, well then, would you do me the honor?” he asked, holding out his arm.

“Thank you. I’m actually glad to have the opportunity to speak with you,” she said, surprising him.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I wanted to apologize for my sister’s rude behavior to you the other day—and, well, quite possibly yesterday and today as well.”

He gave a little smile at the accuracy of her words.

“She is extremely sensitive and, well, I believe she felt as if it were entirely her fault that I was caught in the position I was in—standing in for the princess,” the lady explained.

“Why would she feel that way?” Klaus asked. He had no idea how Lady Melfield had even been found to take Isa’s place.

“Well, because it was she who encouraged me to do it, but truly, I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t wanted to. And it did all work out in the end. Although I can’t say I was very happy at the time, in hindsight, I wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

“Well, you met Lord Melfield at that time,” Klaus pointed out.

“I did, and I most certainly wouldn’t have otherwise,” she agreed, as he sat her at the table. “And, although I could have done without the threats to my life, I understand that you were doing it just to help me maintain my

charade.”

He stopped as he was halfway seated in his own chair and then just dropped the rest of the way, staring at her. “Do you know, you are the first person who understands why I targeted you?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I think it was perfectly obvious. You never did anything that would actually harm me significantly, and even when I was poisoned, the doctor was right there to attend me,” she observed.

“Yes! Thank you. I was most careful to ensure you would never actually be hurt.”

“I appreciate that,” she agreed. “I do wish you had been as kind to Isa and Nik, but then I suppose that wouldn’t have achieved your own objective.”

“Er, yes, well... I have seen the error in my—”

“I do beg your pardon,” Prince Heinrich said, joining them and taking the last seat available at the table to the right of Lady Everston. “Please forgive me. A prince’s work is never done,” he said with a chuckle, looking around the table.

“We’re just happy you could join us,” Lord Everston said from the other end.

“Is there anything in particular that you are working on, Uncle?” Klaus asked.

“No, no. Just the usual, politics and so on,” the Prince said with a negligent wave of his hand. “I do not want to bore you with the details, and especially not when we have so many lovely ladies at table. Please, tell me what you all have been up to today? I am certain it was so much more interesting than what I have been doing.”

CHAPTER NINE



Klaus was sitting in a smaller drawing room with Ranleigh the following day when Everston came in.

“Ah, Everston, you’ve come to learn more about estate management too?” Ranleigh said with a bright smile. “Not that you need it, mind,” he amended quickly.

Everston laughed. “I don’t need it because I’ve got a brilliant steward who handles that for me. I’m certain if I were left on my own I would be floundering worse than any child thrown into such a position. But no, I have been tasked with collecting you both. We are to gather greenery for Christmas upon my mother’s orders.”

“Oh, well, surely we aren’t needed,” Klaus said, giving their host a hopeful smile.

“Yes, there are many others who, I’m sure, are up for the task,” Ranleigh agreed.

“I’m afraid my mother insisted. She especially wants to see you be a bit more social, Lord Klaus. She is worried you’ve been too much of a recluse.”

“Well, I would think that I have every right to be, considering my circumstances,” Klaus mumbled as he picked up his coffee cup and took a sip.

“As one who was affected by your machinations, I think she’s right,” Ranleigh said, losing his smile. “We need to put that all behind us.”

Klaus looked at Ranleigh thoughtfully. “Do you think it’s truly possible?”

The man returned his look and sighed. “It’s not easy. I have to admit. I, frankly, was very scared and worried something might happen to Isa while we were traveling to find her brother, but we managed. We escaped the goons

sent after us and made it not only to Margate but then to London.”

“And let’s not forget that if Lord Klaus hadn’t done what he did, you would never have met the princess or had the opportunity to get to know her,” Everston added.

“Yes! That is very true.” His smile returned to his face. “I think we actually owe you a debt of gratitude. If you hadn’t tried to kill your cousins, I wouldn’t have met Isa, Lou wouldn’t have met Melfield, and Nik wouldn’t have met Lady Hope.”

Klaus could only smile and shake his head. “To be honest, it is my only consolation—the fact that my actions resulted in three very happy marriages.”

“They did. Now, come and shrug into your Christmas spirit and collect greenery before my mother becomes cross—and believe me, you don’t want to see that!” Everston said.

Klaus and Ranleigh both got up and followed Everston from the room. “And no need to go for your outerwear, it has all been brought down for you—that is how determined my mother is.”

They all laughed and joined the others in the entry hall. Everyone was clearly waiting on them.

“We apologize for our tardiness,” Ranleigh said, as he was helped into his overcoat by his valet.

“No worries,” Lady Everston said.

“We’re just happy you decided to join us,” Klaus’s mother said.

He looked at her and wasn’t certain he liked the gleam of excitement in her eyes. “Mother, you aren’t planning anything...” he started.

“What? Me? Why, Klaus, whatever could you mean?” she asked innocently, but the gleam in her eyes now spread to a pretty flush covering her cheeks.

“I know you. You are planning something, aren’t you?” he said. He then turned to the others who may not know of his mother’s antics and said, “You may not know it, but the honorable Markgräfin Kottenfurst is one for playing tricks and getting either herself or others into trouble—it’s how my parents got to know each other.”

“Ugh, Klaus!” his mother protested.

“It is true,” his father agreed. “We not only got to know each other, as Klaus said, it is one of the things that made me fall in love with her.” He put an arm around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“So, what is it, Mother? What are you planning?” Klaus asked, only a trifle embarrassed at his parents’ display of affection.

She glanced up at her husband. “Oh, nothing. It’s just that the last time we were at a Christmas house party, I distinctly remember your father climbing a tree in order to cut down some mistletoe for me. I’m just wondering if he’s still capable.” She batted her eyelashes at him.

Klaus’s father burst out laughing. “That, my love, is an excellent question. I think, however, I may leave such antics up to the younger gentlemen.”

“Oh, but it was so very—” she started.

“How about if we get started, and then we’ll see what we can convince our gentlemen to do to show off their manly prowess,” Lady Everston said, beginning to usher people out the door.

There was laughter all around as everyone headed out.

They all happily chatted as they tramped through the snow toward the wood in search of holly, fresh pine boughs, and, yes, even the elusive mistletoe that grew so high one needed to climb a tree to cut it down.

Klaus happened to be last in the group. He watched as various people broke off into groups of two, three, or even four in search of just the right greenery to bring inside. He was about to follow along with one such group when he noticed Miss North headed off by herself in a completely different direction. Not wanting her to get lost—not that he knew these woods any better than she, presumably—he followed her.

After a few minutes, she paused and turned back to see who was behind her. She scowled when she saw that it was him. Turning back around, she continued on, calling over her shoulder, “You do not need to follow me, Lord Klaus, I shall be fine on my own.”

“I’m certain you’re right, Miss North, however I feel it my duty as a gentleman to see that no harm befalls you,” he answered.

She gave a little huff of a laugh. “And where was your gentlemanly nature when you were trying to kill your cousins and harm my sister?”

“I never tried to harm your sister,” he answered.

“Yes, yes, so you claim.”

“It is but the truth.”

“And what of Princess Isa and Prince Nik?” she asked, spinning around and confronting him. “Are you now going to claim that you weren’t trying to harm them either?”

“Oh, no! Absolutely not. I most definitely was trying to kill them,” he answered honestly, looking her straight in the eye.

Her mouth dropped open a touch, and Klaus had the most ridiculous impulse to press his lips to hers. He shook that impulse away fast enough. Not only would such a kiss be unwelcome, but it would also probably earn him some well-deserved bodily harm. To keep himself from getting too close or, God forbid, touching this beautiful woman, he backed up a few steps and straight into a slender, young tree.

His hat fell off, and the tree shook as he hit it, so he quickly took a small step forward. A large clump of snow fell right on his head, dousing him with cold, wet snow.

Laughter exploded from Miss North. It was the most joyous sound Klaus thought he'd ever heard and almost worth the freezing water that was now soaking into his neckcloth. He could hardly believe it when he smiled in response to her laughter. He gave his head a shake to get the snow out of his hair.

Miss North gave a little screech as some of it must have hit her, for all of a sudden she was directly in front of him, reaching out toward him. His breath caught in his chest as she brushed the snow off his shoulders.

“Well, I suppose that will teach me,” he said, looking deeply into her beautiful eyes, which, at this moment, looked more green than brown.

She looked up at him, meeting his gaze. “It will teach you not to be so honest?”

“No, it will teach me not to think inappropriate thoughts about beautiful women. That was what had me retreating,” he admitted.

Her mouth dropped open again, and her cheeks flushed a deep pink. “Oh,” she breathed. She quickly took a step back from him.

He could only smile. “No worries, Miss North. With the ice-cold water that has somehow gotten underneath all my layers of clothing, I can assure you, all such thoughts have been replaced with a dire need to return to the house and get dry.” It wasn't entirely the truth, he admitted to himself. He still wanted to kiss this girl senseless, however he simply didn't want to do so just at this moment.

She gave a little chuckle before nodding. “Then, let us. I don't actually want you to catch a chill.”

“Although you contemplated it?”

She gave a little shrug before taking his arm and leading him back the

way they'd come.

CHAPTER TEN



They returned to the house in silence, both deep in their own thoughts. Lord Klaus's honesty had taken Sophia entirely by surprise. She hadn't expected for him to admit to having tried to kill his cousins, nor to speak about it so frankly. And the fact that he'd wanted to kiss her! The mere idea sent heat rushing through her. She put that down to fear he might actually do so.

What would she do if he did kiss her? Would she kiss him back?

She wanted to.

No! No, she did *not* want to. Yes, he was handsome. And he seemed to be kind—but how could she even think that when he'd tried to kill Princess Isa and Prince Nik?

Sophia had never felt more confused in her life. Her thoughts were a whirl of confusion as they entered the house.

Lord Klaus excused himself and went straight up to his room while Sophia wandered toward the back of the house, wondering if she wanted to go back out into the garden for a walk. The cold certainly made it easier to think and goodness knew she needed to be able to do some serious thinking just now.

"Ah, are you back already?" A man's voice stopped her, and she looked up to find Prince Heinrich smiling at her from the doorway to Lord Everston's study.

"Oh! Your Majesty," Sophia said, dipping into a low curtsy.

"Really, my dear, there is no need for that now," he said with a warm smile.

She returned it but then said, "Lord Klaus and I came back early. He got

doused with snow falling from a tree.”

“Snow fell on his head?” the Prince asked with a chuckle.

“Yes, poor thing. It somehow, apparently, seeped straight through his clothes. He was feeling cold, wet, and uncomfortable. He’s gone up to change.”

The Prince drew his eyebrows down over his light blue eyes. “It sounds as if you were alone with him when it happened?”

“Yes, actually. I had wandered off in a different direction from the others, and he’d followed to make sure I didn’t get lost,” she admitted.

“I see. I do not mean to alarm you, my dear, but I do not believe that was entirely safe. You should be more careful and stay close to the others when you go out.”

Sophia cocked her head at him. “What do you mean not safe?”

“Well, come now, Klaus did try to kill my Isa and Nik and did your own sister serious harm.”

“He didn’t actually hurt—”

“He may not have succeeded, but he most certainly did harm her.” The Prince shook his head sadly. “I should never have allowed Nik and Hope to convince me to allow him to come to this party. He should be—well, if I’d had my way he would have been hanged for what he did,” he said vehemently.

“You don’t mean that, sir!” Sophia protested.

He widened his eyes at her. “But of course, I do! He committed treason! He tried to kill his own cousins in order to take over the throne. Hanging was not good enough for him!” the man said with venom in his voice.

“But... but he’s your nephew,” Sophia protested. “And... and you are the Prince. You could have hanged him if you truly felt he deserved it.”

“I am ashamed that he is related to me,” the man said. “And I wanted to, truly I did want to see him hang, but my advisers strongly suggested that I allow him to live the rest of his days at his father’s estate. If I acted harshly, they thought it would cause more of a stir and make me look like a monster for having done such a thing to my own nephew. I think it made me look weak for allowing him to live.”

Sophia didn’t know what to say to this. She could completely understand the Prince’s anger with Lord Klaus, but that he still harbored such strong feelings even after two years was surprising.

“You stay away from him, Miss North. I am not certain he is right in his

head. He is a dangerous man,” the Prince said, wagging a finger at her. He turned and disappeared back into the study, closing the door softly behind him.

Sophia stood in the passageway, thinking about what the Prince had said, when she heard the sound of someone stomping their feet just ahead of her. A moment later, one of the maids rushed past, heading toward the back door, a pair of slippers and a shawl in her hands.

Someone must have returned. She went to see who it was and found Hope changing out of her boots and into her indoor shoes.

“Oh, Sophia! Have you returned already?” Hope asked, looking up from her task.

“Yes.” An idea struck Sophia, and she acted on it immediately, without thought. “Er, might I have a word with you, Hope?”

Her new friend looked at her curiously. “Of course! Is there something wrong?”

“No! No, not at all. I just, er, want your opinion on something.”

Hope nodded. “Why don’t we go to the drawing room? If you don’t mind, I’d like to stand in front of a warm fire for a little bit.”

“Shall I see to getting some hot tea for you, my lady?” her maid asked.

“Oh, yes! That would be lovely. Thank you, MacKenzie.” Hope gave her maid a little smile and then preceded Sophia back down the passageway toward the front of the house.

They went up to the drawing room where Hope immediately went to warm her hands by the fire. After a moment she said, “Now, what is it you would like to ask me about?”

“Lord Klaus,” Sophia said succinctly. She gave her an abbreviated version of what had happened, leaving out the part where he’d said he’d had inappropriate thoughts about her, but she included her conversation with the Prince. “What do you think? How do *you* feel about him?” she concluded.

Hope came over and sat on the sofa opposite the chair Sophia had taken. She sighed heavily. “To be completely honest with you...” she paused.

“Yes, please do,” Sophia encouraged.

Hope gave a little nod. “I don’t actually believe that Lord Klaus would harm you. Two years ago, he was out for one thing and one thing only—power. He said as much to me at the time.”

Sophia nodded.

“Now, that being said, despite the fact that Nik insisted on inviting him, I

have still not been able to truly forgive him for what he did.”

“I understand that,” Sophia said, quickly. “He tied you and Prince Nik up and threatened your lives!”

“He did. He, himself, held a gun to the man I love and threatened to kill him right in front of my eyes if I didn’t cooperate.”

“That must have been terrifying,” Sophia whispered, her voice suddenly choked with emotion.

“It was,” Hope agreed. She turned her head away and stared at the fire for a minute. Sophia imagined that Hope must be having some very strong emotions herself just now.

“But you allowed him to come,” Sophia pointed out.

“Only because Nik insisted.”

“Why did he?”

Hope shrugged. “I think he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life on bad terms with his cousin. The strength of family ties.”

“Even after Lord Klaus—”

“Yes. Despite that.” Hope gave Sophia a tremulous smile. “It’s one reason why I love Nik so much. You never could meet a more loyal, good-hearted man.”

Sophia nodded. “I can only hope I can find someone half that good.”

“I hope so, too. You deserve all the happiness.”

“And I will stay away from horrid Lord Klaus,” Sophia added.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Klaus had been acutely aware of Sophia the previous evening at dinner—acutely aware that she was avoiding him. On the one hand, he could hardly blame her after their little interlude in the forest. He had said some rather forward and startling things to an innocent young lady. On the other, she hadn't seemed to be quite so averse to him as they'd walked back to the house together. No, he had a feeling something had happened after that. Someone had said something against him.

He wondered if her sister had insisted that she stay away from him. He wouldn't have thought it of Lady Melfield. She seemed to be indifferent toward him—he couldn't say that she actually liked him, but indifferent was probably the closest he'd come to that. Perhaps tolerant would be a better word? No matter what you called it, he didn't think she would tell her sister to stay away from him, but he could be wrong because staying away from him was precisely what Miss North was doing.

All this was going through his mind as he sat idly watching his family all around him as they had tea together. After arriving back from Christmas services at church, everyone had gathered in the drawing room for refreshments.

His eye was caught by his little cousin, Ricky, Isa's baby. The tyke had wriggled out of his mother's lap and was crawling about, unwatched by any adult that Klaus could see. The child was curious, and as Klaus watched him pull himself to standing using the leg of the table where the tea things were set out, he wondered if the child wasn't advanced for his age. Were babies supposed to be attempting to walk already at merely fourteen months of age?

The child reached up and grabbed on to the hanging edge of the white

tablecloth and began to pull. As a teacup and saucer were pulled closer to the edge of the table directly above the child's head, Klaus jumped to his feet and, in one swoop, lifted the child away from the table. A second later, he heard the teacup and saucer fall and shatter.

The baby in his hands giggled in delight as Klaus swung him away from danger.

"Ah, you like that, do you?" Klaus said to the baby in German. "You like to fly? Are you a little bird?" He swooped the baby up again over his head, and Ricky, once again, screamed happily.

Out of the corner of his eye, Klaus could see the Dowager Lady Melfield immediately rush to the table to move items closer to the center. While she did so, Klaus's mother tucked the tablecloth up and out of the way of grasping little hands.

"My God! What a good thing it was that Klaus was watching Ricky," Klaus's uncle said.

"Yes, the child could have been hurt," his father agreed.

The two men stood nearby watching him play with the baby while things were tidied up and made safe.

Klaus felt a presence on his other side. He turned and saw Isa standing with a smile on her face, looking up at Ricky with his little arms out and flapping, as if he were indeed a bird.

"Thank you, Klaus," she said, loud enough for her father and Klaus to hear.

He lowered the child into the safety of her arms.

"Of course. I don't think he would have been severely injured, perhaps just frightened," he said, caressing the baby's soft blond hair.

Isa just shook her head. "I should have been watching him. I'll take him up to the nursery where he won't be able to get into any more trouble."

"He's a sweet, curious little boy. You must be very proud of him," Klaus said.

He was rewarded with a grateful smile. "I am." She then turned and took the baby away.

Klaus felt eyes on him and turned to see his father and uncle still watching.

"You did well, Klaus," his uncle said.

Klaus gave a little shrug. "I happened to be looking in the right direction at the right time."

“You were watching him for a while. I’d noticed that,” his uncle corrected him.

“Babies are a bit of a curiosity, aren’t they?” he asked with a little smile.

His father and uncle both laughed at that. “They are definitely that,” his father agreed. “But you were very good with him.”

“He’s going to be a handful, I expect,” the Prince added. “He’s bright and curious. You may have stopped him from getting hurt this time, but I imagine there are going to be a number of instances when he won’t be so well watched.”

His father chuckled. “Perhaps Klaus should stay with Isa just to watch the boy.”

“No, thank you. I don’t believe I’m cut out to be a nursemaid,” Klaus said with a laugh. He started to turn away but did manage to catch an approving look from both men as he did so.



That evening at dinner, everyone was still talking about how Lord Klaus had saved the baby. It was as if everyone was shocked that he would have even wanted to protect Princess Isa’s child. Sophia didn’t understand why he wouldn’t. Yes, he’d tried to have Princess Isa killed, but that was for power, not because he actually disliked her—at least that’s what Hope had told her.

His kindness toward the child notwithstanding, Sophia continued to keep her distance from the gentleman. After their confusing time in the forest together, Sophia had been grateful for the guidance of both the Prince and Hope. Sophia, herself, had been conflicted. Mainly, she’d been shocked at her own response to Lord Klaus’s admission that he’d been tempted to kiss her. The fact that he’d managed to restrain himself was both a relief and, oddly enough, a disappointment.

Sophia chided herself for even feeling the slightest bit attracted to Lord Klaus. She didn’t want to feel that way. She wanted to hate him for everything he’d done as clearly as the Prince did.

She wanted to, but she didn’t.

And now that he’d saved little Ricky, it was obvious that she wasn’t the only one having second thoughts about him.

Despite the fact that Sophia kept her distance, most everyone else took

some opportunity during the evening to speak with him. In fact, by the end of the night, Sophia was pretty certain she was the only one who hadn't.

Somehow, as members of the party excused themselves for the night, Sophia didn't feel very sleepy. Pulling her shawl closer around her shoulders, she decided to go for a stroll to the conservatory.

It was a beautiful night. There was a gentle snow falling, filling the air with glistening petals of white. She just stood by the window watching, mesmerized by the beauty.

After a time, she realized she wasn't alone. She started at the sight of Lord Klaus's tall frame standing next to her, silhouetted in the dim light of the night.

"I do beg your pardon. I believe you were so lost in your own thoughts you didn't hear me come in," he said, turning toward her.

"I was just enraptured by the snow," she explained.

He turned back toward the window. "It is pretty, isn't it?"

"I love snow," she agreed, taking a small step away from him. Somehow, she felt he was standing too close for comfort.

He just looked at her and nodded. "I would not hurt you."

"I know," she said quickly.

"But you are feeling uncomfortable in my presence despite that?"

"I have been warned to keep my distance, so I am trying to heed the advice."

His frown was fierce as he asked, "Who told you this?"

"I... I should not say, I'm sure," she answered hesitantly.

"It wasn't Isa, or your sister, nor Nik, I believe. The three of them, oddly enough, are the most favorably inclined toward me," he said, obviously thinking aloud. "Lady Hope," he said with certainty. "It must have been Lady Hope."

"You quite terrorized her when you held her in your basement," Sophia admitted.

"Do I scare you now?" he asked curiously.

"N-no," Sophia answered with hesitation, not because he actually did, but because she was shocked he didn't. He should.

"I see," he said, resuming his frown. "Well, in that case, I will not plague you with my presence any longer. Good night, Miss North." He turned on his heel and started toward the door.

"No, wait," she called out to his quickly retreating form.

He paused.

“I didn’t mean that you should leave,” she said, wondering what she was doing. It was better that he leave, wasn’t it? Surely, she should allow him to do so... but somehow... somehow, she liked his company.

“I wouldn’t want to frighten you,” he said, staying right where he was.

“You don’t. That’s not why I hesitated in my answer,” she admitted.

He took a step toward her. “Then?”

“I was surprised, actually,” she said, being completely honest with him. “I feel as if I should be frightened of you, but I’m not.”

He took another few steps forward but stayed in the shadows of the dark room. “But I would never hurt you. I never meant to hurt your sister.”

“I know.” She gave a humorless little laugh. “Even she knows and understands that.”

“If that’s the case, then I don’t understand why you are hesitant.”

“To be completely honest, I don’t know why either. You make me feel... off-balance somehow. And you remind me of that horrible time when I didn’t know if Lou’s life was truly in danger.”

“I am sorry.”

“You just don’t understand,” she said, voicing the frustration that was filling her.

“Tell me, then.”

His voice was smooth and inviting. “Lou is my family. She’s the entirety of it. I have no one, no one else but her.”

“So, if anything were to happen to her, you’d be alone,” he said, his voice sounding hollow within the darkness of the room.

“Yes.”

“I do understand. That’s why you were so very upset when you thought she might be in danger.”

“Yes.” She kept the other reason to herself—her guilt. It had been Sophia who had insisted Lou impersonate the princess. If she hadn’t convinced her sister to do it, she would never have had to endure even the smallest threat. Everything that Lou had to deal with was Sophia’s fault. That knowledge, alone, was crushing.

“So now, even though you know she was never truly in any danger, you still remember the terror you felt thinking she might have been. There are still the lingering effects of that fear that you might lose your only family.”

Sophia spun around to face the window once again, her arms wrapping

around her as if she could protect herself from his words and her memories.

With only the breath of a sound, she felt him directly behind her. The heat of his hands hovered over her shoulders, only to drop again without touching her.

“I am sorry,” he said quietly. “So very sorry.” His footsteps whispered across the room and out the door.

Sophia was both relieved and disappointed he was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The following afternoon, Klaus was sitting and reading in the library when Lady Everston came in. “Oh, there you are!” she said, coming toward where he was seated by a lovely smoldering fire.

He placed his finger in his place in the book and stood to greet his hostess. “Yes. Were you looking for me, my lady?”

“Well, I’m actually looking for everyone. We’ve somehow all scattered to the winds today. I wanted to let you know that a light luncheon has been set out in the drawing room.”

“Oh, thank you.” He bowed.

“I suppose your uncle is in the study, working,” she sighed, as she turned to go, her message delivered.

“Would you like me to inform him?” Klaus asked.

She paused and turned back. “That would be very good of you, Lord Klaus.”

“Not a problem at all.” He gave her a slight bow and then placed his book on the table next to him.

The study was in the east wing of the house, nearly at the very end of a long passageway. It was clear that Lord Everston liked quiet when he was working there. The only reason for anyone to go down that way was to exit through a back door to the garden.

Klaus gave a quiet knock on the door and then waited until a gruff voice bade him enter. “I beg your pardon, Uncle,” Klaus said in German, coming into the room. “Lady Everston has asked me to inform you that luncheon has been served in the drawing room.”

The Prince looked up at him, looking rather haggard. His hair was

standing on end from gripping it as he bent over whatever task he was working on at the large oak desk. He gave a little nod. "This work never ends," he said with a sigh.

"Is there anything I can help with?"

"No, no. It's just so much slower without my secretary. I was an idiot not to bring him," the Prince said, slowly getting to his feet.

"I would be more than happy to take his place while we're here," Klaus offered.

His uncle looked at him skeptically. "Act as my secretary? He does more than organize my correspondence, you understand. I tell him what I would like to say in a letter, or some official document, and he composes it."

"I'm certain that if I read a few of your letters or documents that I would be able to copy the style of the writing."

"Really?"

Klaus nodded. "I always received the highest marks on my essays when I was in school, and I write a fair hand as well."

"Hmmm..." the Prince gave this some thought. "Some of these things would be highly confidential—" he started.

"Uncle, you can count on my discretion, I assure you."

The man nodded. "All right. Let's give it a try after we eat. God knows, I need help. I'd be willing to get it from nearly anyone at this point."

With that rousing word of confidence, they set out together up to the drawing room. Klaus didn't take his uncle's harsh words personally. He knew he would have to prove himself and his capabilities. He didn't mind at all because he knew he would be able to do an excellent job.



That evening when they all gathered before dinner, Klaus's father slapped Prince Heinrich on his back as he came into the room. Klaus was standing nearby listening to a conversation between the Dowager Lady Melfield and Lord Ranleigh as they compared various bookshops in London.

"Well, well, look who is here early. What is this, Brother?" Lord Kottenfurst asked brightly, his voice carrying well in the room.

The Prince laughed. "You would not believe the reason, Alex." Klaus saw his uncle nod toward him out of the corner of his eye as he attempted to

make it look as if he were involved in the conversation in front of him. “It is all because of your son.”

His father turned toward Klaus, his smile being replaced by a frown. “What has the jackanapes done?” he growled.

“No, no! You misunderstand,” the Prince said quickly. “He has been an incredible help to me. He can write a letter or an edict as if he’s been doing it his entire life. I was astounded at how quickly he caught on to the writing style, but he did so. He also had some extremely sound ideas, which I appreciated a great deal.”

“Really?” His father turned back to his brother. “My Klaus?”

The Prince laughed. “Yes! I am very tempted to keep him on after we return to the capital, Aachen. I am here now because I was able to accomplish all my work, with his help, well in time.”

They moved farther away, toward the drinks, to continue their conversation, and Klaus was forced to turn his attention back to the conversation in front of him, which had somehow shifted to tea shops.



Sophia, at the Dowager Lady Melfield’s insistence, was attempting embroidery. Her own mother had taught her the skill when she’d been much younger, but she hadn’t practiced it for years, preferring watercolor painting to stitching as a quiet hobby. While Sophia carefully placed her stitches, she couldn’t help but overhear the quiet conversation Dowager Lady Melfield was having with Lady Everston.

“I heard he was nearly sentenced to hang afterward,” Dowager Lady Melfield said in a near whisper.

“Well, I can completely understand why. After what he did, truth be told, I’m rather surprised the Prince was so lenient,” Lady Everston said, before taking a sip of her tea.

“I believe His Majesty was worried about his reputation among the nobility,” Dowager Lady Melfield said.

“But what about fairness; being punished for what he did in the same way as anyone else?” Lady Everston asked.

“I can’t imagine my father would have hanged his own nephew,” Princess Isa commented at a normal volume, bringing the ladies’ quiet conversation

out into the open.

Sophia nearly laughed. She wasn't the only one listening in on the conversation.

"But after what he did, my dear. Surely you—"

"I am glad he wasn't hanged," Princess Isa said. "I don't think it would have achieved anything positive. People are hanged to dissuade others from doing the same thing, but I can't imagine that anyone else would have the temerity to attempt to murder me or my brother."

"I have heard you are both more popular than ever," Hope added. "Nik said that the last time he went to Aachen he was nearly mobbed with well-wishers."

Princess Isa nodded with a big smile on her face. "And you remember the enormous crowds at my wedding."

Hope agreed but added. "Still, I don't know that the Prince made the right decision in punishing Lord Klaus the way he did. It's little worse than no punishment at all, being confined to his father's estate."

"And losing his own estate and title," Princess Isa reminded her future sister-in-law.

Hope waved that away as if it were nothing.

"So, you agree that Lord Klaus should have been hanged?" Lady Melfield asked Hope.

"I don't know..." she said, sounding very uncertain.

Sophia wasn't entirely certain she believed he should have been hanged. "He did commit treason," she said, reminding both herself and the group. "He tried to have Princess Isa and Prince Nik murdered and terrified my sister."

"But is that reason enough to kill me?" a man's voice came from the door. Lord Klaus strolled forward to join the group.

Someone gasped, Sophia wasn't certain who.

"Klaus, what horrible timing you have, cousin," Isa said with an embarrassed laugh.

He gave her a sardonic smile and a little bow of his head. "It seems so. Although, I do have to admit to having a morbid interest in your conversation." He turned back to Sophia. "So, Miss North, you did not answer my question. Do you believe I should have been hanged?"

"I... I don't know," she answered truthfully, suddenly quite nervous. What a horrid thing to discuss with someone.

"You don't know? But surely you have an opinion on the matter? You

seemed to have a strong one just a moment ago,” he said, with the lift of an eyebrow.

“We were terrified by your actions,” she said accusingly.

“Were *you* terrified?” he asked.

“Yes, I most certainly was. My sister was targeted—by you,” she said, rising to her feet. “I didn’t know whether she would die of that poisoning. I didn’t know what might happen to her—anything could. Goodness, she was kidnapped!”

“She was taken for a ride,” Lord Klaus said dismissively.

“Against her will, and it took great daring on the part of my son to rescue her,” Dowager Lady Melfield put in.

“Indeed, my lady, but if he had not acted the way he did, she would have been held for a short time and then released with no harm having come to her—such were my orders to my men,” Lord Klaus informed them.

“And how do you know they would have followed those orders? They could easily have thought it fun to hit her or abuse her while she was in their custody,” Sophia said, voicing the nightmares she’d suffered afterward.

Lord Klaus scoffed and was about to say something.

“I am beginning to think that you got off much too lightly, my lord. Perhaps you should have been hanged!” Sophia snapped, allowing her fears and anger to get the better of her before running for the door, before her tears began to fall. Even now, she still felt terrified by what might have happened to Lou if it hadn’t been for Anthony.

She paused just outside the door, unsure of whether to find a quiet place within the house or out of it. And suddenly, she knew exactly what she needed. She needed to ride. Riding took so much of her concentration; it would force her mind onto something else. She wouldn’t have a moment to think about Lord Klaus, Lou, or those horrid events of two years earlier.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Sophia strode into the stable and asked for a horse to be saddled for her. There was a different young man than the one she'd met the other day. But he jumped to do her bidding quickly, so she didn't give it another thought. The horse he brought out was a different one from the sweet mare she'd ridden before, but that was the extent to which she paid any attention at all to the horse.

The man helped her to mount and, while she was a little surprised at the speed at which the horse took off with only the slightest encouragement, she managed to keep her seat and directed the animal toward the forest. As she did so, snow began to fall lightly.

She still could hardly believe that the other women—Isa especially—continued to defend Lord Klaus. How could they do so after what he'd done had affected them all? Only Hope had clearly believed he should have been hanged, but even she had refrained from saying so. Was it impolite to say it out loud?

Sophia noticed that the world was going by at an alarming speed and pulled the animal to a slower walk. It had nearly been trotting, and the narrow track they were on surely didn't allow for such speed, especially as the snowfall was becoming heavier by the minute. She was glad she had on a hat with a slightly wider brim.

She began to wonder if it was mere politeness that had Princess Isa saying that she was glad Lord Klaus hadn't been hanged or if she truly believed that. On the one hand, she had come out of the incident with a husband, after an exciting—if at times, perhaps, dangerous—adventure. On the other, she had been shot at, and her life and that of her traveling companions had seriously

been at risk. And yet, it was like the princess to look at it as a grand escapade and believe that there should be no repercussions considering no one had actually been hurt.

Sophia pulled back on the horse once again, as the animal had tried to move into a trot again. The snow was really beginning to come down fiercely now, and she wondered if she shouldn't turn around and return to the house. Her thoughts, however, were what turned instead.

What of Lady Everston? Surely, she would think that Lord Klaus should have been hanged? It was her daughter who had been put into mortal danger. On the other hand, it had been her *daughter*, not her, and she hadn't even been aware of it at the time. She'd learned only small bits and pieces afterward, and even now Sophia wasn't certain the whole had ever been explained to the woman.

No, of all the people who'd been affected by Lord Klaus's machinations, it seemed to be Sophia who felt the hurt most strongly. It just wasn't right.

And it wasn't right that there was this odd sensation tugging at her heart and making her think that she was being too harsh on Lord Klaus. Perhaps the Prince, or whoever had decided upon his punishment, *had* been right. Perhaps hanging *was* too severe. None of the intended victims had actually been killed or even severely injured.

Sophia just didn't know what was right. She didn't know whether she believed he should have been hanged or not. One part of her remembered the fear, the distress, and the anxiety she'd suffered while another part thought of the man as he was now—kind, thoughtful, and repentant.

With a sigh, Sophia allowed the rein to loosen in her hands. The horse felt this and took it as leave to do what it had been wanting to do the entire ride. It took off in a burst of speed. Before she knew it, the persistent animal was galloping straight out along the track, and Sophia was doing all she could to merely hold on.

She didn't even see the branch until it was too late.



After Miss North left, Klaus considered sitting down with the ladies to explain why he hadn't deserved to be hanged, despite what he'd done. But the pain in Miss North's face, the tears in her eyes, made it impossible for

him to forget about her.

He excused himself and went to see if he couldn't say something to her. He had no idea what. He didn't even know if there was anything he could say that would make her feel any better. But he knew he had to try.

He stood outside of her bedchamber door and then realized that he would probably be more successful if he waited, giving her some time to calm herself first. And, he realized, he could probably use some fresh air to clear his own head as well.

As he donned his coat, he gave a little smile and imagined that he would probably run into her in the garden. If he did, he would certainly take advantage of the situation to attempt to explain things to her—and to listen to her side of it as well, he decided.

He'd expected the air to be frigid, but it seemed to have warmed up a touch from earlier in the day. As he was walking, snow began to flutter down from the clouds. It was oddly refreshing. He turned his face up toward the sky, enjoying the feel of the cold snowflakes against his warm face.

He was a little surprised that Miss North wasn't doing the same. In fact, he wondered why he hadn't run into her yet. Surely, she was outside enjoying the snow.

It had begun to come down much faster, and a wind had picked up as well, swirling the snow around in the air. Perhaps Miss North had been intelligent and was, even now, laughing at him from behind the protective glass of the conservatory or an upstairs window where she was nice and dry.

He turned his footsteps back toward the house. It was becoming too wet and cold to be outdoors.

He took his time changing into dry clothes, even pausing to sit for a bit by the fire in his room to read another chapter of his book. He finally got up and decided that he'd better go downstairs and be social before his father came in search of him.

He found some of the other gentlemen, including his father, Everston, Melfield, Ranleigh, and even uncle, in the card room enjoying a hand of whist.

"Uncle, I am so glad to see that you finally have time for some relaxation," he said after coming into the room.

The Prince just chuckled. "The day's mail has been taken care of, as well you know, since you managed a good bit of it this morning. There has been no afternoon delivery."

“Probably because of the storm,” Everston said, glancing out the window. It had grown dark despite the fact that it was merely half past four.

“My lord,” a man said, coming into the room with barely a knock. “I do beg your pardon, sirs, but my lord—”

“Do your servants not even knock, Everston?” the Prince asked, frowning at the man.

“They usually do. But it’s not common for a groom to come into the house either,” Everston said, standing, his cards still in his hand. “What is it, Jem?”

“It’s Poppy, my lord,” the man said, grabbing his hat off his head in late deference to the assembled gentlemen. “She’s come back to the stable.”

“What do you mean come back...?”

“The lady, er, the young lady with the dark hair took her out a couple of hours ago, but she’s just come back,” the young man explained, becoming even more agitated.

“What of it? Did the young lady mistreat the animal in some way?”

“No, my lord, you misunderstand. The horse came back, but the young lady didn’t.”

“What?” Klaus asked, taking a step toward the groom.

There was a scraping of chairs as the other men rose as well.

“How long did you say she was gone?” Everston asked.

“Hours, my lord. At least two, perhaps three?”

“It couldn’t have been three. I saw her a little over three hours ago in the drawing room,” Klaus said.

Everston turned toward the windows. “But in this storm and with so little light—”

“She’s not an experienced rider,” Melfield put in.

“That’s right! I’d forgotten... and you say you put her on Poppy?” Everston asked, turning back to the groom.

The man nodded.

“She is an energetic mount. Not one fit for someone unused to riding,” Everston said, his voice getting dangerously low.

“I’ll go out and find her,” Klaus said, stepping forward again.

“We should probably assemble a search party,” the Prince suggested.

“No, it’s too dangerous. I’m an excellent rider and have experience with these sorts of conditions,” Klaus said.

“You do?” Melfield asked.

His father nodded. "He used to go out in all sorts of weather at Kottenfurst. Every day for hours."

"I'll go," Klaus said with finality. "Saddle a strong horse for me. I'll be down shortly."

"You can't go out by yourself," Melfield said, coming forward. "And I wouldn't be a very good brother if I didn't try to find her as well. I'll go with you."

"I'll join you," Ranleigh said.

"As will I," Everston agreed.

Klaus gave them all a nod before turning and going up to get changed once again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Sophia sat up in the snow in intense pain. The fall had knocked the wind out of her and—ow! When she'd moved her left arm, it hurt like anything. She must have landed on it or used it to try to break her fall. She prayed it wasn't broken. Her ribcage hurt as well. Could she have broken a rib in the fall as well?

She groaned; it sounded so loud in the silence of the snowstorm. Even the woodland animals had hidden away in their warm homes for the duration of the storm. Sophia would have been smart to have done the same—or at the very least, returned to Lord Everston's home.

She looked around, but her horse was nowhere to be seen. The blasted animal must have taken off the moment it had been able to rid itself of its rider. Sophia was going to have a very long and uncomfortable walk back.

She managed to get herself to her feet but not without a great deal of pain both in her arm and her ribs. Every time she took a breath it hurt. How was she going to make it all the way back? What a fool she was!

She paused to look and see which direction she needed to go, but she couldn't remember which way she'd been heading when she'd hit the branch. She tried looking up into the sky to see if she could tell the direction from that, but it was just solid white... and falling in the form of snow.

Wonderful. If she didn't die of exposure to the cold, hunger would take her as she wandered the wood for days. Surely, she would be missed, and a search team would come to find her, she reminded herself. Well, yes, but when would that be? Most likely after the storm had ended, she told herself grimly.

With a painful sigh, she headed off in a random direction because she had

to go some way. She couldn't just stand there for the rest of the night.

She'd walked perhaps half an hour or more when, up ahead, she glimpsed something large and dark off to the side up ahead. A fork in the path led in that direction. Hoping it was a crofter's cottage, she took it. Perhaps someone there could send for help.

She got halfway to the cottage before realizing there would be no one. No smoke came from the chimney, and the area looked as deserted as the rest of the wood. At least it was some place dry if not warm.

Mercifully, the door was unlocked, so she went in and found a small one-room cottage with a fireplace taking up a good amount of the far wall. If only there was a fire laid and a tinderbox, then all would be well indeed.

It was very dark inside with only two small windows and a gap in the doorframe, but there was enough light to see that the fireplace was completely bare—not even a lone stick of wood to light. The entire place seemed to have been cleaned out. Nothing in the fireplace, and not a piece of furniture either—not even a chair. There was only the dirt floor and the four walls.

Sophia held back a sob. *No point in crying now*, she thought, and it would only hurt her ribs. Just taking in the breath to stop herself from crying was painful. With no other option, she sat herself on the ground against the far wall next to the fireplace so she would at least be out of the direct line of any draft that might come down the chimney.

She could do nothing but close her eyes and try to sleep. In the morning, she hoped someone would come searching for her.

Either morning came a lot sooner than she realized, or someone had come out despite the storm. Sophia awoke with a start when the door to the cabin opened, and a man came in calling out her name.

“Miss North?”

“Yes! Yes, I'm here! Who's there?” She couldn't quite see in the light of the snowstorm, which was still raging outside.

“It's me, Klaus,” said the most unwelcome rescuer possible.

“Lord Klaus? What... what are you doing out in this storm?” she asked. She thought of trying to stand but just the thought made her hurt.

“Looking for you, of course,” he said with a little laugh. “Just a moment, let me see if there's some wood anywhere.” He disappeared back outside and returned a few minutes later carrying an armful of chopped wood!

“Where did you find that?” she asked, amazed.

“Under a tarpaulin against the back of the cabin,” he said, dumping the wood into the fireplace. He proceeded to lay out a fire. “Is there a tinderbox, do you know?”

“I... I haven’t searched, since I didn’t know there was wood,” she told him.

“Do you think you could?” he asked, pausing in his work to look over toward her.

“I don’t know if I can get up. I’m hurt,” she admitted, feeling like a fool.

“You are?” He jumped to his feet and came toward her.

“Please, get the fire started first. I’m wet and freezing.”

“Oh! Of course.” He turned around and took a close look in the dusky light for a tinderbox. There didn’t seem to be one on the mantel, but then he searched around in the corners of the fireplace. “Ah-ha!” he exclaimed in triumph. A moment later he had managed to set some pieces of tinder alight, and the wood in the fireplace was well on its way to catching as well.

“Oh, thank God,” Sophia breathed.

He came over and crouched down next to her. “Now, tell me what happened? How are you hurt?”

“It was that horse I was given to ride. It kept trying to go too fast,” she told him. “I kept slowing it down, but then it finally just ignored me and took off. I was felled by a branch reaching across the track.”

“Oh no! I am so sorry to hear that. Horses can be damned clever when they want to get rid of a rider,” he said. He immediately flushed. “I do beg your pardon. Er, they can be very clever,” he said, correcting his language.

She gave him a little smile. “It’s all right. Anyway, I, er, hurt my arm and my ribs when I fell. I don’t know if anything is broken, but it’s very painful to take a deep breath, and, well, the pain in my arm has simply become a dull throb by now. But I haven’t tried to move it for some time, and I’m not sure I want to.”

In the dim light of the fire, Lord Klaus looked at her arm as it lay across her body, her forearm resting in her lap.

“As soon as it warms up in here a bit, you can try to remove your coat, and then we’ll get a better look at it,” he said, taking off his own coat.

It was beginning to get a bit warmer, but Sophia wasn’t yet ready to disrobe. She wasn’t certain she would ever be.

“Are there others out searching?” she asked.

“Melfield, Ranleigh, and Everston all came out with me, and then we split

up.”

“But does that mean that they are still out looking?” she asked, worried for the safety of the other men.

Lord Klaus gave a little shrug. “I’m sure they’ll return to the house before too long. Once we’re both warmed up, I’ll douse the fire, and we’ll go back as well.”

“I... I don’t know that I could stand being on a horse again,” she admitted.

“Well, we’ll see how you feel in a little while,” he told her gently.

She nodded. She supposed she would have to, eventually, get back on a horse in order to return to the house, but it wasn’t going to be pleasant—not with her arm and ribs hurting the way they were.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Lord Klaus settled down next to her, after draping his coat over her legs. The warmth felt good. She hadn't even realized that she'd been shivering with cold until her muscles began to relax. She gave a little sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"You've had a terrible shock, falling from your horse."

"I feel like I did when Lou was attacked. Only the pain is physical instead of just emotional—and I'm cold," she added with a slight smile.

"Really? I've taken a number of falls and broken my arm once or twice. I know how painful that is. Surely, you didn't feel that sort of pain when your sister was attacked, as you call it?"

"I do call it an attack. What else would you call it?" she snapped.

He sighed. "I don't know. I never meant to hurt her or you. I only had things done to her that wouldn't seriously harm her." He shook his head. "I know I've explained this to you before, but you seem to refuse to believe me. Why is that?"

"It's not that I don't believe you," she admitted. "It's that we didn't know that at the time, so we were hurt. If we knew there was no true intention beyond scaring us, we wouldn't have felt—"

"You wouldn't have even felt scared. But I couldn't have very well written a note and warned you of what was to come," he said, beginning to sound a little annoyed himself.

"No, but... you could have just not done it!"

"But then no one would have believed that she was the princess. I was to harm the princess. Everyone knew there was some plot afoot. If I hadn't done anything to Miss North—Lady Melfield—people would have looked at her

and wondered why.”

“That would have been—”

“No, it would have destroyed all she was working so hard to achieve.”

There was silence for a moment. Sophia asked, “And Lady Hope? Were you merely trying to scare her?”

“No. Lady Hope was an unfortunate fly caught in my web.”

“But once there, you fully intended to kill her along with Prince Nik,” she said, accusingly.

“I wasn’t going to kill either of them. I was going to leave that to my father—who I believed fully capable of doing so if he’d wanted the throne badly enough.”

“You really believed he did?”

He shrugged. “I thought... I thought once I explained my reasoning to him that he would.”

“I still find it incredible that *you* wanted the throne so badly,” she admitted.

“You know, now that I look back at it, I find it pretty unbelievable as well. I’m afraid I had a little devil sitting next to me whispering things in my ear. At first, I wasn’t so certain whether I should even think of such things, but after a while, I forgot that. I began to believe his words. To want what he was offering—power, wealth, respect, even adoration.” Klaus gave a dry little laugh and shook his head as if he couldn’t believe, himself, what he had done.

“I don’t understand. Was this a real person telling you these things or... or something inside of you? I can’t believe the actual devil whispered in your ear,” she said, giving him a hesitant smile in case he did truly believe it.

He gave a true laugh this time. “No, no, it was a person. A man who I’d thought was my friend. I shared with him...” Lord Klaus paused and sighed. “I shared with him a secret, thinking he could help me, but instead he led me astray, and I was so gullible as to believe him. If I’d been smart, I would have followed my original instinct and spoken to my father instead of listening to this man. If I had, none of this would have happened.”

Sophia was silent for a moment as she thought about his words. Eventually, though, her curiosity got the better of her. “I don’t suppose you could share this secret with me?”

Lord Klaus smiled. “I suppose I can since it is no longer happening. I would ask that you not tell a soul, however, as there might still be

repercussions.”

“Of course! I’m an excellent secret keeper—just ask Lou,” she said quickly.

Lord Klaus sat up and faced her, crossing his legs. “It all started when I received a note meant for my father. It accused him of being a spy for both England *and* France.”

Sophia gasped and then immediately covered her mouth with her good hand. “I beg your pardon,” she said from behind her hand.

“No, it’s completely understandable. I was shocked as well. I’d had no idea.” He paused and then continued, “The note threatened to tell the governments of both countries if my father didn’t stop his activities and return to Aachen-Düren. Of course, if he was revealed to be a spy for the enemy, both countries would have—at best—jailed him for life, but much more likely, he would have been killed. The writer of the note asked whether he’d rather be hanged in England or guillotined in France.”

“How awful!”

“I love my father very much, and I didn’t want to see either one happen.”

“Naturally!” she exclaimed, horrified at having to face such a threat.

“So, I told an old school chum of mine. He convinced me not to tell my father about the note...”

“And instead, he suggested you kill Prince Nik and Princess Isa?”

He hesitated for a moment and then said, “Actually, it was my idea, which my friend then whole-heartedly supported. Enthusiastically, even,” he said with a sad smile. “It seemed to be the only solution at the time. If my father’s activities were revealed and he was merely the Markgraf Kottenfurst, he could have been tried and convicted by either government. As the heir to the throne of a foreign country, they would be much less likely to harm him. It could have created... well, I suppose, unpleasantness on either side. Aachen-Düren had a diplomatic agreement with England. If the English found out he was spying for France...”

“It would not have been good. And so you thought that by killing your cousins, he would be protected as the heir,” Sophia repeated, thinking this through.

“Yes. My friend also pointed out that, by making my father heir, I would then inherit the throne myself after his death. He then began to convince me that I wanted this. That I wanted the wealth, power, and well, everything else that goes along with being the prince.”

“And eventually you believed it and hired people to kill your cousins.”

“He even helped with that. He knew people and played the go-between so that it couldn’t be traced back to me should they be caught. I thought he was doing me a kindness.”

“Oh, dear... It also gave him the opportunity to make things even worse for Prince Nik and Princess Isa—worse than even you might have wanted.”

“Indeed. I was a bloody fool. Oh! I do beg your pardon!”

“No, you are right. You were not only a fool, but a trusting one. You thought your friend was doing you a service when, in fact, he was setting you up.”

“For him it was a win either way. Either I became prince eventually, in which case, he could blackmail me. Or if anyone was caught, he could play the innocent and make me out to be the mastermind.”

“He didn’t count on you being caught and not hanged, I suppose.”

“No.”

“Why have you not told your uncle all this? I presume you haven’t.”

“Because that would mean divulging my father’s activities to him. I would hate to see the relationship between my father and his brother destroyed. They are very close.”

“And you’re certain your uncle doesn’t know that your father was a spy?”

Lord Klaus tilted his head in thought. “You know, I never considered that he might know.”

Sophia just gave him a little smile.

“I wonder...” he paused, clearly thinking about this. “I’ve always wondered why my father never had a position in his brother’s government. But maybe he did...”

She gave a little shrug and then hissed with the pain the movement caused.

“Well, what is done is done. I will spend the rest of my life at Kottenfurst, and eventually, I’ll inherit it.” He gave a dry little laugh. “I’ve learned that quite a lot goes into managing an estate—much more than I’d ever realized.”

“And you can be happy with that?” Sophia asked skeptically.

“Yes. I can. So long as it occupies all my time. I’ve been banned from English society, and society in Aachen isn’t nearly as exciting—and it all centers around the Prince, anyway. I will simply have to be satisfied with what I’ve got.”

“You could travel,” she offered. “If the Prince allowed it.”

“I could...” he agreed. “That actually might be quite interesting. I could see the Americas or India.”

“Or even China, or Russia. I can tell you Moscow is a lovely city,” she offered. She was beginning to feel quite warm and relaxed. And was it possible, slightly in charity with this man who had made her life so extremely miserable?

“Yes. Would you tell me about it?” he asked.

Sophia not only told him about Moscow, where she had only lived for about nine months before her parents died of influenza, but also Berlin and Rome, where they’d lived before that. They talked and, entirely to Sophia’s pleasant surprise, laughed for hours.

“Miss North,” Lord Klaus said quietly after a pause in the conversation.

“Please call me Sophia,” she interrupted. “I think we know each other well enough to be less formal with each other.”

He smiled and nodded. “Sophia...” he said as if testing to see how it felt on his tongue. “Sophia, do you think you could ever find it in your heart to forgive me?”

She stopped and stared at him. His eyes were an honest blue and his pale blond hair fell carelessly over his forehead. He looked utterly forlorn and repentant, yet strong and masculine. Sophia not only felt she could forgive him, but she also felt sad at just the thought of leaving his presence. It was the oddest sensation, as if she wanted to be with him always. He made her... happy.

She nodded. “I can and I do. I understand the reasoning behind your actions now and, dare I say it, I feel as if I understand you.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Tell more about your life,” she asked. “I’m fascinated by the fact that your mother is English and your father is from Aachen-Duren.”

He chuckled but explained to her how they blended the two worlds, enjoying the best of both.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Out of the corner of his eye, Klaus watched the sky begin to lighten with the morning. They'd talked the entire night. He could hardly believe it, but it had been the most wonderful night of his life.

He looked over at Sophia and imagined waking up in bed with her next to him. He could so easily see her there. Just as easily as he could see himself eating breakfast with her every morning and dinner every night. How happy he would be if she were a regular part of his life. How joyous it would be to be able to talk with her like this whenever he wanted. To hear her thoughts on all matters of subjects, to experience... life with her. His life. Forever.

He also knew with absolute certainty that for two very good, strong reasons he needed to do something right now. Something he never in the past two years thought he would have the opportunity to do, let alone want to—he needed to propose to Sophia.

He shifted himself so that he was on his knees before her. She paused in the story she was telling him about another Christmas house party, one she hadn't been invited to. "What?" she asked, looking up at him.

He smiled at her and trailed his fingers down her soft cheek. "Do you believe in miracles?"

She smiled and gave a little laugh. "I don't know, why?"

"I do. I do because I have just experienced one. Perhaps, it's a Christmas miracle."

She cocked her head expectantly.

"The miracle is that I found you—and I don't mean here in this cabin—but here at this house party. The miracle is that you have forgiven my transgressions. And the miracle is that you are the most beautiful, wonderful

woman I have ever met.”

She flushed prettily but shook her head. “I don’t know what you are going on about. Are you overly tired? I’m certain you are speaking nonsense.”

“I’m not. I’ve never been more awake nor happier in my life—and it’s all because of you. I want this. I want it every day of my life.”

She laughed and looked around the empty cottage. “You want to be trapped in a cabin in a wood? You want me to be injured?”

“No, you silly goose. I want to be with you.” He took her hand. “Sophia, you may think this premature, but let me tell you, you would make me the happiest man alive if you would consent to become my wife.”

“What?” She started, jerking suddenly in her surprise, then winced in pain as she jostled both her ribs and her arm. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were foxed!”

He laughed. “Drunk on love?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t love me. You barely know me!”

“After tonight, I feel I know you very well. Certainly well enough to know that I’d like to marry you.” He looked down a little ruefully and then turned toward the window pointedly. “There is also the minor problem that we have now spent the entire night together, alone.”

She looked toward the window and gasped. “Oh my goodness! It’s morning?”

“It is. And we need to attempt to get you back to the house, although I’m afraid it’s going to be very painful for you. And a doctor needs to be called to see to your wounds. But I won’t return without you consenting to marry me.”

“My reputation... I... I could be ruined.”

He shook his head. “I love you, Sophia, and I would never allow you to be ruined.”

“I... I like you very much... In fact... I wonder if I’m not even beginning to love you. I’ve just never been in love before, so I don’t know what it feels like,” she said softly.

“May I kiss you? Perhaps that will help you make up your mind,” he said, giving her a smile.

Her lips curved up ever so slightly, ever so hesitantly, before she nodded.

He leaned forward so she wouldn’t have to move and pressed his lips lightly to hers. She was as delicious as he’d imagined. Her lips were soft and sweet and sent blood rushing through his body. He nibbled only a little at

their sweetness before pulling back, so he wouldn't embarrass himself with his ardor because goodness knows he wanted to do so much more than merely kiss her. But she was young and hurt. He wouldn't dare do anything to make her pain worse.

"Oh, yes," she breathed, as he slowly pulled away. She kept her eyes closed for another moment before slowly opening her eyes. "Do you mean it, Klaus? Do you really want to marry me—and not just to salvage my reputation?"

"I do."

She nodded, giving him a shy little smile. "Then, I would be honored."

He laughed, suddenly so very happy. "If you weren't injured, I would grab you and spin you around in my joy."

She smiled and gave a little laugh. "I would have liked that, but even just laughing hurts," she said, her smile turning into a slight grimace.

"I'm sure it does, and what I'm about to do next is truly going to be painful, and I apologize but we must get you back."

He stood, put on his coat, and then scooped her into his arms. She squeaked in surprise, and probably pain, but breathed through it, wrapping her good arm around his neck.

They rode with her in his lap and her legs bumping gently against the horse's left flank. Her injured arm was tucked safely between them to keep the jostling to a minimum. Still, he could tell that she was in pain the whole way.



Klaus carried Sophia straight into the house the moment they returned. Someone must have been looking out the window because Lou, Anthony, Lord and Lady Kottenfurst, and the Prince were all there in the entry hall within moments.

"My God, is she all right?" Lou asked, rushing down the stairs.

The Kottenfursts and the Prince seemed to have come from the breakfast parlor. "What happened?" one of the men asked.

"Where have you been all night?" Anthony asked, following Lou.

"A surgeon is needed," Klaus said, pausing.

"I think my arm might be broken," Sophia added. "And possibly a rib

from when I fell off my horse.”

“Oh, goodness!” Lou said.

“I’ll send for the surgeon,” Lady Everston said. Sophia hadn’t even seen her join in the crowd.

“You should take her straight up to her bedroom,” Lady Kottenfurst said.

There was a murmuring of agreement, so Klaus did exactly that, putting Sophia gently onto her bed. The moment he backed away Lou rushed in to take his place by Sophia’s side.

She brushed Sophia’s hair back from her face. “You poor thing!”

“I found her in a small cabin in the wood,” Klaus explained to everyone. “She was sitting there shivering in the dark. But there was dry wood nearby, so I was able to make a fire. We actually spent a tolerably comfortable night.”

“Thank goodness you found that cabin,” the Prince said, sounding quite relieved.

“Indeed. It would have been exceedingly uncomfortable otherwise,” Sophia agreed.

“And I am pleased to tell you that Miss North’s reputation will not suffer from having spent the night alone with me. She has agreed to become my wife,” Klaus told everyone assembled.

There was stunned silence for a moment as mouths dropped open and eyes widened.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Lou was the first to respond. “Absolutely not!”

“No. I forbid it,” Klaus’s father said, lending his voice.

“That is not a good idea, my love,” his mother added.

“No one but us knows what happened. So long as the tale doesn’t spread—and I can’t imagine that any one of us would say anything—her reputation is safe.” Anthony turned and faced Klaus. He lowered his voice and added in a threatening manner. “I assume that nothing untoward happened?”

“No! Klaus was a perfect gentleman the entire night. We did nothing but talk,” Sophia said quickly.

“Good. Then let’s not hear any more talk of marriage,” Anthony said with a satisfied nod.

“But what if we want to marry?” Sophia asked, looking around at the assembled family members.

“I would forbid it,” Lord Kottenfurst said quickly.

“But...” she started. She looked at Klaus, but he was suddenly finding the floor very interesting. Wouldn’t he speak up? Wouldn’t he fight for them?

“We will all simply forget this ever happened,” Lou said.

“Klaus,” Sophia said, looking to him to say something—anything.

He looked up at her and then at his father. To her shock, although he didn’t look happy about it, he just shook his head. “If my father says we may not...”

“I can’t believe you!” Sophia nearly shouted. “Did you not just tell me this morning that you loved me?” she demanded. What was going on here? Sophia felt as if she’d stepped out from a dream into a harsh reality. It was a dream where everything had been turned upside down, but it was now that

she felt as if she were standing on her head.

“I...” Klaus started, but then he lowered his gaze once again.

“I don’t believe this!” Tears welled up in her eyes and throat. He wasn’t going to say anything. He wasn’t going to even say a word in opposition to his father and her sister. Where was his backbone? Did he even have one? She was beginning to think he didn’t. No wonder he’d been so swayed by his friend’s words. He simply did as he was told and didn’t have a thought of his own. This man was nothing more than... a wet rag.

Holding back her tears, she whispered. “Out. Please, everyone, get out.”

“Of course, you must be exhausted,” Lady Kottenfurst said immediately. She began shooing people out. Sophia heard her telling Klaus to go to his room to rest and wash up as well.

“We’ll wake you when the surgeon arrives,” Lou said, planting a kiss on Sophia’s forehead.

Once everyone was gone, Sophia broke into painful sobs.



Klaus couldn’t rest. He was too riled up. And even if he were to attempt to close his eyes, he knew that the only thing he would see in his mind’s eye was Sophia’s look of disappointment, of disgust, of fury when he hadn’t said anything when his father and Lady Melfield had said that they would not be allowed to marry.

And beyond that, he didn’t blame Sophia for feeling any of it. He felt it himself! But what could he have done? What could he have said? He knew in his heart that, in that moment, there was nothing he could have said to change their minds. He would only have worked against himself if he’d said anything.

The hardest part, he was certain, would be convincing Sophia of this.

The only thing that made any of this bearable was the fact he was now used to living with regret and self-disgust. At least this time, he knew it wouldn’t be for long.

A few hours later, he knocked softly on Sophia’s door. He’d heard from a footman that the surgeon had come and gone.

A maid answered the door, opening it only a crack so she could see who it was.

“I would like to have a word with Miss North,” he told the young woman.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, my lord, Miss North is asleep. The doctor gave her some laudanum, so she’ll probably be sleeping at least until morning.”

He nodded and left. He should have expected as much. Well, he would simply have to speak with her tomorrow.



That evening, unable to face his family, Klaus took his dinner in his room. He was sitting with his book and a bottle of port, which he fully planned on drinking until the alcohol sent him into a stupefied slumber, or he reached the bottom of the bottle, whichever came first, when there was a knock on his door.

A glance at the clock told him it was too early for the men to have left the dining room. So, who could this be?

He got up and answered the door.

“Klaus, we need to talk,” his mother said from the passageway.

“Of course.” He stepped back and allowed her into his room. “I’m afraid all I have is port to offer, but I could send for something...”

She smiled. “While I have been known to steal a sip of your father’s now and then, I think I’ll decline.” She took the seat opposite the one he’d been occupying.

“Were you serious when you proposed to Miss North?” she asked, getting straight to the point.

He nodded. “I was.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “She said this morning you’d told her you loved her.”

“I do,” he agreed.

She sighed. “Honestly, Klaus, how could you possibly be in love with a girl after only knowing her for less than two weeks?”

He gave a little smile. “I think I fell in love with her the moment I first saw her walking through the garden in the frigid cold on the very day we arrived.”

“Really?”

“She is beautiful, clever, and... well, she feels things quite deeply. I

admire that.”

“Why? Do you not feel things?”

“I do. Sometimes I think I feel too much. Perhaps that’s why I find it attractive in another,” he admitted.

His mother nodded. “You’ve always been a sensitive soul. It was why... well...” she stopped speaking.

“Why what?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Why I was so shocked when I learned you wanted to kill Nik and Isa. How could you do that knowing the pain it would cause your uncle?” she blurted.

Klaus just shook his head. “I had my reasons.” Even now he was loath to share his father’s secret with his mother.

“Did you think your father wanted to be prince? Did you not know he’s never wanted the position and was always grateful to be the younger brother?”

“He would be a much better ruler than Uncle Rich,” Klaus said in his own defense. “He would be fair and evenhanded like my uncle, but he would also bring honor to Aachen-Duren and make it known throughout Europe. He would make it more than the tiny, insignificant little country it is now,” Klaus said. He’d thought about this a great deal before he’d given his friend the go-ahead to hire the thugs to kill Nik and Isa.

His mother just sat and stared at him in silence for a few moments. “Is that what you want for the country?” she asked quietly.

“I do. Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I’m very happy living in a small, insignificant country. I’m happy not being in the center of the chaos that is Europe at the moment.”

“But Papa isn’t. He likes all the political intrigue,” Klaus pointed out.

His mother inclined her head. “He does, you’re right. But he involves himself in that already with his spying—and don’t think that I don’t know about it. I do, and I would be extremely surprised if you didn’t.”

Klaus had to keep his mouth from dropping open at his mother’s admission. He’d never thought she knew anything about his father’s clandestine activities. “I... I can’t believe you knew about that.”

She smiled at him slyly. “I know everything about your father.”

Klaus studied his hands, clasped together in his lap. “What you don’t know, and neither does Papa, is that I learned about his spying through a note that was accidentally delivered to me instead of him.” He proceeded to tell

his mother the truth.

Her mouth was hanging open by the end of it, and all she could say at first was “Oh, Klaus. Oh, my dear, dear boy.”

Eventually though, she composed herself and asked, “Have you told your father this?”

“No.” Klaus shook his head.

“You must. And your uncle.”

He lifted his eyes at that. “My uncle? Do you think he knew about Papa’s... activities as well?”

“If he didn’t, he should.”

“But what if he gets angry? What if he thinks Papa was unnecessarily taking risks and even putting the reputation of Aachen-Düren on the line? I thought of telling Uncle, but I... I couldn’t. I couldn’t see their relationship harmed by this.”

At this, his mother reached out and laid her hand upon his. “Even if Rich does get angry, their love for each other is stronger. You must trust them with the truth, Klaus—for your sake and theirs.”

After a moment’s silence as Klaus contemplated what his father and uncle might say if he told them, his mother interrupted his thoughts. “Let us set this aside for the moment and leave the past behind us. I am wondering if Miss North will be a part of your future.”

“I would like her to be, but I’m worried that I seriously harmed any hope of that when I didn’t speak up this morning,” he told her.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I knew it would be futile. I still need to prove my worth to my uncle before I can convince him to give me my freedom, and while I’m imprisoned at Kottenfurst, I can’t marry anyone. I realized this as I rode back with Sophia this morning. I’d spoken too hastily—mainly because I was thinking of her reputation more than anything else. But as I rode, I realized my mistake.”

His mother nodded. “And so, you did not speak up. In a way, that’s good. I agree completely, and in fact, it is the very reason why I’m here. Your father wanted to be sure you knew that was the reason for his refusal to allow you to marry. It’s not that he doesn’t think Miss North is a good match for you. It’s that he doesn’t see the point of you marrying only to force the same punishment on her.”

“Precisely!” Klaus agreed. “I love her too much to do that to her.”

“I’m not at all surprised to learn you’ve recognized this as well,” his mother said, reaching out a hand toward him. He took it just as she asked, “So, what is your plan of action?”

He smiled at his mother. He did love her so very much.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



An hour or so after his mother had left, Klaus was surprised by another knock on his door. He was not surprised, however, when he opened it and found his father standing on the other side.

Lord Kottenfurst frowned at him. “You didn’t come down to dinner,” he said accusingly. “Your mother said you wished to speak with me. Does one have anything to do with the other?”

“Please come in, sir,” Klaus said, stepping back. This time he didn’t ask, but simply poured out a second glass of port and handed it to his father. He refilled his own and took his seat, indicating for his father to take the chair his wife had been sitting in not so long ago.

“Actually, no. They have nothing to do with each other. I didn’t come down to dinner due to the unpleasantness of the situation with Miss North. But...” He paused and ran a hand through his hair. “Mother insisted that I speak with you on another matter. Regarding something I should have told you a very long time ago.”

“Oh?” His father seemed mildly curious but relaxed. Klaus knew that was about to change.

“Two years ago... before anything concerning Nik or Isa happened, I...” A tremor of anxiety shuddered through Klaus’s chest.

“What is it, Klaus? You know you can tell me anything,” his father said gently.

Klaus nodded but clasped his hands together tightly. “I walked out of the house in London one evening—you had already gone out—when someone called out to me. Er, I believe he called ‘Kottenfurst.’ I turned, naturally.”

His father nodded.

“The man thrust a note into my hand and then walked off. I read it.”

His father’s eyes narrowed. “Even though you knew it was for me.”

“Yes. Well, I wanted to be sure.”

“And what did it say?” His father’s voice lowered.

“It threatened to tell the governments of both England and France of your spying—for both countries—if you didn’t cease and return to Aachen-Düren.”

His father burst to his feet and began to pace about the room. After a moment, he stopped and turned toward Klaus. “Is there a reason you did not see that I received that note?”

“I was afraid. I was afraid for your life.”

“If you feared that I was going to be exposed, why did you not give me the opportunity to do something about it?” his father growled.

“I did something stupid. Incredibly stupid.”

“You did many things incredibly stupid, beginning with opening and reading a note that was intended for me.”

“I told my friend, Kineton. He thought that you might have to kill me or, at best, exile me to Aachen-Düren for discovering that you were a spy.”

“You told—” His father’s voice was merely a whisper now.

“He thought my life would be put in danger.”

His father ran his hand down his face. Klaus never felt more like a child, a very naughty child.

His father took a deep breath. “And this was when you came up with your brilliant idea to kill your cousins?”

“Yes. I thought that if you were the heir, there would be nothing the governments of England and France could do to you—that you would be safe from any repercussions from your, er, activities.”

Klaus nearly jumped when his father burst out laughing. Was he so furious that he was... laughing?

“Klaus, you really are...” He sighed and sat back down. “Even the heir to a throne—especially one from such a small and insignificant country such as ours—is responsible for his own behavior and will face the consequences of it.”

“Oh.”

His father finished off the port in his glass. “So, you thought to kill your cousins, make me the heir to the throne, and thereby protect me from the repercussions of my spying. All because some unknown person wrote and

said that he knew what I was doing.”

Klaus cleared his throat. “Yes, that pretty well sums it up.”

“And here I’d always thought that you’d inherited my intelligence,” his father said with a sad shake of his head.

Klaus just frowned at his father. “Kinton was whispering in my ear the whole time. Supporting my assumptions. Telling me that this was clearly my only course of action—the only way I would be able to save your life.”

“And you believed him because you wanted to do so.”

“I wanted to save you,” Klaus whispered, staring at his hands.

“Not to mention that should I become the prince, then you would inherit the throne as well upon my passing,” his father pointed out.

“Kinton went on about that, too. He got into my head,” Klaus admitted.

“That I believe.” Lord Kottenfurst sat forward in his chair and placed his hand on top of Klaus’s. “Son, I love you. And I know that you love me. I... appreciate that you wanted to protect me. But to do so at the cost of the lives of Nik and Isa... I am not so important. I am not worth their lives.”

Klaus’s head snapped up, and he looked his father in the eye. “I believe you are.”

His father could only smile sadly at him and shake his head.

“Mother thinks I should tell Uncle Rich of this as well.”

Lord Kottenfurst sat back in his chair, frowning.

“Does he know of your, er, activities during the war?” Klaus asked.

“No, he doesn’t.” He ran a hand down his face once again, clearly thinking this through. Eventually, he nodded. “Your mother is probably right, but I like that as little as I like what you did.”

“Should I—”

“No!” He paused and then said more gently, “No. I will tell him. Not now. There is already too much excitement going on in this house between you and Miss North, not to mention Nik and Lady Hope’s engagement ball. But I will tell him.”

Klaus nodded. He took in a deep breath and realized with surprise that his chest felt lighter. He’d been holding on to this secret for so long. Now that it was out, he knew he never, ever wanted to keep a secret from his father again. He’d hated not telling him the truth. It hadn’t been easy, but he felt so much better.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Early the following morning, Klaus was summoned to his uncle's presence. The man was sitting at Lord Everston's desk working away when Klaus joined him. It had taken Klaus a few minutes to gird himself to the lecture he was most likely about to receive, but he couldn't avoid his uncle forever, and the longer he waited, the more annoyed the man would probably be.

"Ah, Klaus, here. These need to be responded to. Read through them and then give me your thoughts on what you think we should say. If I agree, I'll leave you to write the letters." His uncle pushed forward a small pile of correspondence sitting on the corner of the desk closest to Klaus.

That was it? He just wanted Klaus to resume his duties as secretary? Keeping his sigh of relief inaudible, Klaus picked up the letters and read through them. He then waited until his uncle was finished reading through another piece of correspondence before telling him his thoughts.

"Very good, very good. I like most of what you've said," his uncle said. He then told Klaus his own ideas on the matters at hand and then told him to get to work drafting responses.

They worked through the morning and into the early afternoon. At about one, a footman came in to ask if they would like a light luncheon brought to them. The Prince agreed that would be best since he still had a pile of work to complete before he could rest for the day.

A few minutes later, a tray was brought in.

While they helped themselves to food, Klaus could feel his uncle's gaze on him.

"You make an excellent secretary, Klaus," his uncle said, as he slathered

mustard onto a piece of bread.

“Thank you. I enjoy the work.”

The Prince nodded. “Enough to want to make this a full-time occupation?”

Klaus looked up. He’d just taken a large bite of his own sandwich and had a hard time not choking it down quickly so he could answer. When he didn’t say anything, his uncle continued, “I like your style of writing, and I like your ideas—much more creative than my current man. If you are interested, I won’t hesitate to move Braun to another position. I would, of course, request him to stay on for about a month, so he could teach you all the ins and outs of the job once we return, but after that...”

“I would be honored, sir,” Klaus said, after taking a sip of the ale they’d been brought to go with their food.

“Yes?”

“Absolutely. I only have one problem. I, er, don’t know that it would be possible for me to accept the position,” Klaus said reluctantly. Deep in his heart he hoped and prayed the Prince would set aside the barriers to him taking the job, but he didn’t want to seem overly confident.

“Why is that?” the Prince asked, frowning at him.

“Well, it would be impossible for me to carry out my duties from Kottenfurst. I would need to be in Aachen.”

The Prince waved his sandwich through the air as if brushing away a fly.

“Your confinement would, of course, be lifted. I’ve corresponded with my advisors on this, and we believe it might be best if you were brought on for a probationary period. Braun will already be working with you to show you everything you’ll need to do. He’ll just take on the additional task of monitoring your work, correspondence, and any meetings you have with others—like a shadow, if you will. It won’t be for very long, just until everyone is satisfied that you have indeed learned your lesson and are the responsible young man I’ve always expected you to be.”

“I am! I have!” Klaus answered, practically vibrating with just the thought of being free once more.

The Prince looked at him long and hard. “Your parents and even Nik tell me you did what you did because you wanted a position in my government.”

“That is the honest truth,” Klaus agreed immediately—it wasn’t the whole truth, but certainly a part of it. “I’ve always wanted to work in government.”

“Why did you not simply ask me for a position?” his uncle asked, putting down his sandwich and crossing his arms over his chest.

“I did! I asked you as soon as I had graduated from university,” Klaus protested.

“When was that? Three, no, four years ago?” the Prince asked, uncrossing his arms and sitting up.

“Five, Your Majesty. I'm four years older than Nik.”

“Ah, right. Yes, of course. I believe I told you to get more life experience first.”

“That's right.”

“And so you decided that killing your cousins would count as such experience?”

“Not precisely,” Klaus answered. “There was, er, another circumstance that led to that idea.”

The Prince raised an imperious eyebrow.

“My father has told me that he will discuss the issue with you after the house party.”

The eyebrow lowered. “Your father.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you are not at liberty to tell me yourself?”

“No, sir.”

The Prince sighed and closed his eyes. “Very well. But now? If I give you this position...”

“You can be assured that I will do everything in my power to make you and Aachen-Düren prosper.”

“And how can I be sure that you won't, at some point, decide that you've had enough being my secretary and decide you'd rather a more important position?”

“Oh, sir, you can be sure that *will* happen. But when it does, I swear I will simply apply to you for the position rather than attempt to take it forcefully. Believe me, I have learned that is not the way to advance in the government.”

His uncle nodded. “Very well. Once we return to Aachen, you will work under my current secretary. He will teach you everything that he does, which is a great deal more even than what you've been assisting me with here, and then you will take over the position. After a few years, if you do well, we'll see about moving you to a more elevated position.”

“That would be... Uncle, if you will allow me this position and my

freedom, might you also give me your blessing to marry Miss North?”

“Not without your father's permission,” the Prince said sternly.

“From what my mother told me, he only objected because he didn't think I should marry until I had earned my freedom. If you give it to me, I'm certain he'll lift his objections.”

“And Lady Melfield?”

“Well... I'm hoping she will do the same once she realizes that Sophia and I are truly in love.”



The soft knock on her door jolted Sophia awake. She'd been dozing for some time, idly wondering if she could attempt to get up.

The door opened and Lou stuck her head into the room. “Are you awake?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Sophia answered.

“Oh, good. I didn't want to disturb you if you were still sleeping.” Lou came into the room, closing the door behind her.

“I was just contemplating getting up. I need to use the chamber pot, but just the thought of sitting up is daunting.”

Lou gave a little laugh. “How about some help, then.”

“Please?”

Her sister came over and helped Sophia sit up. As she did so, she said, “The surgeon said he didn't think your ribs were broken, just badly bruised.”

“He wrapped them anyway, just to be sure,” Sophia told her. “But my arm *is* broken.” She held out her tightly splinted and wrapped arm. “Thank goodness it's my left.”

“Yes. Do you feel ready to attempt to stand?” Lou asked.

Sophia gave a nod and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She then stood with her sister holding on to her good arm. She paused there and then gave a nod. “I think I can do the rest on my own. Thank you.” She went behind the screen and took care of business while her sister chatted, telling her about the dinner she'd missed the night before and how terrified they'd all been when her horse had returned without her.

“I still can't believe that groom gave you a mount you couldn't control,” Lou said, when Sophia came out again.

“I didn’t request any horse in particular, and I suppose he thought I knew how to ride well. It was a different stable hand from the one who’d been there the other day when I went out riding to tour the estate.”

“But the horse was too much for you to handle,” Lou said with a shake of her head.

“Well, it was more that she wanted to run, and I didn’t want her to. I had to keep reining her in and slowing her down. I guess my mind wandered and the moment I loosened the rein even just a touch, she just took off. I just didn’t see the low-hanging branch before it was too late,” Sophia told her.

Lou winced in sympathy. “We’re lucky you only have a broken arm and bruised ribs.”

“I’m lucky there was a cabin nearby, and Klaus came and found me!” Sophia turned to her wardrobe and started looking through it for a simple gown to wear.

“You’re not going to get dressed!” Lou protested.

“Of course I am. I have a broken arm, that’s all.”

“Sophia, you should stay in bed and rest.”

“I can rest sitting on a sofa in the drawing room.”

“Are you sure?” Lou asked, looking worried.

Sophia just smiled at her older sister. “Yes.” She turned back to the wardrobe and pulled out a deep green woolen gown that had a row of tiny pearl buttons down the back. “Here, this isn’t my nicest gown, but it’s warm and easy to wear if you’ll help me.”

“Of course. And we’ll keep your stays tied loosely so as not to hurt your ribs.”

Sophia nodded.

“About yesterday...” Lou started to say as she helped Sophia take off her nightgown and put on a shift and her stays.

“Yes?”

“You were very angry when Klaus didn’t say anything after Lord Kottenfurst and I protested your engagement,” Lou said hesitantly.

“Well, wouldn’t you be? He told me at the cabin that he loved me, but at the first sign of opposition he folded like a well-read letter.”

Lou smiled at the analogy but quickly became serious again. “Do you love him?”

Sophia was grateful her head was inside her gown just at that moment and she wasn’t able to answer her sister right away. Truthfully, she was beginning

to question her own feelings. She'd thought she loved him—he was, after all, quite wonderful and so caring. The way he'd looked out for her the entire time they'd been at this house party, even after she'd snubbed him and been so rude. He'd still been kind. Never in her life had she felt so... protected, cared for... as if she were someone special.

But she knew she had to shove all that aside and remember what he'd done to Lou. How could Sophia admit she loved the man who'd put her sister through so much distress? How could she tell her sister that she wanted to marry the man who'd tried to kill her closest friends? Lou said she forgave him, but when Sophia looked into her eyes, she wondered if she saw doubt there.

After the dress had been pulled down into place, Sophia asked, "What do you think of him? You objected to our marrying very quickly."

"That's because I know that when we arrived you were furious Klaus was even here. You hated him on sight. I didn't want you to think that you needed to marry him simply because you were alone with him for a few hours."

"I was alone with him for an entire night," Sophia pointed out.

"But nothing happened between you, right?" Lou paused, straightening the gown to look Sophia in the eye.

"Nothing at all," Sophia assured her.

With a nod, Lou moved around to Sophia's back and began buttoning the dress. "Well then, I don't think there's any reason you should feel compelled to marry him. I've told you I want you to marry someone you love. I want you to be as happy as I am with Anthony."

"I know."

"So, there is no need for you to marry Lord Klaus if you don't want to," Lou reiterated.

But what if I wanted to marry him, Sophia asked herself silently. She didn't have the nerve to ask the question out loud. She knew Lou said she forgave him for what he did to her two years ago, but did she feel good enough about him to allow her only sister to marry him?



That evening Klaus dressed for dinner a little early so as to catch his father before going downstairs.

His mother answered their bedchamber door.

“Good evening, Mother. Is Papa here? I’d like a word with him if possible.”

“Of course. He’s still getting dressed.” She stepped back to allow him into the room.

His father was standing in front of a tall standing mirror, his chin in the air, as his valet tied his cravat. There were three crumpled discarded pieces hanging over the back of the dressing table chair. Klaus waited patiently while the careful operation was being performed.

When his father finally lowered his chin and examined the man’s work, the valet stood back with an anxious expression on his face. Slowly, Lord Kottenfurst nodded. “Very well. That should do for this evening. Thank you, Franz.”

The man bowed and then helped his lordship with his coat. When that garment was settled to both men’s satisfaction, the valet stepped away, taking the discarded neck clothes with him.

“Well?” his father asked, finally turning toward Klaus.

Now it was Klaus’s turn to be nervous. “I was wondering, Papa, if you might have that word with the Prince, er, earlier than you had originally planned.”

His father’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“My uncle was so gracious as to offer me a position this afternoon—as his secretary—but with one condition,” Klaus explained.

His father’s face broke out into a broad smile, and his mother, who’d also been standing nearby, stepped forward. “Oh, Klaus, that’s wonderful!” she exclaimed, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I’m so thrilled for you!”

“Yes, well—” Klaus began.

“What’s the condition?” his father asked.

“That I take the position under probation with Braun, his current secretary, monitoring everything I do and everyone I speak with,” Klaus explained.

“Ah. He’s not sure if he can trust you yet or not.” His father nodded his understanding.

“Precisely. But I’m certain it would help me a great deal if you might...”

“Explain the entire situation to him,” his father finished for him.

“It would not just be for me, but for you as well. You know it would be a weight off your shoulders were you to tell him the truth,” Klaus pointed out.

His father sighed and looked toward Klaus's mother. "I have only been telling him this for how many years?" she asked, poking a finger into her husband's side.

"Very well. I shall do this—for both of us," his father finally said, admitting defeat. "It won't be easy..."

"But it's the right thing to do—for both you and Klaus," Lady Kottenfurst said, taking a step forward and raising herself onto her toes in order to give her husband a kiss on his cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY



After two days of recuperating, Klaus hoped that Sophia would be well enough to attend the Everstons' ball. He also desperately hoped he would finally get a chance to speak with her. He'd tried so many times in so many different ways, but he'd never managed to find her alone. On the afternoon of the thirty-first, he found Isa in the conservatory where he'd gone in the hopes of running into Sophia.

"Oh, cousin," he said, finding her there with her baby in her arms. The child was wiggling and clearly upset but not quite crying outright.

"What are you up to, Klaus," she responded in German, bouncing the baby.

"Er, nothing," he said, speaking in the same language. "I like this room with its enormous windows, that's all. It's like being outside only a great deal warmer. And you? How is my little cousin?" He chuckled the baby's velvety cheek.

"Not sleeping when he should be," Isa said with a little laugh. "I'm giving Nanny a break. Apparently, he didn't sleep very well last night, and instead of being a good little boy..." She glared down at him fondly. "He is not even napping when he usually does."

"Ah, I suspect there is simply too much to do and see," Klaus said. "May I?" He reached for the baby.

Isa handed him over with a little surprise and curiosity. "I never thought of you as someone who would like babies."

Klaus shrugged. "I've never had any interaction with them before this. But I find this little one quite fascinating." He arranged the baby so that his head rested on Klaus's shoulder with the baby's face toward his neck.

“Perhaps you should put this between his wet face and your nice coat,” she said, offering him a soft little blanket.

He bent himself at the knees so his shorter cousin could arrange it on his shoulder and then stood back up and began to slowly walk around the room with a gentle bouncing step. With his free hand, he gently stroked the baby’s face, encouraging him to close his eyes. After a couple of minutes, Klaus asked, “Have you seen Miss North today?”

“She was in the drawing room most of the morning,” Isa told him, watching him wander from the center of the room.

He nodded and turned to wander in the other direction. “Is she feeling better?”

“She is. It’s quite amazing she wasn’t hurt worse when she was knocked off her horse.”

“Indeed. I can’t imagine how painful and difficult it must have been for her. But it was lucky she found the cabin even though she wasn’t able to bring in the firewood that was nearby.”

“But you did. And I hear you spent a very pleasant night just chatting,” she said, looking at him curiously.

“Don’t give me that look. That is precisely what we did. We talked,” he told her honestly.

“And decided to marry,” she added.

He nodded and turned about to walk back the way he’d come. “It was the least I could do since I hadn’t wanted to risk returning her to the house injured in the middle of the night.”

“Why was it that you didn’t return right away?” she asked more closely.

“It was dark and snowing, and she was in a great deal of pain,” he told her.

“And you wanted an excuse to propose,” she suggested.

He gave her a little smile. “I might have.”

She chuckled but then stopped quickly. “I’m sorry that didn’t work out.”

“Oh, don’t worry. The subject isn’t fully closed yet. My father objected because I hadn’t been granted my freedom, and he didn’t want Miss North to be subjected to imprisonment because of me.”

“*Hadn’t* been granted your freedom?” she asked.

“I don’t know that he wants it announced quite yet, but your father has offered me a position as his secretary. With it, I will be granted my freedom.” He paused. “Does that bother you?”

“No!” she said quickly. She paused as if thinking about it. “I do believe that you have atoned for what you did.”

“I have—I hope so. Truly.”

She nodded. “Then you should be allowed to be free and to take this position with my father. It’s the sort of thing you wanted all along, isn’t it?”

“It is. And I’ve warned him that I will be looking to advance from there.”

She looked at him with amazement. “What did he say?”

“That he would consider it once I had proven my worth. He thought four or five years as his secretary would be a good amount of time, and then he will consider me for a higher post.”

“That’s wonderful, Klaus. I’m really happy for you,” she said, sounding as if she truly meant it.

“Thank you. Now, I just need to secure my bride, and everything will be as it should be. I don’t suppose you would know if she were planning to be at the ball tonight?”

She smiled ruefully. “No, I’m afraid I don’t.” But then a sly little twinkle entered her eyes. “Do you want me to find out for you?”

He stopped walking directly in front of her. “Would you?” he asked, peering down at his shoulder where the baby was now fast asleep.

“I’d be happy to, especially since you’ve just made my life so much easier.” She gave a little chuckle, nodding toward the baby.

When she didn’t immediately make a move to take the child he asked, “Should I take him directly up to the nursery or will you?”

Her smile was brilliant as she said, “I’m afraid I’m going to ask you to do so, so we don’t disturb him any more than necessary. Do you mind?”

“I do not.” He reached out and gave her arm a gentle, loving squeeze. “You’ve got a wonderful little family. Hopefully, I will as well before too long.”

“My prayers are with you, Klaus.”



Klaus had been thrilled to learn that Sophia had, indeed, planned to go to the ball. It was to be held in London so that the greatest number of people would be able to attend despite it being in the middle of winter.

Lord and Lady Everston went up to Town in the morning to ensure

everything was in readiness. Lady Hope and Nik, in whose honor the ball was being held, left a little early, so they were there on time for anyone who arrived early. Everyone else made the two-hour drive in a caravan of coaches.

Klaus had been hoping to get into the same coach as Sophia, but she somehow managed to leave with Lord and Lady Melfield and the Dowager Lady Melfield just as he arrived in the entrance hall. Instead, he rode with his parents. The last coach, carrying Isa, Ranleigh, and the Prince was just behind theirs.

Lady Everston had truly done a magnificent job of having the ballroom decorated. There were hundreds if not thousands of candles, and the room was filled with the festive greenery of the season. Footmen wandered about handing out glasses of champagne to those who wanted it, lemonade to those who were not imbibing.

Before the start of the first dance, Klaus managed to locate Sophia as she stood across the room with her sister. Strangely enough, by the time he reached the vicinity she had disappeared.

“Lady Melfield,” he said, approaching the woman.

“Good evening, Lord Klaus,” she said, giving him a polite smile.

“Good evening. I was hoping to ask your sister for the first dance,” he told her, still looking around to see if she might be nearby.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you just missed her. She’s gone off to greet some friends. I’m not entirely certain she is planning to dance tonight in any case,” she said, looking at him. Was that disapproval he read there? Maybe this was going to be more difficult than he’d thought.

“Oh, of course. Well, perhaps I’ll get a chance to promenade with her a little later, then,” he said. He gave her a nod and then went off to see if he could even just get a glimpse of where Sophia had disappeared—if she had actually gone to speak to friends or if she were simply avoiding him.

He did see her a short time later speaking with some other young ladies, so perhaps he still stood a chance. He could only hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



S omehow Klaus seemed to spend the entire evening chasing Sophia around the ballroom. She moved from group to group, always disappearing just as he arrived. When the clock struck midnight and everyone raised a toast to both the New Year and the happily engaged couple, he finally managed to come up behind her.

“Happy New Year, Miss North,” he said, stepping up next to her.

She jumped, nearly spilling her champagne. “Oh, Lord Klaus, you startled me.”

“I am sorry about that, but I’ve been trying to speak with you all evening, and somehow have managed to miss you every time.”

“Really,” she said, her gaze sliding away.

So, she had been avoiding him! Well, he wasn’t going to let her continue to do so.

“Please, Sophia,” he said quietly so only she could hear. “Let me have a word.”

“But of course! What is it you wanted to say?” she said innocently.

He frowned. “In private,” he clarified. He offered her his arm.

Reluctantly, she placed her right hand in the crook of his elbow.

He immediately led her straight to the French doors leading out into the garden, managing to hand off their champagne glasses to a passing footman as they went.

“It’s too cold to go outdoors, my lord,” she protested when he started to reach for the door.

“I’ll lend you my coat or call for your wrap,” he offered.

She just frowned at him for a moment and gave a small shrug of her

shoulders and slipped through the door that had been left open a crack to allow some cooler air into the overheated room.

He took her to the far end of the balcony, knowing that neither one of them wanted to step out into the snow in their dancing slippers. Once there, he shrugged out of his coat and placed it around her shoulders. It was cold, but he was so nervous he barely felt the temperature. He took her hands in his, being careful with her left as her arm was wrapped tightly to keep the broken bone from moving while it healed.

“I know you are angry with me,” he started before she could even say a word. “But I want to explain to you why I didn’t speak up when my father and your sister objected to our marrying.”

“Really, you have no need—” she started.

“Yes, I do have a need to do so,” he interrupted. “My father objected, and I didn’t speak up for precisely the same reason, because neither one of us wanted to subject you to the same punishment I have had to live with for the past two years. You should not have to pay for my mistakes.”

She frowned up at him. “Punishment?”

“My incarceration on my father’s estate. You know I haven’t been allowed to leave there since I returned to Aachen-Düren.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Oh, I see. If I married you, then I...” she paused. “But I wouldn’t have been subjected to the same punishment.”

“No, but even after we married, which we would have had to do at Kottenfurst, I would still be subjected to it. And if you’d left the estate, I wouldn’t have been able to go with you.”

“Oh, yes. I... I hadn’t thought of that,” she admitted.

“I couldn’t have done that to you.”

She nodded, now understanding.

“However,” he said, clasping her hands a little tighter. “My uncle has offered me a position as his secretary and with it he has granted me my freedom. I’m certain I’ll still be watched carefully, but I am no longer going to be confined to Kottenfurst.”

“But that’s wonderful for you!” she said, looking up at him.

“It is. Because it means that I can now, very properly, propose to you.” He lowered himself to one knee and let go of one of her hands, so he could fish in his pocket for the ring he’d brought. He held it up to her. “Please, Sophia, would you do me the great honor—”

“No!” She winced and then closed her eyes. “I am so sorry, Klaus, but

I... I cannot.” She snatched her hand from his, turned and ran back into the ball.

Klaus just stayed there, kneeling on the ground, unable to believe what had just happened. He only stood when a footman stepped outside, looking for him, Klaus’s coat in his hand.



Sophia ran back into the ballroom and then, at one woman’s shocked expression, realized she still had Klaus’s coat on. She immediately slipped out of it and found a footman to take it back to him. If she paused to hold it up to her nose for the briefest moment so she could smell his spicy, enticing scent one last time before turning it over, no one would ever know.

She’d been so successful all night at avoiding Klaus. She’d been so proud of herself. It had almost become like a game of tag or hide and seek. The moment she saw him heading in her direction, she would make some excuse to whoever she was speaking to and disappear before he could reach her.

She hadn’t seen him sneak up on her after the New Year’s toast. He’d caught her, and there had been no way to avoid going outside with him without being extremely rude. Now, she almost wished she had managed to avoid it because if she hadn’t let him have his say she would still be angry with him. Perhaps she would always wonder if she’d been wrong to stay away from him, but at least she wouldn’t feel so utterly devastated as she did now.

Turning down his proposal had been the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life. She still couldn’t believe she’d had the wherewithal to do so. Where had that strength come from?

She knew immediately where—her love for Lou. It was only her love for her sister that had made her turn him down.

As if thinking of her, brought Lou to her. Sophia glanced to her right and found her sister standing not far away. Incredibly, she wasn’t speaking with anyone just at the moment. Perfect.

“Please, Lou, I want to go home,” Sophia said, walking up to her sister. “And I don’t mean back to Everston, I mean *home*. Can we not return to the house in Town tonight? Please?”

“What is wrong, Sophia? What has happened? Klaus was looking for you.

You must not have spoken with him yet.”

The moment the woman she'd spoken to opened her mouth, Sophia realized her mistake. She was speaking with Princess Isa, not her sister! They looked too much alike!

“Oh, Princess Isa! I am so sorry. I mistook you—”

The princess gave a little smile. “It's all right. It has been happening to me all night, and probably to Lou as well. We are practically identical.”

“You are! I should have remembered you were in blue, and Lou is wearing green tonight,” Sophia said. She was sure her cheeks were bright pink with embarrassment.

“Yes. We were sure not to wear the same color,” Princess Isa said with a little laugh. She sobered immediately, though. “But tell me, you have not spoken with Klaus, have you?”

“I... I... I need to find my sister. Please excuse me.” Sophia spun around on her heel and walked quickly away praying the princess would forgive her rudeness. Lou was with Anthony nearly at the other end of the ballroom. She approached them and repeated her plea, this time to the right person.

“Why? What's happened?” Lou asked immediately.

“I... I'm not feeling well. I'm extremely tired. I think, maybe, it's too much coming to a ball so soon after the accident,” she said, lying through her teeth.

Her sister narrowed her eyes at her and shook her head. “There is something you're not telling me.”

“Perhaps it's a good idea,” Anthony said, taking her side for once. “I would not be at all surprised if your sister had overextended herself. A ball can be very strenuous, especially when you are still recovering. Come, I'll call for our coats and carriage.” He started to lead them out into the entry hall.

Sophia was walking directly behind Lou and could hear her say, “Anthony, she's upset about something.”

“I know. Give her a chance to calm down, and then, perhaps, she'll confide in you,” he said softly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The following morning, Sophia was woken by a light tapping on her door. It couldn't be the maid, she normally just walked in after a light knock with her morning chocolate and toast. No, it had to be—

“Sophia? Are you awake?” Lou said, opening the door.

“Yes, come in, Lou,” Sophia said, sitting up.

“I'm sorry. Did I disturb you?”

“It's all right. I'm sure Peggy will be here soon with my chocolate, anyway.” Sophia gave her sister a little smile even as the events of the previous evening all rushed back into her mind with painful clarity.

“I was wondering if you would be willing to discuss what happened last night,” Lou said, coming over and sitting at the edge of Sophia's bed.

Sophia knew in her heart that she would love nothing more than to tell her sister everything. Never had she kept anything—and certainly nothing so very important—from Lou. But she just couldn't.

If Lou knew that Klaus had proposed to her... and that she'd turned him down, despite the fact that she loved him with all her heart—something Sophia now knew for certain—her sister would be put into an untenable situation.

Lou had always said that she wanted nothing more than for Sophia to marry for love, and now here she was, finally in love with a man—the wrong man. How could she have allowed herself to fall in love with the one person who she could never marry?

She'd hated Klaus on sight, as well she should. He had terrorized both her and her sister. But then... something had happened. Even now, Sophia wasn't certain just what it was. Maybe it was his kindness. Maybe it was his gentle

thoughtfulness. Whatever it was, Sophia had succumbed. And no matter what her sister said, Sophia knew Lou would never feel comfortable with Klaus, would never allow Sophia to marry him. How could she after all he'd done?

Oh, Sophia knew that Lou said that she forgave him, that she understood, but did she really? Sophia knew her sister, and she didn't forgive and forget easily. She'd watched Lou throughout the house party and never once had she seen Lou voluntarily speak with Klaus. No, she had avoided him at all costs, and when Klaus had told everyone upon their return from the cabin that they were engaged, it had been Lou who had objected first and loudest.

No matter how Sophia felt, she would never hurt her sister or do anything to even make her feel uncomfortable. She owed Lou everything.

All this ran through Sophia's mind in the blink of an eye... well, perhaps two blinks and those blinks were quickly followed by more as Sophia attempted to keep the tears that suddenly threatened to spill over. Sophia just shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I just can't."

"Was it something to do with a gentleman? I saw you speaking with quite a few. In fact, you seemed to be quite busy, always flitting about, talking with people, making them laugh and then moving on. It was almost hard to keep track of you," Lou said with a smile.

Sophia managed to pull her lips up and return her smile. "You know me; I do love speaking with people, and it has been so long since I've seen many of those I spoke with."

"But then something must have happened? Did someone say something rude? I can't imagine a gentleman—"

"No, no one did anything. Please, Lou, can we just... just change the subject? I'm happy to be here." Sophia fiddled with the bedclothes, pulling them higher on her lap. Thankfully, the maid did come in just then with her chocolate.

"Of course," Lou said. She stood to allow the maid to place the tray across Sophia's lap. "Well, I just wanted to make sure you were all right. Oh, and to tell you that we'll be leaving for Everston in about an hour. Can you get yourself ready to go within that time?"

Sophia's heart stuttered. "No." She then quickly corrected her abrupt statement. "I mean, er, I would rather not return."

Lou shook her head. "Sophia, it would be rude of us to just abandon the house party like that. It's bad enough that we didn't return last night after the

ball.”

“I know, and you and Anthony should definitely go back. I’ll be fine here by myself. Just tell everyone that it’s so much better for me to continue my recuperation here. And I certainly won’t go out.”

“I can’t leave you here alone!”

“Well, you know I’m not actually alone. There is the staff. The holidays are just about over and, truly, I just want to be quiet for a little time after being so social. You understand, I’m sure.”



Klaus was grateful the Prince slept in the morning after the ball. He half feared the man was going to be up early, demanding that Klaus be hard at work before he’d even had a chance to have his coffee. In fact, it was a little surprising when Klaus entered the morning room to find only Isa there.

“Good morning,” Klaus said, as he picked up a plate from the sideboard and began helping himself to some eggs and meat.

“Good morning. Did you have a good time last night at the ball?” his cousin asked, pouring herself another cup of tea.

He hardly needed to think about it. “It could have been better,” he admitted.

“Oh dear! What happened?”

Klaus sat down next to her after asking for a cup of coffee. “Sophia led me on a merry dance all night, chasing after her. Only at midnight, after the toast, did I manage to speak with her by coming up from behind her so she wouldn’t have a chance to escape as she had the entire evening.”

“Goodness! She managed to elude you the entire night?”

He nodded as his mouth was full. Once he swallowed, he continued. “I finally got hold of her and convinced her to step outside with me.”

“And?” Isa looked at him eagerly.

“I explained why I hadn’t argued when my father and her sister objected to our getting married and then told her that the Prince had granted me my freedom.”

Isa smiled brightly. “And then you proposed?”

He nodded. “I did. And she turned me down.” He shoved another forkful of food into his mouth despite the fact that it now tasted like the filthy snow

that was piled along London's roads.

"Oh, Klaus! I am so sorry! Did she say why?"

He just shook his head. "She said no, and then she turned and left. I am hoping to speak with her about it today," he admitted. "If I can pin her down without her running from me the moment she sees me approach."

Isa sighed, drawing her eyebrows together. "I hate to tell you this, but neither she nor her sister and Melfield returned to the house last night. They must have gone to Lord Melfield's house in Town."

"What? But surely, they'll return today?" he said, putting his coffee cup down before he'd even taken a sip of its contents.

"I don't know. I hope so. It would be rather rude if they did not. But then again, if Sophia told Lou that she didn't want to see you—and why..."

"Then they may not be returning at all!"

His cousin could only shrug.

Klaus had now completely lost any appetite. He closed his eyes for a moment, wondering when the Prince was planning on returning to Aachen. He could only hope it wouldn't be right away so he could have a little time to find and speak with Sophia. With a sigh, he got up. "If you'll excuse me. I'm certain your father left work for me in the study."

"Klaus..."

He didn't wait to see what Isa had to say. He just strode from the room. The only thing worse than Sophia leaving and not returning was Isa's pity.

As he'd thought, there was a stack of correspondence for him to go through. The Prince joined him in the early afternoon, exceptionally pleased to find Klaus already at work.

"Ha! I knew I'd made a good choice," the man said, as he came into the room.

Klaus looked up and gave his uncle a little nod before returning to work. It was tempting to thank the Prince for providing such an excellent distraction from his personal troubles, but he didn't think the comment would be appreciated, so he just kept his mouth shut.

It was nearly four when there was a knock on the door.

"I do beg your pardon." Lady Melfield stayed hovering near the door.

Klaus stood.

"I was wondering if I could have a word, Lord Klaus?" she asked.

He frowned. "Of course, my lady. Sir? If you would excuse me?" he asked the Prince.

The man made a shooing motion. “Of course, of course.”

Klaus followed her out of the room and toward the back of the house to the conservatory. It was a difficult room for him to be in since it reminded him so forcefully of Sophia, but it was also probably one of the more private rooms in the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The moment Klaus walked into the room, Lady Melfield turned on him. “My sister is so upset she won’t even leave her bed. Why do I think you have something to do with this?”

Klaus’s mouth dropped open, but he snapped it shut again, his own anger rising. “I assure you, my lady, this is something she brought entirely on herself.”

“What happened?” she ground out, glaring at him.

Klaus strode over to the windows and stared out into the snow-covered garden, trying to regain control of himself. Finally, he turned back around to face the lady, saying as calmly as he could, “After forcing me to chase her around the ballroom the entire night, I finally managed to speak with Sophia in private. I asked her to marry me. She said no and then walked away. If she is upset, I assure you it is not because of anything I did. All I said to her was that I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.” He crossed his arms over his chest as if daring her to say that he’d done anything wrong.

Instead, her eyes went wide and then narrowed in thought. “You told her that you love her? I assume you were speaking the truth?”

“Of course!”

She nodded and began to pace back and forth across the center of the room. “Then what has her so upset?” she said quietly, more to herself than him. He assumed she wasn’t actually speaking to him and so didn’t answer. “Why would she be unhappy that you love her?” She paused in her pacing. “You didn’t say anything else to her?”

“I explained why I hadn’t spoken up when you and my father objected to our engagement after we returned from the cabin.” He shrugged helplessly.

“Why was that?”

“Because, at that time, I was still confined to my father’s estate. I couldn’t, in clear conscience, marry Sophia and force her to be confined as well,” he admitted.

She nodded. “That makes sense. It wouldn’t have been fair to her. But the Prince has lifted his edict and now you’re free to go where you please and therefore to marry Sophia,” she said, understanding. She must have heard of his new position with the Prince. It didn’t surprise him.

She resumed her pacing for only a moment before asking him, “And she agreed readily to your proposal the first time when you were in the cabin? She didn’t feel pressured at that point to accept you because of her reputation?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking that perhaps she had. Perhaps she didn’t actually *want* to marry me. But then why did she become so upset when you objected, and I didn’t speak up? I assure you, Lady Melfield, I’ve been going round and round every possible argument since she walked away from me last night.” Goodness, he wished he didn’t sound so much like a hurt puppy.

Lady Melfield looked at him with pity in her eyes. It didn’t help. “Of course. I am sorry. I only wish I knew what was going through my sister’s head.”

“Is there a reason why she would not want to marry me? I mean aside from the fact that she doesn’t love me?” Klaus asked. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished them back. He wasn’t at all certain he wanted to know the answer.

But Lady Melfield just shook her head. “Not unless she thinks it would hurt me. That’s the only thing I can think of.”

“How would it hurt you?” he asked, confused.

“Well, after the events of two years ago...”

“But—”

“I understand why you did what you did, and I have forgiven you for it,” she said, forestalling him with a raised hand. “But Sophia hadn’t.”

“No, I know. That was one thing we spoke of at length when we were in that cabin.”

Lady Melfield nodded. “So, is it possible that she thinks I still harbor hard feelings toward you? Is it possible she is refusing you out of an effort to spare me pain?”

“It does sound as if it’s something she would do,” he admitted, as he thought about it. “She is very sweet and thoughtful in that way.”

Lady Melfield nodded. “Very empathetic.” She sighed and turned to him. “Well, if that’s the case, I know precisely what you need to do.” She gave him a little smile.

He just narrowed his eyes at her. “Are you certain it isn’t something *you* need to do? Shouldn’t it be you reassuring her that you approve of this marriage—assuming you do?”

“I’ll make sure she knows I approve, but it is you who needs to go and speak with her.”

“We could both go,” he suggested. He didn’t know if Sophia would believe him or just think he was putting words in her sister’s mouth to get what he wanted.

“We could,” she agreed. “But I have faith you’ll be able to handle this on your own. If you truly love my sister...”

She paused meaningfully, so he immediately jumped in. “I do!”

“Good, then you must go and tell her so—in no uncertain terms that you do and that I approve of your suit.”



Sophia hadn’t even bothered to get up that day. She could hardly bear to face a day without Klaus, without Lou. Alone, as she would be for the rest of her life. Well, she supposed she could become the beloved, indulgent auntie who was always there. She would be a cross between aunt and nanny. What else could she do?

By midmorning, she was sitting in the window seat staring out at the snow-laden little garden behind the house when there was a soft knock on her door. Her maid came in. “I beg your pardon, Miss North, but there is a gentleman here to see you.”

Sophia turned around. “A gentleman?”

The maid handed her a visiting card. “Klaus, Graf Adenheim” was scratched out and “Lord Klaus Kottenfurst” handwritten onto the card. She gave a bitter little laugh. He hadn’t even had new cards printed up after he’d lost his title. She supposed he figured it wasn’t worth it since he couldn’t actually visit anyone.

“I put him in the formal drawing room. Can I assist you to dress?”

“No. Tell him... tell him I am unwell and unable to speak with him. Give my regrets.” She turned back to continue staring out the window while the maid went off to deliver her message.

Ten minutes hadn't even passed before she heard the door open again. “Unwell or sulking?” said Klaus's voice from behind her.

She spun around. “Klaus! I am not dressed. You cannot simply barge into my bedchamber like that.”

He stood there just inside the door with his hands on his hips. “Apparently, I can. I thought I would be polite about this and even sent up my card, but you have forced me to take stronger measures.”

He strode forward until he was standing directly in front of her. “Your sister sends her regards and has asked me to bring you back to Everston.”

“No, she hasn't! If she'd wanted me there, she would have insisted I return with her yesterday.”

“She sent her maid to assist you to dress and with any packing you might have,” he continued as if she hadn't said anything.

“She, she sent her maid?” Sophia looked behind Klaus and found Watson standing there looking displeased, but then she always did so.

“I do not approve of gentlemen in the bedchambers of young ladies,” the lady's maid said succinctly. “My lord, now that you have informed Miss North of your presence more forcefully, please leave so that she may dress and meet with you in a proper manner.”

He glanced behind him and nodded. “I shall see you in the drawing room in a quarter of an hour,” he informed Sophia. He turned and left.

“The nerve!” Sophia breathed.

“I cannot approve of such behavior, Miss North, but there was no stopping him when Mary came down with that message,” the woman said, turning to Sophia's wardrobe and beginning to pull out clothing for Sophia to wear.

“I can't say I approve either, but he is certainly persistent, isn't he?” Sophia agreed. She allowed the woman to help her dress and was in the drawing room a mere twenty minutes later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“I was not sulking,” Sophia said as she entered the drawing room where Klaus was sitting paging through the *Lady’s Monthly*.

He stood, putting the magazine back on the table where he must have found it. “You look much better—not that I minded your dressing gown, it was very pretty.”

She frowned at him and tried her best not to let even the slightest tinge of amusement cross her lips. Deep inside, her traitorous mind did little jumps of joy at the thought that he liked seeing her in dishabille.

“Watson did confirm that my sister would like me to return to Everston,” Sophia allowed, as she sat on the sofa across from the chair Klaus had been sitting in. She certainly hadn’t expected that he would come and sit next to her, but he did just that. Not only did he sit close, but he faced her and took her right hand in his, since her left arm was in the sling the doctor had insisted she wear. It still hurt from the night of the ball when she’d not worn it, not wanting to look too odd or injured.

“I had a long conversation with your sister yesterday,” he told her. “She wanted to know what had upset you so much.”

Sophia turned her head to look away but said nothing.

“I told her that I loved you and then what happened the night of the ball. She was surprised it was you who was so upset. She thought I should have been the one to take to my room and stay there.” His lips lifted into a smile.

He was teasing her. “No, she did not! She doesn’t believe in such nonsense,” Sophia said, trying to keep her own smile away.

“Oh, all right, perhaps she didn’t say exactly that, but I could tell she was thinking it.”

Now she really did giggle.

“Sophia, I love you. Please, please tell me why you won’t marry me,” he said, becoming serious again.

“Lou...” Sophia started, but then a lump in her throat got in the way.

“Your sister has given me her blessing. She even sent the maid to corroborate if you didn’t believe me,” he told her.

Sophia turned and looked up into his sky-blue eyes. He looked earnest. Could it possibly be true?

He let go of her hand and placed his gently on her cheek. “Let me say it again because it doesn’t seem to be getting through to you. I love you. Your sister has no objection. I have done everything—absolutely everything possible—to ensure that I be granted my freedom so that I could ask you to marry me.”

“Well, I’m sure you wanted your freedom for yourself—”

“Of course I did, but truly, I was thinking of you as I worked to impress the Prince with my skills. I want to spend the rest of my life doing everything within my power to make you happy. Please, say you will marry me?”

Tears pricked at her eyes. “Is this my Christmas miracle?” she breathed.

“If you’ll say yes, it will certainly be mine.”

She gave a little nod. And suddenly he was kissing her. His lips pressed fervently against her own, his tongue traced the outline of her mouth until she opened to him, and then their tongues danced together in the most joyous of dances.

When he lifted his head, he smiled. “You have made me the happiest man, Sophia.”

“And you have made me frustrated, angry, annoyed, and unreasonably happy.”

He laughed. “And I may do so for the rest of our lives.”



Klaus could have wished Lady Melfield’s maid anywhere else, but she had ridden with him inside the carriage on the way to London, and she was going to do the same on their way back. Of course, the main difference was that Klaus had been a nervous wreck and had actually found the woman’s calm, cool demeanor somewhat comforting on their way to London. Coming back,

however, he rode with Sophia's hand clasped tightly within his own, and he wanted nothing more than to be able to kiss her, nibble at her ear, or even just tell her again and again how happy he was. But Sophia was clearly uncomfortable even just allowing him to hold her hand with the woman present. Twice she had tried to slip it from his; twice he'd reclaimed it.

"Klaus," Sophia whispered, with a pointed look at the woman sitting calmly across from them.

"I don't care. We are engaged now. I am allowed to hold your hand."

"You will not be truly engaged until Lord and Lady Melfield have said so," Watson said crisply.

"But I thought my sister had already given her approval," Sophia asked, pulling her hand from Klaus's once again.

"She said she wanted Lord Klaus to return you to Everston," the woman said.

Sophia glared at Klaus. "You said she approved—"

"She did!" He turned and narrowed his eyes at Mrs. Watson. "You know very well she did."

"I wish to hear it from her mouth while the two of you are standing directly in front of her. And Lord Melfield, as well, has a say in the matter. He is Miss North's guardian."

Sophia huffed and crossed her right arm under her left, which was within its sling, ensuring that Klaus couldn't hold her hand.

"Well, in that case, do you need to hear it from the Prince and my father as well?" Klaus snapped.

"Yes, that would be most reassuring," the woman said, giving him a cold smile.

"I am—"

"Klaus, let's just be patient, please," Sophia said, putting her hand on his arm.

He was grateful this woman was Lady Melfield's maid and not Sophia's. He would not hesitate to fire her the moment they were married if she were tied to Sophia.

They arrived at Everston just in time to change for dinner.

When Klaus entered the drawing room before the meal, Sophia was not down yet. Lady Melfield immediately left her conversation with Lady Everston to come over and greet him. "Well?" she asked.

He could only smile. "Aside from some frustration with your maid on our

way back, it all went well.”

“My maid?” she asked.

“She refused to accept the fact that Sophia and I were engaged until she learned of your approval, and Lord Melfield’s.” Klaus told her.

“Oh, she is such a stickler,” Lady Melfield said, brushing aside his words. “Well, I certainly approve, as you very well know. And I am so happy for you, Klaus.”

He relaxed a little. “Thank you.”

Sophia came in and joined them.

Lady Melfield immediately gave her sister a hug without saying a word and then tapped her ring against her glass to get everyone’s attention. Once everyone had turned toward her, she said, “I have wonderful news! We are to have another wedding.” She turned and looked at Klaus and Sophia with a brilliant smile on her face.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Isa said, giving a little clap of her hands.

“Congratulations!” Ranleigh said.

“Wait, just a moment,” Lord Melfield said. “Do I not get a say in this? Klaus, you did not come to me to ask for my sister-in-law’s hand.”

Klaus’s breathing stopped. Was he really going to cause trouble? To insist on such formalities? Was he truly Sophia’s guardian? “I, er, I asked Lady Melfield’s permission, but I wasn’t aware that I needed yours, my lord,” Klaus stammered.

Lord Melfield just smiled at him. “Well, officially, *I* am her guardian. However, in all things Sophia, I do defer to my wife. If she said it was all right, then, of course, it is. We’ll meet later with solicitors to draw up a marriage contract.”

“But what about Lord Klaus’s confinement to Kottenfurst?” Lady Hope asked.

“I have released him from it,” the Prince said. “He is to be my secretary once we return to Aachen. And I have also approved of this match. Alex, you don’t have any objections, do you?” he said, turning to Klaus’s father.

“I have only one stipulation,” Lord Kottenfurst said.

“What is that?” Sophia asked, beginning to look worried.

“That you learn to ride a horse better!” the man said before bursting out into laughter.

“Oh,” Sophia breathed with relief.

“How about if, as a wedding gift, I give Miss North the sweet mare she

rode the day we went out to tour my estate?” Lord Everston offered.

“That is very kind of you,” Sophia said, giving him a grateful smile. “Just so long as you don’t switch it with that other horse I rode after that.”

He laughed. “No, no. I promise that one I will be keeping for myself. She is a handful!”

“So, there are no objections?” Klaus confirmed, looking around the room.

“We only wish you both all the happiness in the world,” Nik said, putting his arm around Lady Hope’s shoulders. She nodded her agreement.

“Thank you,” Klaus said.

“And now we’ll have two royal weddings to celebrate, so you’d all better plan on coming to Aachen this spring,” the Prince said.

“I don’t know that mine counts as royal,” Klaus began.

“Of course it does! You’re my nephew. You may not be the heir to the throne, but you are still a member of the royal family.”

“Thank you, sir,” Klaus said, with a bow. He turned to Sophia. “Well, now you’ll get your chance to be a real princess, unlike your sister.”

She just laughed. “Just so long as I’m with you, nothing else matters.”

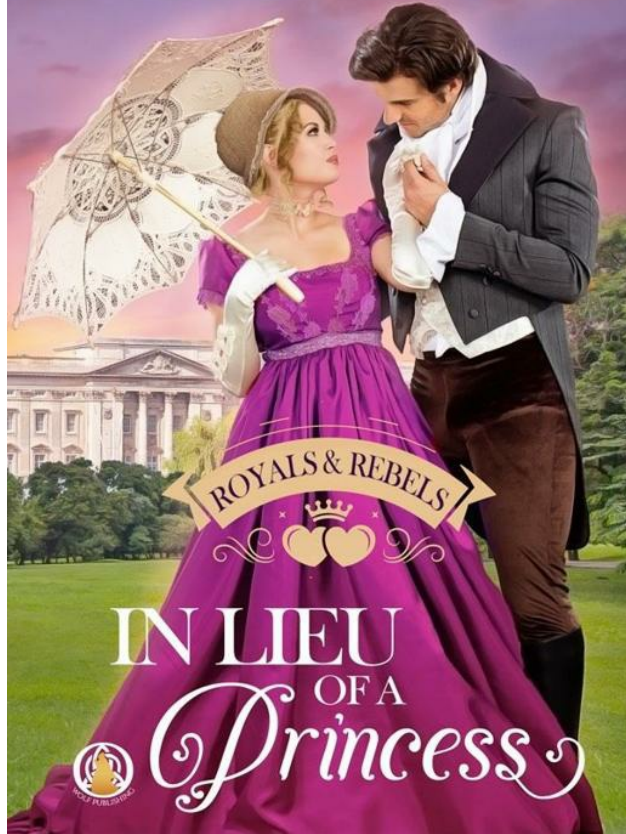
THE END

Thank you for reading *Christmas Forgiveness* by Meredith Bond!

This story is an addition to the *Royals & Rebels series*, which tells the stories of Prince Nikolaus, his sister Princess Louisa, and their accidental ally Lucinda North as they each discover romance, and adventure.

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ABOUT MEREDITH BOND



USA Today bestselling author Meredith Bond’s books straddle that beautiful line between historical romance and fantasy. An award-winning author, she writes sweet, fun, traditional Regency romances, medieval Arthurian romances, and Regency romances with a touch of magic. Known for her characters “who slip readily into one’s heart,” Meredith loves to take her readers on a journey they won’t soon forget.

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UNTIL SPRING

A BREAKING THE RULES OF THE BEAU MONDE
NOVELLA

SHANNON GILMORE



Until Spring by Shannon Gilmore

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Spinster rule number one: always carry mistletoe.

Spinster rule number two: stock the abandoned cottage with wood and blankets.

Spinster rule number three: a healthy imagination is never wasted.

When Remington Hawke crossed an ocean to visit his birthplace, he never anticipated there would be no room at the inn. But a chance encounter and a brilliant game of billiards resulted in an invitation he could not refuse and a woman he could never let go.

At twenty-five, Lovie Wright was on the shelf—not that she cared or even felt it. At least not until a stranger from out of town came along and challenged her complacency.

“You want to kiss me, Lovie Wright.” Those famous words would be her downfall or the beginning of everything. One thing was certain, however, the man who made that statement, that dare, was her future.

CHAPTER ONE



England 1823
December

The smell was the first thing that hit Hawke as he worked his way down the gangplank of the passenger ship docked in London's harbor in the dead of December. The chilling temperatures buried most of the unpleasantness of the Thames, but the air still held the foul stink of rotting fish as if it had been frozen in its worst state.

"Mister Hawke, sir! Mister Hawke!" shouted the bosun from the *Equipoise* of all names. Hawke's tilted equilibrium had been out of balance for nine weeks, and the sight of Mr. Tanner's gray-capped head bobbing up and down looked more like the swells of the ocean than a weathered seaman hurrying toward him.

"Cap'n says yer to go to the home office cuz a letter 'as come fer ye."

Hawke bowed his head, which sent his senses reeling to dizzying heights of nausea once again. "Thank the captain for me. Which direction, Mr. Tanner?"

"Left from 'ere right near the docks. Can't miss it. *Russel and Sons Shipping.*"

Hawke tipped his hat. He focused on keeping his head steady and his equilibrium from spiraling, as he tried to hold stock in legs like jelly. Transatlantic travel in the heart of winter? Never again. It was the grave notice of his grandmother's illness that forced him into action and put him on the devil of a ship for his late father's homeland. It had taken weeks to locate a ticket from Boston. And another nine to set foot in England.

One hand gripping his portmanteau and the other clenching his greatcoat together under his chin, he bent his head against the bristling wind emanating off the river like the breath of an alley cat. As a result, he thought he missed the home office when the orange and blue sign reading *Russel and Sons* caught his attention. After giving the clerk his name, he received more than a letter—it was a weighted packet.

“Thank you,” he said to the clerk. His next question had to do with hiring a hack, but first, he wanted a peek at the thick envelope with his name printed in bold ominous letters on the outside. He broke the seal at the top to find a packet of legal papers inside, along with a letter. He read the letter first. It was the worst news. His grandmother had passed away in her sleep a week prior.

He hissed a heavy sigh, turning his face toward the planked ceiling as if God had some explaining to do. He fought the urge to crumple the vellum and instead carefully slid the letter back inside the envelope.

“Bad news, sir?”

He gave the clerk a wry smile. “Bad enough. Can you point me to a hack?”

“I’ll be happy to have one called fer ye.”

The small office boasted two uncomfortable wooden chairs and a small table between them. He was itching to explore the rest of the portfolio, but this was not the place. No doubt it contained directions to the house, which he already had, and possibly a notice from a solicitor. Hawke was her only close relative, and it stood to reason that he might have inherited the whole lot. The weight on his shoulders multiplied tenfold.

He sat long enough to unbuckle his leather portmanteau and slide the folio inside, then he closed it back up and braced himself for another dipping, tottering ride in a vehicle that continued the forever swaying and bouncing.

He’d been in a hurry, but after the news of his grandmother’s passing, his heart slowed, his head throbbed, and he desperately needed a place to stay until he could secure travel to her country estate. The sky ignored his misfortune and mercilessly refused to comply with his wishes as a dollop of rain smacked him on the forehead. He swiped the sleeve of his greatcoat across his brow.

Sooner than was comfortable, he found himself rocking about in a moving vehicle again. A hack tilting about on worn springs forced him to hang on to the coach strap to help steady his bobbing head long enough to

find a hotel in the city. The cabin smelled of rose hip and cheap perfume, presumably from the last passengers, and the scent wasn't doing his sloshing stomach any favors.

Fortunately, the rain held off until the hack dumped him in front of the Golden Cross. As luck would have it, and in keeping with the season, there was no room at the inn.

He took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair in a vain attempt at staving off a headache, then proceeded to the coffee house located next to the coach entrance.

A bit of black brew should clear his head, but there were no seats available, and the noise and clamor of conversations that ranged from local festivities to political affairs made him rue the day he purchased that damn ticket. Why he thought he'd make it to England before his grandmother slipped away was a mystery. In truth, he felt compelled to be here, as if fate had nudged him. What drove him to cross the Atlantic in the winter had to be great because the trip alone could have been his death by sea, sail, or illness.

"You look like you need a table, friend." A dark-haired man seated at a crowded table to his right raised his voice above the din.

"What I need is a drink stronger than coffee, although if you'd offered a billiard table, I'd have stayed even without the drink." Hawke turned his focus back to the man at the counter, ready to order hot coffee when he was interrupted.

"Billiards, you say?"

Hawke looked askance, slightly irritated, to see the man lounging arrogantly, his arm draped over the back of his chair, and something inside Hawke, curiosity, ego, or the need to conquer the disappointment he'd had since arriving in London, made him address the man again. "I don't see that kind of table here. What's your game?"

"I thought I said billiards." The man smiled, friendly, but his overconfident demeanor raised a few flags.

"And I thought I said a real drink. If you can offer that and an appropriate table, I'd be obliged."

"How does Irish whiskey sound?"

Hawke scrutinized the man. He couldn't imagine a pub nearby would serve Irish whiskey, but the thought made his mouth water, and his aching head begged him to venture farther.

The man stood. "Rochester." He introduced himself, putting out a hand

toward Hawke.

Hawke took it. "Remington Hawke."

"Quite a name."

"And yours?"

"Dalton Rochester, but no one uses my Christian name."

"Because you're a heathen or a fancy lord?" He was certainly dressed well enough.

"Perhaps close on both accounts."

"And bored enough to offer a drink to a stranger from out of town?"

"Are you from out of town? I couldn't tell with that accent."

It was a jab, friendly but still ribbing. "American, with English parents."

"Ah, that explains it. There's a British accent in there, but it is obviously buried under the less superior muddy American polish."

"If I thought you were serious, Mr. Rochester, I'd invite you to fight, but I think you're doing your best to rile me for some other reason."

"Like?"

"Either you're a brilliant billiard player, and you're looking to score a bet, or you're a pickpocket looking to get me foxed."

Mr. Rochester broke out into heavy laughter. "I like you, Mr. Hawke. And you may be right about the billiards. Completely wrong about the pickpocket, however. But I do know where to get Irish whiskey."

"And you came here?" Hawke asked with comical disbelief.

"A mistake, I admit, but my friends are otherwise occupied for the holiday, and drinking alone doesn't suit me. But I do know where to find a table."

He gave the man another glance, biting the inside of his cheek. He could be a hustler. Hawke smiled deeply. "If it has billiards, I'm there already. Where and how far, Mr. Rochester."

"Close enough for a healthy walk, but in this rain, I'd as soon take a coach."

Hawke rolled his eyes shut. "My head is still reeling from the last hack I was in."

"Not a hack. A coach."

"Irish whiskey?"

Mr. Rochester grinned and nodded.

Definitely a hustler, but Hawke knew his way around a billiard table better than most, and Lord knew he needed the diversion. Perhaps this pub or

gambling house would be connected to a hotel.



Strong's was a club for pugilistic exercise. The large room that took up the front looked like any gentlemen's club, but Hawke didn't see a billiard ball in sight. He watched as Mr. Rochester conversed with an apparent employee, saw the man bob his head toward the ceiling, then questioned his sanity when he answered Mr. Rochester's wave to join him.

"There's a large room for an audience and tournament play, or we can use a private table where there's no wait."

He followed Rochester up a flight of stairs, where the man stopped and opened a door. The room was large and stuffed to the gills with men throwing out coins on a billiard table that boasted a slew of bank notes spread across the green baize. Mr. Rochester bent an eyebrow and jerked his head toward the room. Should he trust this stranger? He didn't particularly wish to be packed shoulder to shoulder around one billiard table that was swarming with men placing bets. His head hurt enough from the travel.

"You did say a private table." Hawke decided to trust the man even though his luck so far had not been reliable.

"Thank God, yes."

They proceeded up another flight of stairs and through another door. The room was clean, well stocked, lavishly furnished, and large enough to hold a billiard table without a cue stick hitting the walls.

"I must say I was beginning to wonder if you were a thief."

"No, Mr. Hawke, just bored. Do you play?" The man gestured toward the table with the familiar green baize.

"Not as well as you, I'm guessing."

"You think I'm a hustler?" Mr. Rochester chuckled. "Bravo, you may be right. But truly, I just thought you looked as if you could use the quiet."

"And a drink." Hawke dropped his bag, close enough to keep an eye on it just in case his instincts were wrong. He watched the dark-haired man pour two glasses of, presumably, Irish whiskey. At least one could hope. Mr. Rochester handed him a tumbler, and they raised a mock toast. "Is this your private room?"

"No. There are a dozen like this. Some with tables, some with just a bar,

some with tables for cards, and some with a balcony to witness the fights below. Those are the best rooms.”

Hawke shrugged out of his coat, switching his drink from one hand to the other. They both took opposite chairs in the corner of the mahogany-paneled room. “I’ve never seen a club like this. At least not in the States.”

“You’re visiting then?”

“Perhaps.” He took another drink. “What’s your game, Mr. Rochester, besides billiards?”

“You mean, who am I, and what the hell am I doing asking a stranger for drinks?”

“Precisely.”

“You were right about the lord. I’m the son of a viscount who earns a living through investments and playing this game.” He pointed with a nod toward the table.

“So, you did bring me here to hustle.”

“No. I play single games for sport, and I play tournaments for blunt. Really, I left my house today because I share it with my cousins, one of them being a woman. For some reason, I thought the coffee house might be quieter.”

Hawke chuckled. “Henpecked by a cousin?”

“You have no idea. She’s like a sister and all the more nagging because of it. Anyway, I thought you looked as miserable as I felt, and with the rain, there was nowhere else for me to go but home. Except for here, but as I said, all my friends are with their families for the holiday. Let me ask you why you trusted me?”

“Because you said Irish whiskey. And billiards.” He raised his glass.

“Then you *do* play.”

Oh, Hawke played. Too well to take advantage, except this gentleman was finely dressed and looked like he could afford a good wager. “A little. I’ll let you be the judge, Lord Rochester.”

“Rule number one. Just Rochester. My father was a lord.”

Hawke nodded in kind, a silent agreement to drop the formalities.

“Rule number two, we finish our drinks and have another.”

Hawke threw back the rest of the whiskey and eyed the cue stand, hoping the sticks were as well-made as the lion-footed table looked. The scent of beeswax filled the polished room, and the walls where the sconces hung were kept clean. And then there was the table lighting. Even with the small

window that looked out over an alley, there would not be sufficient lighting for a proper game during afternoon hours. Barely past four o'clock, and the sun was already casting shadows on the building next door. Thankfully, this establishment was well equipped with oil lamps placed in a rectangular frame that hung over the table, but they were yet to be lit.

"And the rules of the game?" he asked Rochester.

"No game," Rochester said, picking up a stick. "A shot."

"You must think me a threat to refuse a game." Hawke chose a stick and was surprised at the fine workmanship. It was polished to a sheen, and the woodgrain shone beautifully in shades of amber and tan. Even the handle was softly carved with ivy.

"I'll tell you what I think after the shot," Rochester answered, sizing up the table and placing a red ball at the farthest end.

"Fair enough."

"It's hardly fair, Hawke." Leaning over the table, Rochester shot him a look of pure arrogant delight. "I play this table often."

It was a simple shot—strike the ball toward the opposite end of the table, and the one closest to the bumper, without touching it, wins.

Rochester looked up under his brow, primed for the shot, and smiled.

Hawke lost that round. He'd done it on purpose, but even so, Rochester was a good player. "Threat?" Hawke asked.

Rochester rubbed his chin. "Stranger from out of the country who sizes up a cue stick without picking it up?" He smirked. "What do you think?"

"Threat. And I'd say you're no fool, either."

"You missed your shot on purpose. So how about a real game?"

Hawke agreed. Besides, he needed the diversion to ease his grief and to allow him time to plan. Tomorrow he'd meet with the solicitor who had sent him the paperwork and the folio. For now, he'd enjoy the fine whiskey and worthy opponent and forget the fact he had nowhere to stay just yet.

They played one game before the sun completely set. Rochester beat him fairly this time. The man had an unusual talent for the game, but then this was his city and his table.

"I'll fetch a light for the lanterns, and we can play more. Unless you've had enough?" Rochester eyed him, clearly daring him to leave.

"As if I could resist. However, before you light the oil, I'll challenge you to a trick shot."

"Are you good enough to play in shadow, then? Well, this is getting

interesting.”

Hawke lined up a ball, positioned his cue stick at the correct exaggerated angle, and skipped one ball over the other, making the pocket on the opposite side. He rested the butt end of the cue stick on the floor and turned with a smirk.

“Is that all you have?” Rochester asked before he set up another shot. He pointed with the billiard cue. “Right there, left corner.” Then he took aim, without so much as a pause, sending the ball flying, banking off one edge, angling toward another, and striking the side closest to Hawke before it rolled into the proper leather pocket.

“Touché and I do appreciate the fact you can do that in such light. You are good, Rochester, but can you shoot blindfolded?” Hawke poured another round of drinks.

“Blindfolded? I take it that you can?”

“You could say it is my hustle, so I’ll refrain from wagering.”

Rochester snorted a chortle. “I won’t,” he said, placing a yellow boy on the table.

Hawke leaned the stick against the lion-footed table and pulled his cravat loose with one hand while he gathered a red and white ivory ball with the other. He set them on the baize in front of him, and for extra measure, he sighted down the slender dowel checking for warping. For a boxing club, the sticks were remarkably made. They were straight, carved, and well-balanced. “Hold this.” Hawke handed the stick to Rochester and went about tying his cravat to block his vision. He gave it an extra tug to be sure it wouldn’t fail the test and adjusted the fabric above and below his eyes. He reached out, waving his fingers like a sightless man awaiting his cane. He felt Rochester put the cue stick in his hand. He closed his fingers around it.

Real success counted on the silencing hypnotic feel of the wood. Often when he played this shot, it was to raucous roars of cheering laughter. The lack of it had almost the opposite effect. It would seem he’d become accustomed to the noise so that the silence became loud, like a knock against his self-assurance.

Hawke took a deep breath, allowing the beeswax and polish to set his mood and clear the whiskey from his brain, although he’d done the shot drunk as a wheelbarrow without destroying his record. He slid his hand across the well-ironed felt, feeling for the cue ball. He found it and the red ball where he’d left them, near the end of the table, approximately a foot

away from the edge. He set the cue stick next to them, feeling the lay of the slab and scouting the angles by the length of the stick. Happy with the direction, he set the balls one after the other, leaned his thigh against the table, careful to leave his left forefinger resting over the top to queue up the wooden dowel. With a minor adjustment of his feet, he pulled the stick back with his right hand, and as he exhaled, he struck the ball with certainty into the next ball and heard Rochester's *whoop* before he heard the ball sink.

"Good God! Bravo! You even set up the table while blindfolded. You're a better man than I."

"Trick shots do not make a game. Don't underestimate yourself," Hawke said, pulling off the blindfold.

"Well then, a game it is, and if I can't beat you, I'll have you run out of town immediately."

"No need to bother running me out. I'm afraid someone beat you to it since I've yet to find an available room to stay."

"I dare say you've found one now."

"Does this place let rooms?"

Rochester gave a half shake of his head. "The answer to that is complicated."

Hawke raised a brow.

"It's not a brothel. Far from it. Strong runs a respectable boxing arena. That is to say, there is the occasional caller who may stay a night or two in one of the rooms, perhaps with a lady. Being a gentleman, I, of course, wouldn't know." The way he delivered that speech left little doubt that Mr. Rochester was more than aware. "What I'm suggesting is that no one should spend Christmas alone in a drunken stupor."

"I'm hardly drunk yet."

"Believe me, the whiskey is too good to stop before the bottle is empty." For proof, Rochester poured them both another glass. He raised it toward Hawke. "Cheers to a friendly game and to a room for the holiday in the best Mayfair inn available. Mine. Unless you have a better idea."

"You have a table there?"

Rochester gave a nod. "And more whiskey."

"And the nagging cousin?"

"Oh, that one. She's bossy but would never allow a stranger to celebrate Christmastide alone."

Even if he could find lodging elsewhere, Hawke found he didn't want to

be alone. He'd had plenty of that this past year.

CHAPTER TWO



“Hudson, where is he?” Lovie Wright asked her brother from the doorless arch that led to the drawing room. The house may have been a steal for Mayfair, but it needed a king’s ransom’s worth of work, and the drawing room, like most rooms in the house, did not have a working door. Rochester had seen to that. Her cousin had pulled down every door when he purchased the manse and was slowly rebuilding the place from the inside out.

“If I knew that, I’d have hauled him home hours ago. Why?”

“Because he has still to approve an agreeable cook, and I’m verily tired of doing half the work myself.”

“Believe me. You don’t want Rochester or me cooking.”

“Believe me”—her hands went to her hips—“neither of you want me cooking alone nor my wrath because of it.”

“I’ll see to it.” Hudson pulled the newspaper he was reading high enough to avoid her next scowl and no doubt wished she would go away.

“You always say that, and nothing ever happens.”

The nicely ironed paper now lay in an exasperated bunch next to Hudson while he cleared a wayward lock of brown hair from his forehead. His eyes were as green as hers, but his hair was like sinfully dark chocolate, the same color as Rochester’s. She and Hudson might be cousins to Rochester, but they were, the three of them, arguably more like siblings. As for her, she had golden streaks in her auburn hair, like streams of sunshine in a chestnut tree her mother had said, the same as her father.

But more than that, they had the loss of parents in common. Lovie had

lost both her mother and father, and Rochester had lost his mother as a young boy. Her cantankerous uncle was still alive, living as Viscount Rochester, which is why Dalton Rochester, his son and heir, had moved away from him. Besides, having the two of them in the same room was confusing because the viscountcy belonged to the surname, and Rochester rarely used his Christian name of Dalton.

Lovie blew out a long breath, steadying her temper.

“What do you want from me, Lovie?”

“I want you to learn to cook unless you can convince our cousin to get serious about this place. How long can we live this way? And all together? If you’d let me stay at our family’s estate, I wouldn’t be here to complain.”

“You can’t. It would be dangerous for you to be alone for so long, and I need to be here for Rochester’s business arrangements.”

“Business, indeed. The man plays billiards.”

“Which has become quite lucrative in the last several years.”

“Then he should have no problem hiring more help. Or do you like charred goose? And while I’m thinking of it, I refuse to cook such a meal. Perhaps I’ll go home and spend Christmas with the land steward and his wife.”

“You’re being rash.”

“And?”

“Like a woman.”

She walked over to the window seat, picked up a pillow, and flung it across the room at Hudson’s head. “Sometimes I hate you, Hud.” Of course, she didn’t mean it.

He bit back a smile.

She turned away to keep from laughing.

“And look at this, will you? Such a cheery house I have,” Rochester showed up just then, standing in the doorway Lovie had just vacated, a clearly drunken arch to his smile. Behind him stood a stranger, a man of equal height to Rochester’s six feet one inch.

“What wayward soul have you brought us now, Rochester?” She tilted her head to get a better look at the stranger. He didn’t look poor, but he was as sloshed as her cousin. The man’s mouth turned up in a decidedly wicked fashion, his hatless head was wet, and the ends of his hair dripped from the rain that had threatened all day. Good God, he was a handsome devil. The sheen of rain turned his hair bronze, which was appropriate since he looked

like a statue of Adonis. One could only hope that his voice was whiny and toadyish because if this was one of Rochester's friends, then he was most certainly a cad.

"Madam." The man bowed and somehow managed to keep standing.

Well, hells bells, his voice reverberated through her like smooth whiskey, the kind that Hudson and Rochester procured from the owner of their favorite boxing establishment. For a moment, she didn't want to speak. She just wanted to breathe him in. No, not breathe. She pinched her nostrils when the smell of strong spirits reached out like the long arm of a ghost wafting across the room. You couldn't see it, but you knew it was there.

"We've had a little to drink," Rochester said, standing tall like an aristocrat who could do no wrong, confident and arrogant until he leaned a hand against the missing door's casing and hung his head with a chuckle.

"I can see where this is headed. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen." Not exactly her ideal escape to walk past them both, but they stood aside, giving her a wide berth just before she stopped and scolded them with a hardy stare.

"I like that one." She heard the drunken guest say as she walked past.

She halted, pivoting on her heel. "You, sir, are a scoundrel and are not welcome to stay, or look, or comment any further regarding my person. Is that clear?"

His gaze darted over her face and body, and she knew he was imagining her without clothes. "Today, the reprimand is clear. Tomorrow I'm not certain I'll remember. My apologies now in the case of the latter." He tilted his head in lieu of a bow.

"In your current state, I cannot accept the apology, and in the case you do not remember, I'll have the only other sober person in the room remind you." She meant Hudson, and then as she turned, she realized what he'd said and what she'd answered. It sounded, suspiciously, like he was to spend the night. She turned back, feeling woozy from the constant volley of conversation. She closed her eyes while holding up one finger for emphasis. "One more thing"—she pointed toward Rochester—"What on earth makes this man think I'll see him tomorrow?"

Rochester bowed his head as if crowning the moment with respectability. "Miss Lovie Wright, meet Mr. Remington Hawke."

"Ma'am," Mr. Hawke said, proceeding to remove a hat that did not exist, further proof of his gross intoxication.

She stared at both men like they were imbeciles. "Oh no, not here. Not

when we're in dire need of a cook."

Rochester turned to Mr. Hawke and drolled, "We are short some staff, and our little Lovie here is the only one of us who can cook."

Hudson finally spoke. "No, Rochester, she cannot." At least her brother supported her. "She's not staff. I'll cook if need be."

"Oh, God, no." Rochester aimed that comment over his shoulder at Hudson.

"If you two are going to argue the finer points of fine cuisine, I'm going to my room." And then she added pointedly at Rochester, enforcing her position with each inflection. "My room, which has a door unlike your own, and Hud's room, which is right here on that sofa. Do we understand one another, Cousin?" Hudson had refused to sleep in the empty room that would eventually be his. Instead, he preferred the solid sofa against his back rather than a cot. In Rochester's defense, beds were high on the list, but Hudson had preferred the billiard room to be finished first.

Rochester smirked, his rolling gaze fixed on her for an exaggerated few seconds before he blinked his eyes into focus toward Mr. Hawke. "I would offer my billiard table, but then I'd have to kill you. I hope you don't mind a cot, Mr. Hawke."

"For goodness' sake, give him a chair before he falls down." At Mr. Hawke's height, it was a long way to fall, and she didn't fancy trying to help one drunken man and her brother to pick this Hawke person up off the floor. A cot, of all things. She couldn't believe Rochester would invite a stranger home when the house was grossly under-furnished and currently ill-managed.

"The rooms are unfurnished, but they are available," Hudson said. "I'll find him a guest room with a cot. I'll even light a fire to warm it."

Lovie had a feeling that Hudson had the better job, having escaped the consistently broken smiles of two soused men.

"Rochester, your cousin may be a bit naggy, but she's rather lovely." Mr. Hawke tried to bow again, then he closed his eyes, placing a hand against the wall.

"Sit, you odious man. And you too, Rochester." She walked past them again, back into the lion's den of a drawing room, and patted a red sofa and matching chair, directing them both where to sit. Mr. Hawke took the settee, and Rochester a chair before the fire. "You'll not drink another drop tonight. Is that understood?"

"We're grown men, Lovie," her cousin slurred.

She huffed but could not stop her prolonged stare at Mr. Hawke. He leaned against the arm of the sofa, his fist supporting his chin, and he looked like a boy with a naughty smile. “Naggy indeed,” she said quietly.

Mr. Hawke licked his lips. “I think she likes me.”

“You are deranged and drunk, may I remind you,” Rochester said.

The man’s smile was slanted, and his gaze was appreciative.

Rochester straightened in his chair, and for a moment, she thought he might call Mr. Hawke out, which would be appropriate under the circumstances. Instead, he said, “Not to worry, she’s not usually so defensive. Most of the time, she’s quite agreeable company.”

“Rochester, have you lost your mind?”

“I believe he misplaced it somewhere between here and St. James.” Mr. Hawke said unnecessarily. His eyelids drifted closed. His chin slipped from his fist, jolting him awake for a mere second before he nodded off again.

To her dismay, she felt sorry for him. She walked over to Rochester and smacked his booted foot, which was lying across his knee, with her slipper. “Go to bed, but first, help me with this one.” Between her and Rochester, they managed to move Mr. Hawke’s legs onto the sofa. Rochester removed his boots, and Lovie retrieved a blanket before Hudson returned.

“Why do I have the feeling I just made up my own cot?” Hudson asked.

“Unless you’d like to carry him upstairs, I believe he’s here for the night.”



Lovie woke to sunshine, a warm welcome after a day of drizzling rain. She took extra care dressing as she would have done for any invited company. At least, that’s what she told herself. In truth, she was curious to see how the stranger, Mr. Hawke, cleaned up.

With the house relatively quiet, she tiptoed to the doorway of the drawing room.

“I’m awake and am certain I owe you an apology, Miss Wright.” The voice came from behind and, without a doubt, belonged to their guest.

“Why, you almost sound civilized, Mr. Hawke.”

“And you’re understandably angry.”

She licked her lips. “No, I was just curious how you got along.” She

pointed to the cup and saucer he held. "I see you found the coffee."

"It's tea, but yes. Why don't you sit and allow me to get you a cup?"

She felt her cheeks twitch into a grin. "Thank you." When he left the room, she kept her eye on the doorway and backed up cautiously as she felt behind her for the sofa. The backs of her knees encountered the settee, and she turned but did not sit. She shook her head because even the proximity of where he'd been was too close for her. Finally, she decided on the chair before the fire where Rochester had sat last night.

Lord God in heaven, she had thought the man handsome last night, but in the light of day, with his hair dry, curling at the ends, and brown eyes that could melt butter, her breath left her chest. She struggled to find her voice. Why did he have this effect on her? She'd given up looking for a partner in life among the *ton* and the elite who Rochester mingled with. As a result, she realized it had been years since she'd been attracted to a man.

Oh, she couldn't allow it, not now. It was simply the holiday season that had her thinking such whimsical thoughts and governing her forgiving nature.

"Here we are. I brought sugar and cream. I didn't know how you take it."

"That was kind."

"There isn't anything to eat as of yet, but I believe I could handle toast."

She half stood. "I'd be happy to make you some."

"No, no," he said with a rumbling chuckle. "I meant that I could manage it if you were hungry."

"Oh." She raised her brows. "Mrs. Nithercott should be along shortly. She's the housekeeper, but she helps with the kitchens. Rochester has yet to hire a cook. Which reminds me," she looked around. "Where is my cousin?"

Mr. Hawke shrugged, taking a seat on the sofa, this time like a gentleman. "He was gone when I awoke, but your brother was kind enough to show me around."

"Tell me how you came to be here?"

"In this house?" He pointed to the ground. "Or in England?"

"Both, if it's not too personal."

"I traveled from America, where my home is, to visit my grandmother before she passed. Unfortunately, I was given word on my arrival that she had succumbed, so I ended up in a coffee house where I met your cousin, Rochester. He invited me to a game of billiards. And a few drinks." He said the last part with a mischievous smile about his eyes.

"I see. Well, that explains a lot, believe me. Rochester plays daily and

with whoever will oblige him.” She put her cup back on the saucer and folded her hands. “I am sorry about your grandmother. That must have been difficult after such a journey.”

“Thank you. It was.”

“So, help me understand. Did you somehow know Rochester? Are you from here?” She meant England.

“No, on both accounts. My parents were from here. I may have been born here, but my roots are in America.”

“That explains the accent, but I hear a touch of British there, too. Did you never live here?”

“No, not really. I have visited, however.”

“Did you say your parents *were* from here?” She knew she must sound like an interrogator, but her curiosity outshone her typical good manners.

“They’re both gone. My mother last year. My father three years ago.” He sighed. “And now, my grandmother, who passed before I landed on shore.”

She put a hand on her chest. “I can understand how that might lead you to drink with a stranger.”

“I would not have blamed you if you’d thrown me out. Your cousin was kind enough to offer me a place when I couldn’t find one.”

“I do think I tried to throw you out, but I imagine you don’t remember.”

“And would you toss me out now?”

“I am at the whim of Rochester since this is his house. Hudson and I have a family home northeast of here. Not as far as Cambridge, but that direction, if you’re familiar. I’ll be leaving for there in a couple of days to check on it. Will you be with us for Christmas?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t actually been invited. Originally, I had hoped to spend it with my grandmother. She lived near Cambridge, but I’m not at all familiar with the area.”

It sounded as if his grandmother’s estate was a mere two hours from Lovie’s family home. “Do you have other family members here?”

“None that I’m aware of.” He looked uncomfortable, his hands folded in his lap, ignoring his cooling tea.

“Then you must stay for the holiday. Christmas is a day for opening doors to friends, and no one should be alone.” This was the expected attitude of the season, but one Lovie barely felt—not that she was immune or cold, just practical. She’d spent too many years in her youth pretending to enjoy a festivity that only reminded her of being alone. Not that she wasn’t thankful.

She had a brother and a cousin who were closer than most families, but she missed her parents. And more accurately, she missed the idea and, perhaps, the unreasonable expectation of what a holiday should be.

“Rochester told me you wouldn’t throw out a stranger in need. Should I be worried?”

“You should always be worried, Mr. Hawke.” She hid a genuine smile behind a sip of tea. This man was too easy to talk to, too enjoyable to sit with, and too heavenly to look at.

As soon as the roads were passable, she would be making a trip to the country to check on her family’s estate and, with any luck, return before Christmas day. It would take some convincing, but she planned to leave Hudson here. The holidays made her melancholy, and she would just as soon spend them where she could let her feelings have rein. She missed her parents, especially her father, who had raised them on his own from when they were young children until he met with a hunting accident.

“I found a cook!” Rochester’s excited voice bellowed from the foyer.

“I think we’re saved.” Lovie stood as Rochester’s feet echoed in the hallway before he appeared in the drawing room, out of breath.

“Did you hear?” Rochester asked.

“I believe everyone heard you.”

“Just in time for Christmas dinner. I can taste the roast beef now, and the puddings, and the pies.”

Lovie took in Rochester’s broad smile and dark tousled hair, the only attribute on him that was ever out of order. “But is she good?”

Turning his head, Rochester stopped the endless list of Christmas dishes, his gaze isolating her, and his mouth stalled on a word. “Good? You’re worried about good after you threatened us with no holiday dinner?”

She giggled, giving a quick shake of her head, her hands settled on her hips. “I never threatened a thing. Besides, Mrs. Nithercott takes care of most of our meals with my help. I’m not complaining, you oaf.” She motioned to the other end of the settee. “Sit with your guest. I’ve been forced to entertain Mr. Hawke, and I can’t imagine he’s enjoyed a moment of my company.”

Mr. Hawke’s eyes lit with mischief like he wanted to throttle her, and then he winked. “Quite unpleasant.”

Rochester looked between them. “Why do I feel as if I’ve intruded?”

Hawke cleared a chuckle from his throat, and Lovie, uncomfortable with Rochester’s evaluation, took her seat again.

“Your cousin has been a generous hostess.”

“And Mr. Hawke has nowhere to spend Christmas.”

“Well, Lovie, I take it you would like me to extend an invitation.”

“Formally, yes.” She teased her cousin while she sat primly like a woman used to getting her way.

“There you have it,” Rochester said, gesturing to Hawke. “I’ll have my secretary draw up a calling card and an official invitation. Where shall I send it?”

“I fear I have no address except that of my grandmother’s. No room at the inn and all that.”

“Seriously, you can stay here. No one should be alone on Christmas,” Rochester said, shelving his teasing tone.

“I told him the same.”

“Did you?” Rochester glanced her way, his hazel eyes beaming suspiciously.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Hawke began. “But I don’t want to be any trouble. I must see a solicitor today, and there has to be a hotel somewhere in this city with a vacancy.”

“But will you find one that serves excellent brandy and sports a magnificent billiard table?” Rochester didn’t give Mr. Hawke time to reply. “No? Well, there you have it.”

Lovie and Mr. Hawke exchanged looks, and she felt her face flush hot.

He grinned, rubbing his chin, his eyes locked with hers. “I accept.”

It sounded to Lovie like a challenge, and she felt the need to give a perfunctory nod. At the same time, her heart hiccupped, launching into a thumping rhythm that felt like excitement. It had been ages since she’d felt anything like it, but she couldn’t deny the thrill coursing through her veins.

“Unless Miss Wright is uncomfortable.”

She swallowed and pressed her lips into a smile. “Permission granted.”

CHAPTER THREE



From the moment Hawke set foot in England, nothing had gone as planned. Case in point, instead of visiting with his grandmother, he was seeking out a Mr. Atherton, the solicitor listed on the paperwork he'd been given at the dock office. He managed to secure a cab with the help of a footman and headed to Gray's Inn.

The imposing brick building seemed to loom over him. He felt lost in more ways than one. A holiday. No family. And now the unease of stuttering through the legal process. Was he to walk through the cavernous archway or seek out a door on the street? He wandered the grounds for twenty minutes, which were admittedly well tended, beautiful in fact, lined with trees and perfumed with flora. Eventually, he gave up his prideful sense of direction and simply asked a passing boy.

"On that there second row, sir. Yewl find Mr. Atherton's office." Hawke didn't move, just searched the façade for another hint until the boy clarified, "Right there, sir, through that door." He pointed to a mahogany door set in the recess of a stone arch.

Hawke dipped his head in thanks and handed the boy three pence for his time.

Dark paneling covered the office walls, and he tried not to think of it as a church while he sat quietly waiting for the secretary to return from delivering his message. Without an appointment, he expected no less.

The scent in the room was reminiscent of a polished cathedral, just like the one where his father's funeral had been held. So much loss, so many funerals, and he didn't care if he never saw the inside of a religious dwelling again. In the last five years, he had lost his parents and the man he had

apprenticed under, who was like an uncle. In many ways coming to England felt new, different, and refreshing, but he also knew it couldn't last. This was not his home, although after meeting Mr. Rochester and his cousins, he felt as if he'd made friends.

"Mr. Hawke." A gentleman emerged from an interior door, and Hawke stood. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I hadn't expected you today."

"I assume you are Mr. Atherton?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Forgive me. Busy day. Come in and have a seat." The solicitor walked a bit hunched like someone perpetually looking for something they'd dropped.

Mr. Atherton appeared to be in his fifties, with gray hair, a thick middle, and sporting spectacles that he wore at the end of his nose. Hawke took a seat in front of a large desk stacked with leather portfolios. His fingers itched to move the inkpot sitting atop a mess of paperwork. The circumstances, all of it, made him nervous.

"I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice."

"Well, now. I know this wasn't the visit you had expected, but I thought it prudent to send notice to the dock before you traveled the distance to your grandmother's estate. Which brings me to why you're here." He slid a folio aside, bent his head to see something nonexistent under his desk, then flipped through several loose sheets of vellum.

All the while, Hawke watched that inkpot creep another inch closer to the edge of the desk. Assuming the eccentric man had a method to his madness, Hawke didn't offer to help.

"Ah, now I remember." Mr. Atherton held up a finger, and then he opened a drawer and pulled out a small folder. "The will. I won't bore you with legalities, since there are no other living relatives. The estate, everything your grandmother had, was left to you."

It came as no surprise since Hawke was her only grandchild and apparently the last of the family.

"I have some paperwork here, somewhere," Mr. Atherton said, his gaze shifting about his desk again. "Things to sign. Legal papers and all that nonsense. I imagine you'll want to check on the estate sooner than later. I was out there two weeks ago."

Hawke grimaced with the reminder that he'd missed his grandmother by days.

The man looked from over his spectacles. "It's in adequate shape, but

there are few servants left, and you'll need to hire more if you're going to live there."

"I'll be there temporarily."

"The land steward retired but feel free to call on me if you need advice on hiring another."

Hawke sighed inwardly. Without a land steward, the place would likely fall apart before he could decide what to do with the property. He was in no mood to sell it anytime soon. To do so would feel like another loss. There had to be something of his father there, and he intended to spend a few drunken nights looking for clues of treasured memories that his grandmother might have kept. Family was important. Even though he hadn't set foot in his grandmother's home in over a decade, there had been plenty of correspondence.

These were his thoughts as he traveled the short distance back to Rochester's. He passed too many hotels to think he couldn't find a room tonight. Wearing out his welcome was not high on his list of goals.



With Rochester still scarce, Hawke found himself admiring the man's billiard room. The deep burgundy baize was unusual and must have been expensive. The table, he knew, was something fine, indeed. He kept his itching hands in his pockets to keep himself from picking up a cue.

"You're back." Without preamble, Miss Wright announced herself on the threshold of the gaming room, one of the few rooms with a hinged door.

Hawke turned, pulling his hands from his pockets and smoothing down his jacket. "Your cousin has a beautiful table." Hawke examined the room, arcing his gaze over the ceiling conversationally. "And for a private room, this is unmatched."

"Rochester spends more time here than anywhere else in the house. That's why it's completely furnished and decorated while something as important as a parlor goes empty. It's his pride and joy, I assure you."

"Then he hasn't met the right woman." He grinned, raising his eyebrows. "Do you play?"

"Me? No. I'm too busy darning socks like all fine women." The comment, although given in jest, held a bit of mockery as well.

“I promise your talents are being wasted.” He gave her a half smile and watched as she came fully into the room. Her presence awakened an unexpected joy in him.

She strolled around the table, her fingers lightly touching the polished edge. “You think you know me, Mr. Hawke?” She gazed up under her lush auburn lashes. “Darning socks takes a great deal of talent. Besides, I may be an accomplished pianist.”

“And I’d say you’re lying.” His comment produced an immediate, dimpling smile, one that apparently shocked her because she wouldn’t look at him.

“Try to prove me wrong.”

“That’s easy, madam. You have no pianoforte. Certainly, you’d never live in a house without one.”

She laughed. A melody that struck his heart. She stepped away from the billiard table, her hands folded primly. “I hadn’t considered that. Of course, you’re right.” She took a seat on one of the leather tufted chairs. “Sit if you’d like.” She motioned to the chair directly opposite her, placed beside a cozy, circular side table.

Hawke gladly accepted her invitation, allowing his morning with the solicitor to slip away in her presence. “So, you don’t play the pianoforte. You don’t play billiards, and I know you’re lying about the socks.” He slanted a dubious look her way. “Tell me something that Miss Lovie Wright likes.”

“I like my family. I like the theater and music despite the fact I cannot play a musical instrument, and I cannot sing a note.”

“And?” he asked when she stopped as if there was nothing else.

“And, I don’t know. I can tell you readily what I *don’t* like. I don’t especially like the London Season, except for the theater, perhaps. I don’t like gossip, which could be why I don’t care for the Season, and I don’t much like cooking and will be forever grateful that Rochester finally found someone who can do it.”

He licked his lips, considering her from her lovely auburn hair to the tip of her chin because he dared not look lower. “You know what I think?”

“Hardly, Mr. Hawke. You’re very hard to read.”

“Unlike you who wear your soul in your eyes.”

She scrunched her brow. “And what do my eyes say?”

“That you’re curious.”

“About many things. But I have a feeling you’re speaking of something

specific. I'm intrigued. What has me curious?"

His gaze fell to her mouth. "You want to know what a kiss is like."

She started to laugh. "You're incorrigible. Besides, I'm not a tame shrew nor a silly debutante. I've been kissed."

He raised a brow, daring her. "Yes, but in that instance, the man kissed you, and you're curious what it would be like to initiate it yourself." He sat back, happy with his teasing estimation.

"Why would you think that? It's absurd." The last came out accompanied by a nervous laugh.

"Because I see it in your eyes. I can sense it through your gaze. You look at me with intense passion, most of the time, and perhaps a hint of surrender, too." This was a dangerous game. He didn't want to scare her away. He only wished to see her blush.

She cocked a brow at the same time she folded her arms. "If my eyes are full of passion, it is not the adoring kind. And your eyes, Mr. Hawke, are full of ego."

"I pathetically admit to that truth. Now, it's your turn. Tell me you've never kissed a man."

She huffed out a sigh and lost her smile. "If you mean that I've never walked up to a gentleman and voluntarily initiated a kiss, then no, I have not."

"Aw, but you will." His arrogance surpassed his own expectations.

"You think I want to kiss you." She tried to sound indignant with that statement, but in just seven words, she'd lost her breath.

He sat back, folding his arms. "Miss Lovie Wright, I don't think it. I know it. And if you're wondering, it wouldn't be ill-received either."

"Well, Narcissus, if you are missing your own reflection, I can have a mirror hung over your bed tonight."

Oh Lord, he hadn't expected that. Now his mind was conjuring up all manner of mischief with this woman. He chuckled. "Go ahead and do your best to flip this narrative. It doesn't make it less true."

"I don't even know what to say. I cannot believe your daring. Certainly, your banter needs honing."

"And you, sweet, are the one to do it." He grinned without apology. "If I've offended you so deeply, why haven't you thrown me out yet?"

She tilted her head. "Because it is Christmas, and I am known for my kindness and generosity."

“We’ll see.”

“You are an arrogant beast.” The words were direct but lacked conviction. “How long do you plan to stay?”

“Until spring.”

“In this house?” Her eyes were round.

“Doubtful. Not to worry. I’ll leave for my grandmother’s estate as soon as possible and likely stay there until I leave for home.”

“If you’re in a hurry to return to the States, why wait until spring?”

“Because travel by ship is almost impossible in the winter and much safer in the spring. I’d rather return home in one piece.” He watched her, their gazes locked, his mouth grinning and hers grim. “I wouldn’t worry, though. It won’t take you that long to give in.”

“To?”

“Your curiosity. I guarantee you’ll kiss me before spring.” He knew he had gone too far.

She took a breath that signaled an end to the conversation. “I think I’ll take a nice walk. My ardor can use some cooling off, apparently.”



Lovie didn’t know whether she was miffed with herself for allowing such a ludicrous conversation or if she was intrigued by the daring Mr. Hawke. She wandered the park, allowing the cool breeze to lift the heat from her cheeks while she enjoyed the relative solitude. Since the park was close by and because she always promised to stay in sight of the house, she had no reservations about walking alone. Ten minutes could do wonders. However, today it had done little more than give her ample time to consider her supposed curiosity.

After seven minutes, she felt the cold bite of winter through her cloak and decided to return home. She watched the street, waiting for a break in traffic and looking for the driest path across. As she checked the road, her gaze landed on the opposite walk where the unmistakable outline of Mr. Hawke stood, presumably waiting for her to rush over and kiss him fiercely on the mouth with all her passionate heart.

Let him believe his own wicked musings all he wished. It wasn’t true. She did not want to kiss him.

She absolutely, with all certainty, did not.

If she had to say it a hundred times before she believed it herself, then it would be an exercise worth doing.

CHAPTER FOUR



Hawke felt a sense of responsibility after Miss Wright hastily left. He waited outside and observed her walking through the park's winter garden from across the street. Women shouldn't walk alone, this he knew, and he felt as if he'd driven her to act rashly.

Why he found it so delightfully entertaining to tease her, he didn't know. It wasn't like him to be so forward, not anymore, not after the incident where a young woman had almost lost her life because of her overeager brother. Although one could argue it was partly Hawke's fault. It had taken him nearly a decade to be convinced that the disastrous event had not been his doing, that nothing he had done caused it.

Who fights a duel at the naïve age of fifteen? He should have been chasing skirts instead of defending the honor of a young miss, even if the two of them were friends. It should have been another young man behind that pistol, not him. He should have spoken up and stopped the whole foolish act. But he had not. He should have done many things differently. It had been a hard lesson learned, and the cost was too great to ever allow such a thing again.

After so much time spent hiding from the world, here he was now, enjoying laughter and playful banter with a woman—a stranger. Perhaps it was easier because no one here knew him, and he could pose as anyone he wished. He could be anything—a carefree gentleman, a successful businessman, a world traveler, hell, he could be the mayor of his hometown if he chose. He would have to admit that he *was* close to being a successful businessman. His father had been, but Hawke had dragged his feet, wanting

to make his own way, his own money.

“Mr. Hawke, are you always this irritatingly forward with women? Or is it just me you wish to annoy?” Miss Lovie Wright was a formidable force.

“If I wanted to be forward, I’d have accompanied you to the park.”

“Why? Because women should never be alone? Heaven forbid, we should have a moment of peace to think on our own.” She rolled her eyes dramatically. “We tend to get ourselves into so much trouble when we’re not watched.”

He shrugged, jamming his hands uncomfortably in his coat pockets.

“A man without words. Thank you, merciful Lord.”

He looked at his boots and chuckled.

“Well, are you going to stand here in the cold all day? Because I’m going inside.”

“And I’d be happy to follow.” He did just that, walking behind her like a lost puppy, and in many ways, he felt like one. After he helped her out of her coat and removed his, Miss Wright continued to the drawing room. He had to smile because she failed to keep her disinterested charade going when she peeked behind her to see if he continued to hunt her. At least, that’s how he defined the surreptitious look and the way she wet her lips.

She was sitting on the sofa when he rounded the entry to the drawing room.

“Miss Wright, it is, in fact, not at all like me to be so forward. But I will admit I may be difficult. I simply wouldn’t know because I don’t have siblings to keep me in line.”

“You must have friends.”

“Friends are friends because they enjoy each other’s company and are rarely bothered by unseemly personalities.” He took the chair adjacent to the settee. “Are we not friends?”

She turned a petal pink. “I don’t think we know each other well enough to have formed a friendship.”

“Your cousin invited me here after knowing me for a few hours. You’ve had the pleasure of knowing me for two days, and still, you’re afraid of me. Why do you think that is?”

“I’m afraid of you? Is that what you think?” She tried to sound repulsed, a disgruntled woman set upon by a loathsome man. But her nervous chuckle, and the way she folded one hand over the other repeatedly, said something very different.

“It’s not what I think. It’s what I know. Or is it that you’re afraid of yourself?”

“You are completely daft and outrageous.” She shook her head.

“Miss Wright, I am but having a bit of fun with you. Nothing more. Harmless banter, or do you not recognize it?”

She studied him, anchoring her gaze with confidence on his face, scrutinizing him with the likes of psychological science. “Do you know what I think?” She tapped an elegantly manicured fingernail against her plump lips. “I think you are hiding behind humor.”

He grinned, appreciating her valiant effort to see beyond his veil. “Might we agree that I’m hiding behind charm instead?”

“If charm is arrogance and ego, then yes.”

He laughed heartily, relaxing back in his chair, letting his arms hang nonchalantly over the sides. “You are a clever one, Miss Lovie Wright.”

“You are under the misguided impression that I invited you to sit with me for the unlikely pleasure of your company, when in reality, I indulged your visit today to ask a favor.”

His forehead raised an inch in surprise. He had not expected that. “Now, we are getting somewhere.”

“I’m quite serious.”

She looked serious—too serious—and it made him uncomfortable. She was right. He hid himself behind wicked behavior. But not sinful. Not quite that far. Not yet.

He sobered. The last time a female asked him for a favor, someone got hurt. He reminded himself, generously, that this was different, and he was older and wiser. “I’m listening.”

She blew out a slow, meditative breath, the kind you pause behind for courage. “If I’m correct, you’ll need to visit your grandmother’s estate. Likewise, I need to visit my family’s estate. From what I gather, the two estates are close enough that we could share travel plans. If we rode straight through, with only posting stops, it would be a long day, but we could avoid staying at a tavern, and I’d have the protective company that my brother will insist upon.”

Hawke could not be more stunned. “Why would you trust me? What I mean to say is, you’re correct. I do need to visit the estate. I’m simply shocked you would ask.”

She sat back, an almost confused expression on her face. “I admit that I

am as well. Except I do need this, and the question itself is a decisive test.”

“Pardon me?”

“Such a direct question and event, and yet you are not teasing or poking fun, which means you are capable of behaving like a gentleman.”

“And that’s your test? Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“Both.” She looked him straight in the eye without blinking. “Perhaps I’m naïve to trust you, but I do have a feeling—call it women’s intuition—something I cannot explain about you. Perhaps it’s because we’ve both experienced such loss. Tragedy is like glue.”

“Or a magnet.” He sat forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and studied her. Was this a trick? Oddly, it was her comment about naivety that caused him to consider it. “What makes you think your brother or cousin will agree?”

She shrugged one noncommittal shoulder.

“You haven’t thought this through. Mind you, I’m not in opposition. The fact I don’t readily know my way is reason enough. But you know your guardians will not agree.”

“My guardians?” She sounded annoyed, and she squared her shoulders. “I am old enough to be my own caretaker.”

“I meant no offense.”

“I know what you mean.” She blinked away a sigh. “And you’re not incorrect, but I also know neither of them have time to escort me, and I can be rather persistent.”

“No doubt you are.”

“You won’t have to do a thing. I’ll discuss it with them and explain my reasoning, and when their bullheadedness subsides, they’ll agree.”

“Simple as that?”

“Simple as that.”



An hour later and Lovie was not so sure.

“The house can wait,” Hudson said. “For God’s sake, it’s almost Christmas. What if you’re unable to return? What if the weather strikes rain, and the roads are impassable?”

“And what if that doesn’t happen?” It was a stupid argument. She had no

defense against it. "If that happens, then we'll turn around."

"And then what? Check in to an inn with a stranger? Have you any notion what damage that kind of scandal would cause? It's not just you, Lovie. Rochester and I are working hard to repair his reputation, and we're making headway. We need to strike when the iron is hot, building from the foundation we've laid because our livelihood depends on it."

"It is my reputation that would be tarnished, not yours or Rochester's."

"Do you believe I put so little value on my sister's reputation or welfare? Lovie, even you realize the implications. Families are destroyed or made by any number of singular incidents. Small things can destroy a foundation. One crack in the veneer." He had taken up pacing in the study.

"Hudson," she admonished despite him being the eldest, "at twenty-five, I am quite old enough to travel as I please. No one expects a spinster to behave scandalously."

"You are hardly a spinster."

"I'm on the shelf, according to the most recent debutante drivel. The diamonds of the first water and all that nonsense. And really, Hudson, why do men care? They do whatever they please and pat each other on the back for their ingenuity. Why shouldn't I do as I wish, especially when I rarely keep company with the *ton*?" She could see the muscle in his jaw working.

"The aristocracy marry for money and prestige, as well you know."

She squeezed her eyes shut because she knew her brother was correct, and she felt the argument eroding beneath her like sand under one's feet when the tide came in. She was too aware that the fallout from Rochester's one slip-up had tarnished his reputation almost beyond repair. All because he and Mr. Darrington badgered the wrong gaming hell owner during one drunken night of bad choices. They managed to lose almost ten-thousand pounds between them, and when their friend Winn Markham stepped in to help, all hell broke loose. But she could hardly blame Mr. Markham for what he had done, not after the gaming hell had cheated her cousin out of his entire year's allowance. Markham was a master at cards, and he'd seen fit to win back everything. Too bad he'd done it dishonestly. That little blunder had cost them all dearly. Their actions had been responsible for the banishment of Winn Markham from his family. Rochester and Darrington figured they owed it to their friend to follow. So, they spent the next three years in Bath. Not quite a prison. But not home, either.

"I see you realize my point," Hudson said.

“What I realize is that, once again, I have no control over my own life. You understand this—I know you do. I’ve done my share here. I’ve helped in every way possible, even down to the meals, the staff, everything, Hudson.” She was beginning to sound desperate when she wanted to sound confident. “I love you and Rochester. You are my only family. Do you truly think I would do anything that would hurt either of you? Besides, Mr. Jakes our trusted footman will be along. If you want a report, I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to send one.”

Hudson stopped midpace and scratched his forehead, and she knew she had won.

“I’ll be careful. Mr. Hawke will stay at his grandmother’s estate, and I’ll be safely ensconced in our family home checking on staff and supplies. Besides, it’s Christmas, and I want to make certain there’s enough for the staff and cottagers to celebrate. We owe them that much. I’ll be back before Christmastide.” She licked her lips. “Unless, of course, your schedule permits...” She knew it did not. He planned the billiard games that Rochester played for blunt. It was a lucrative business arrangement, and Hudson rarely had time to keep up with a household. She, however, was literally trained for the task.

Aside from hers and Hudson’s due diligence, she needed time alone. Friends were few, which meant most of her existence revolved around men. True, they were family, but men, nonetheless. Once she dropped off Mr. Hawke at his estate, she’d have several days to herself, and she sorely looked forward to it. She needed it. And for reasons she did not wish to address, she’d rather travel with a man—and an interesting one at that—than a maid who would talk incessantly about embroidery or frippery. The conversations she’d had with Mr. Hawke had been stimulating. That’s as far as she planned to consider.

CHAPTER FIVE



Hawke would not have thought it possible, but somehow the persuasive Miss Lovie Wright finagled a yes from her brother and Hawke's newest friend, Rochester. His plans included being on his best behavior, but that didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy a dose of healthy banter.

Such a grim trip now held the promise of a positive memory. If all went well, they'd be back in Mayfair by Christmas day and celebrating with punch and mistletoe, and perhaps he'd be granted that kiss by Miss Wright. The whole ridiculous idea was all in fun, but he couldn't deny that he held out hope of her relenting and giving in to her own wish. It wouldn't do for him to initiate something so daring, but if she did, it would be a request he could not afford to refuse.

As with most things in life, reality could not bear the burden of speculative planning, and after Miss Wright bid her brother adieu, the day collapsed into awkward silence. He felt as if he were in a cave that had no exit. Even the posting houses were but a small break because making good time on the road had been paramount.

But he'd done it. He'd traveled the countryside with a near stranger, which was nothing like his trip across the Atlantic. Crossing an ocean was not the same as sharing a coach with a beautiful woman, but the banter they had shared at the house had vanished, replaced by quiet indifference. Or so it seemed.

As they neared his grandmother's estate, the confines of the coach felt less suffocating. The misty winter scenery was like fresh air.

"Is that the place?" Miss Wright asked, her voice filled with wonder as

she leaned to peer out the window.

Hawke dipped his head to see, searching the horizon and spotting the grand manor set on a sprawling rise that overlooked the expanse of property. He couldn't tell from that distance what kind of shape it was in, but his expectations were few, though his memories of the place were grand. "I believe it is."

"How long has it been since you've seen it?" She turned her attention toward him.

His gaze held to the scenery, and he swallowed a measure of panic. "A long time." His voice came out whisper thin, and he wondered if she'd heard. He took a deep breath and sat back. "I was seventeen." He shook his head. "Lord, twelve years it has been. How could I have stayed away so long?" Internal questions spoken out loud rarely require an answer. When he turned his attention to Miss Wright, she was staring at him with a look of concern and sympathy. He welcomed neither.

"I am but a couple of hours from here, near Saffron Walden. We passed it if you recall."

He nodded.

"I'll see you in a few days. Will you be all right on your own? I imagine there are servants about. Yes?"

He blinked away the melancholy that came over him when they pulled into the drive. "I believe so. Honestly, I'd prefer to be alone. Don't worry about me." He tried for a genuine smile but couldn't be sure if he achieved it.

Mr. Evans, the current butler, greeted him when he knocked on the ominous front door and proceeded to introduce Mrs. Baker, the housekeeper. Both looked to be in their fifties. Mrs. Baker's hair still held some hint of color, possibly a brunette if he had to guess. Mr. Evans had white hair that circled his head like a wreath, leaving the top as bare as a baby's bottom. There were several gardeners, a half dozen or so maids, and footmen. The house looked well-kept and attended, but what he wanted—what he needed—was privacy. Mr. Evans balked when Hawke suggested the entire staff be given a few days off for the Christmas holiday. He even offered to pay for their travel and any expenses. He felt the extravagant use of his inheritance would be well spent if it gave him added time to process the experience.

In the end, the cook insisted on stocking food for a few days, which Hawke appreciated, and most of the staff gladly took advantage of the free holiday he offered.

He roamed the house well into the night, starting with the attic. Toys, old clothes, furniture, and trunks. He picked up a tin elephant, gray with spiky tusks, its feet attached to wheels rusted stiff. He wondered if his father had played with it, pulling it along by the long string attached to a metal ring soldered to the curled trunk. There were also dolls whose eyes, round and vacant, seemed to watch over the stowed, forgotten items. Were they his grandmother's, or did she once have a daughter? His father never spoke of siblings, and he always assumed there had been none.

He wandered the second floor looking for an appropriate place to sleep, finding his grandmother's stateroom instead. He ran a hand down the sunny yellow counterpane, pausing near the pillow and looking on as if she were there. His eyes misted. He missed her, of course, but most of all, he missed the idea of family. His had been a rich upbringing, with love. He'd even corresponded as often as possible with his grandmother.

On her side table was a likeness of him at fifteen years and another as a young man of two-and-twenty. They were a comfort. On her bureau, a half dozen miniatures graced an intricately tatted doily—his father, his mother, another one of him as a young boy, a woman who might have been an aunt, and one of his grandfathers who Hawke recognized himself in. But the one he searched for was placed next to his grandfather. In it, his grandmother, Beverly Doris Hawke, was a young woman with hair painted hazelnut brown and eyes shaded as blue as cornflowers.

He'd missed so much of his extended family while living an ocean away. He was a man of two continents, and although he would not have given up the life he led, he equally missed the one he would never know.

On day two, he roamed the property as much as the weather permitted. The ground was ripe for planting, and he imagined a pasture green and spotted with sheep. The paperwork spoke of cottagers, but he didn't go so far as to find them. Instead, he trekked back to the manor, found a bottle of brandy, and threw himself into a club chair. On the second night, he drank his dinner and passed out in the drawing room.



Lovie spent two days reading over the household accounts, relishing the time away, and not looking forward to the drive home tomorrow. She'd pick up

Mr. Hawke and endure another ten hours of virtual silence on the way back to London.

Part of her had worried about him, and more than once, his chiseled jaw and laughing eyes interrupted her dreams. He looked so lost when she left his estate, but there were servants to care for him, and she could only imagine the ghosts in that house. The few memories he carried would surely be difficult enough, but the memories that truly hurt are the kind that eat away at one's conscience. And if she recognized anything in that hooded expression, it was grief. He'd lost his chance to see his grandmother again, and he would wander that house playing out scenarios that might have been. She knew this feeling too well, as she had often done the same with dreams of her mother.

For the first time since Mr. Hawke had arrived at Rochester's, she painfully realized what kind of holiday the poor man had in front of him. No family, only strangers. No comfort dishes to consume. No memorable reverie around the pianoforte. In a room full of strangers, he was more apt to feel more alone than if he had stayed on the other side of the world.

Had she been a little hard on him? Possibly.

When she picked him up tomorrow, she purposed to be happy, friendly, and talkative. Neither of them had spoken much during their journey there, and she meant to alter that on their return trip to London.

Good cheer, good attitude, and good company—that was her only thought the following morning when she set out to retrieve Mr. Hawke.

For the two-hour trek, she mused and planned their greeting. "*Hello, Mr. Hawke. I hope you fared well,*" she'd say. And then he'd say, "*Why yes, Miss Wright.*" And then he'd probably suggest something about a kiss, and she would not be riled by it but understand he was a hurting soul and needed her comfort, even if that meant taking a ribbing from him. She practiced not blushing, which was pointless because the man made her blush with a look.

Buried deep under a strict veneer of self-discipline, she was aware of her attraction to him, and she had little doubt of his for her, but it was simply an infatuation for something new. She gave the fluttering heart and dropping stomach no more than a passing thought. She certainly wasn't dwelling on the shape of his mouth curved into a devilish smile, the way his cheek dimpled and made him look like a pirate, or his eyes, a deep earthy brown that warmed her whenever he looked her way.

Well, hang it all, she felt a blush rise just thinking about it.

As the drive came into view, she composed herself, pulled her coiled hair

over her shoulder, fixed the hood of her cloak, and prepared to stay calm, cool, and in control.

“Allow me, my lady,” her footman said after she tried to knock on the door for the fourth time. The footman gave a forceful clang of the brass hammer, which he repeated thrice.

Lovie made a fist banging the heavy oak door with her gloved hand. “Where do you suppose the butler is, Mr. Jakes?”

“I couldn’t guess, my lady.”

“Well, there’s nothing for it. Here’s to hoping the door is unlocked and we’re not taken for thieves.” She tried the handle, and the door gave way. She couldn’t hazard a guess where the occupants might be.

The foyer appeared tended, swept, artfully decorated in warm, ruddy tones set off by a beautiful black-and-white checkered marble floor. She eyed a grand staircase that rose from the middle of the room, and several spacious hallways leading from the first floor to God knows where. Like a child’s game, she randomly selected the left hallway and cautiously peeked around each corner until she came upon an open room where a fire glowed from within.

“This must be it,” she said to the footman, who looked as curious as she felt. Tugging her traveling costume into place, she rounded the doorway to a stately drawing room, where half the furniture was covered in white sheets, revealing one occupant. She nervously turned to the footman and quickly excused him from the room.

“What have we here?” she asked the room at large.

Hawke sat with his back to the drawing-room door. His arms extended like bird’s wings across the back of the sofa with a drink in hand and his booted feet crossed on the tea table. He groaned at her question.

“Did you not hear me banging on the front door? And where are all the servants?” She came around the sofa to see him with his head lolled back, peering at her with one eye open. He was obviously soused.

“There weren’t many, to begin with, and I sent them away.”

“Your feet are going to scuff that perfectly beautiful table.” She advanced, her reticule hanging from one arm, swinging while she shoved his dirty boots from the polished wood with her clean gloved hands.

Thrown off-balance as his feet hit the floor, he abruptly sat forward, holding out his hand in an attempt to keep the contents of his glass from sloshing out. His wrist took the brunt of the splash, leaving a stain of spirits

clinging to his open shirt cuff. "You're back early." He had taken on a blaming tone as if finding him drunk was her fault.

"I am not." She dusted off her gloves. "If you don't know what day it is, I'll tell you. It's three days past a good shave, according to your beard."

He toasted her with a half-lidded gaze, raising his close-to-empty glass. "Does it offend you, darling?"

"In your current compromising condition, yes." In truth, he looked rather handsome and piratical, and she was secretly tempted to pull off her gloves and rub a palm against his rough cheek.

"My current condition is spinning. Or the room is spinning. I can't tell which. I'm rather sick to my stomach." He closed his eyes again.

"What have you eaten?"

He held up the tumbler in answer, grinning and eyeing her dreamily through his dark lashes. When she put her hands to her hips, he smirked, a handsome half smile, to be sure, mischievous almost.

"What a lovely way to break your fast."

"Lovely," he said the word with a far-off look of contemplation. "Lovely Lovie." He turned his gaze on her. "Lovie? Who the hell named you?"

"If you were sober, I vow I would take offense. However, seeing you in such a dreadful state simply makes me feel sorry for you."

"I meant no offense." He waved his hand as if a fly were irritating him. "I happen to think it's adorable."

"The name or me?"

"Aha! You do care what I think. You will kiss me, Lovie Wright, mark my words. And of your own free will." He laid his head back, his eyes closed, and he sighed with pleasure. "I cannot wait."

CHAPTER SIX



Oh, he was daring, that one. Lovie would have to keep her heart close if she were to avoid falling into his snare, his charm, his wit. His everything. She couldn't help the smile that came after he exclaimed and challenged her with his statement about her wanting to kiss him. She was beginning to believe it herself.

As she watched his inebriated, grinning mouth from a safe distance, she gathered her nerve and pushed the conversation back to something more manageable, like food.

She shook her head as he raised a brow.

"When you kiss me, remember that I told you so." His arrogance outshone his inebriation.

"I would not be so sure. Besides, by tomorrow you will have forgotten today. Or you'll certainly wish you had. Now, let's get you something to eat."

"You do cook, I hope."

"My cooking is not in question. Your concern should be keeping it down and whether that's possible. Point me in the right direction and pray the cook left the fires burning."

Sheets covered the furniture in every room she passed. Whatever staff had stayed on had apparently been sent away by Hawke. From one maze of rooms to another, Lovie eventually guessed correctly and found the kitchens. She also found the ovens cold.

From there, the buttery was not difficult to locate, and she managed to turn up some dried fruit, cheese, and bread. A simple plate would have to suffice, but she did her best to arrange the dismal fare into something that at least appeared appetizing—not that he'd notice. His mind seemed to be

clearing, but the aftereffects, the nausea, was sure to last.

The finishing touch was a snowy white napkin with which she covered the plate. Then for reasons she refused to dwell on, she stopped to smooth a wayward strand of hair in place.

Thankfully, the journey back to the drawing room was not as complicated as finding the kitchens by pure trial and error had been.

“Here we are,” she said, strolling into the room. No response came from Hawke.

His head hung at an awkward angle, and she stopped to observe his broad shoulders lifting and falling with each shallow breath, which she could hear now that she was listening intently. She put the plate on the tea table and moved to wake him but stalled midway to admire him. Without his waistcoat, his white lawn shirt lay open at the throat, and the skin underneath was tanned by the sun. She chanced a finger along the back of his hand, where it hung lifelessly over the arm of the sofa. When he didn’t wake, she rubbed her thumb in his palm, turning his hand over, and was surprised to find the pads of his fingers calloused like a man who worked for a living.

On further inspection, she found an odd scar in the web between his thumb and forefinger that appeared to run straight through. She couldn’t imagine how he came by it.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

Her shoulders jerked, and her body stiffened, causing her to tighten her grip involuntarily like a hand sticking to metal when lightning strikes. She’d read about such a thing and always assumed one could not survive it. But here she was still clutching his hand, as if the room had been charged and he were the metal. She dropped his hand immediately and rubbed her tingling palms together, trying to erase the sensation while she searched for a proper response. Wide-eyed and embarrassed to the roots of her hair, she met his gaze.

His languid stare was in direct contrast to his cocksure smile.

She swallowed hard. “I was worried you had stopped breathing.”

“Believe me when I say I appreciate the concern.” He chuckled, then winced.

“Your head is already aching, isn’t it? I’d say it serves you right, but I fear I’m not certain what you deserve. This had to be a difficult trip for you.”

He rolled his eyes shut like someone who wished to avoid such sentimentality.

“It’s not for me to wonder.” She retrieved the plate. “No fire in the stove, but I managed to find some bread and cheese.”

“What is that?” He pointed to the unappetizingly shriveled orange pieces on the plate.

“Dried apricots, I think.”

He made a sickly sound in his throat.

“At least try the bread while I fetch some water.” She rose and removed his empty glass, hoping to dissuade him from suddenly taking up the decanter where he’d left off.

“I would offer to help, but I can’t seem to move.”

“Eat.” She tore off a piece of bread and placed it in his hand before she left the room for clean water.



Hawke didn’t think he could keep even the bread down, and just the sight of the apricots, which reminded him of something you’d scrape off the bottom of a boot, made his stomach lurch. And he was damned if he would lose his accounts in front of a woman. Especially this one. He hadn’t expected her until tomorrow. By then, he would have been sober and well, composed and charming. He tried to smile but everything hurt. And the bread... he stared at it, trying to conjure up the will to take a bite. When he finally did, his throat convulsed around it in protest.

Miss Wright returned with a pitcher and filled a clean tumbler. “Drink,” she demanded.

“I can barely swallow this.” He held out the bread.

“You need fluids.”

He eyed her from under his aching brow and tried for a smirk.

“Not that kind. Surely, you’ve had enough spirits to hold you over for a few days.” She shoved the glass in his hand. “Drink,” she commanded again, more forcefully like a determined schoolmaster.

He sipped, gagged, and tried again.

“Small sips until you’ve finished it all.”

“Yes, Dr. Wright.”

“I wouldn’t try the cheese in your state.” She took a piece and sat in the chair opposite the sofa.

“I’ll hold to the bread, or I vow I’ll lose my stomach right here.”

“Perhaps I should fetch a bucket.” She half rose, but he motioned for her to stay seated.

“I’m a gentleman if nothing else.”

“I see. So, a gentleman never gets sick in front of a lady?”

“Never.”

“How cunning to have such complete control over one’s brain. As I’m sure you always do. Men are so smart.” Her words mocked him, and rightfully so.

“Occasionally.” He couldn’t smile any longer. He just swallowed the rock of bread, put the offensive food aside, and laid his head back, moaning.

She must have left the room as he drifted into silent agony. All his efforts were wrangled into one purpose, one goal, to calm his stomach and stop the merry-go-round that his subconscious had leaped on when he wasn’t looking. He heard the unmistakable light tread of her footsteps and then the cold shock of a wet cloth pressed to his forehead. With his eyes still closed, he reached up to hold the rag in place and unexpectedly came into contact with her hand. He raised his lashes and found eyes as green as jade staring at him with more than concern etched across her brow. There was confusion, too. She jerked her hand away like she’d been scorched, and he sighed, letting his head loll until it rested against the back of the sofa, which was conducive to holding the cool cloth in place without help. Although, he was grateful for the nurse whom surely God had sent.

He swallowed down another lump saddling up his throat. “I expected you to call me a drunken sod, or some such, since you keep finding me at my worst.”

“I wouldn’t do that. Not while you’re dealing with personal ghosts.”

“How ghoulish of you.”

“That is not at all what I meant. My imagination is not subject to apparitions of any kind.”

“You leave your ghosts in closets, then?”

“Every last one.” He heard a teasing manner in her statement and a bit of truth.

He opened one eye, cocking his head a little to see her. “If you must know, I am quite embarrassed that you should keep finding me this way.”

“This is different. You and my cousin were making merry that first day, but this”—her gaze traveled over him—“this is something else. When I set

out at noon, I thought we'd stay at a posting inn on our way back, so we wouldn't have to travel at night, but now that I'm here, I don't think I want to move you. I seriously doubt that you'd be able to keep your pledge as a gentleman to keep everything down."

"Forgive me if I don't argue that point. I know how much you like conflict."

She giggled. A genuine sound of lighthearted camaraderie floated toward him. It was more settling on his abused stomach than the tasteless bread.

"You're not afraid to stay with a bachelor?" He smiled unrepentantly. "And an eligible one, at that."

"I think I can handle you, Mr. Hawke."

Even in his sloshed state, he could not hold back the vision of her handling him quite intimately, which made him uncomfortable by half. He pulled off the cloth and sat up because his obvious arousal over her simple statement would surely be visible if she dared to look. The effort hurt on more than one level. And not just his eyes, which felt bruised to the boney recesses of his skull every time he moved them.

"Seriously, is there something I can do for you?"

"I would suggest that kiss you owe me but not under these circumstances."

"I owe you? How so?"

"Because we both know what passion lies underneath your wanton green eyes."

"Do we? You are a marvel, Mr. Hawke." She mocked him but not unkindly. "What if I help you find your room? I can't imagine you're enjoying the company, and you need to sleep until this passes."

"I don't have a room. I slept here close to the brandy." He leaned forward, wearily, with his head in his hands.

"There must be at least two dozen rooms alone in a house this size. Surely, we can find one suitable. And one without brandy." She added the last part with a determined tone. "If you think you'll be all right here for a bit, I'll seek out appropriate quarters and clean linens."

"Not the lord or lady's suite." He didn't look up. It was too much effort. His body was already accepting the offer of comfort. He sighed with relief.

"Understood."



Hawke must have dozed off because the next thing he knew, she was back, and he was following her to a guest room, his head pounding with every step. To his humiliation, she offered to help him mount the stairs, but his pride would not have it, and so he suffered dizzying consequences of trying to keep his path straight and his feet from tripping him up. Falling did not sound appealing.

The bedding under his hands, the pillowcase against his cheek, felt crisp and fresh with the clean scent of lemon. It was entirely possible she'd made the bedding up herself, but he couldn't know.

"Wait." She touched his calf as his legs hung over the side of the bed. "Your shoes." She slid his shoes from his tired feet, and he sighed into the pillows, forgetting everything else.

The following morning, he woke with a groan, and his mouth felt like he'd swallowed a dishcloth. To his surprise, on the bureau across the room were a pitcher and a bowl, along with a bar of soap and toothpowder. After making use of all the water and wishing he had a razor, he went in search of the little sprite who had thoroughly taken care of him yesterday. On his way to the drawing room, he wondered more than once whether he would find her angry or irritated over his state. The fact they did not leave yesterday could not have sat well with her.

With his hands shoved deep in his pockets, he followed the humbling scent of coffee—humbling because he knew she had made it. The drawing-room doors stood wide, and he stopped at the threshold, tapping his knuckles lightly against the frame. "Am I welcome?" he asked sheepishly.

Miss Wright turned from setting dishes on the tea table, wearing a makeshift apron about her slender waist. She also wore a soothing smile that was neither condescending nor judgmental, both of which he deserved. "That is a silly question since this is your home. Of course, you're welcome."

He walked forward with little confidence. "It's my house, not my home." She ignored his dispiriting statement.

"How is your head today? Does it hurt much?"

"I'm certain it will be better after coffee. Thank you, by the way, for the essentials this morning."

"It was no less than you would do, I'm sure."

"I don't know about that." He motioned for her to sit before he joined her on the settee. It was perhaps too personal to sit so close, but after last night personal was a given. "What I do know is that you've never been intoxicated.

That alone makes caring for a blockhead like me that much more difficult.”

“I’m afraid your assumption about me is inaccurate.” She handed him a cup and saucer.

“A woman who drinks? And what is your pleasure, my lady?”

“Irish whiskey.” She did not look up from her task, answering without a scrap of hesitation.

“Now I know I’m in love,” he said with mocking relief. He was delighted with her easygoing attitude and her saucy revelations.

She put the back of her hand to her mouth, but it couldn’t squelch the giggle. “How many times have you fallen in love, I wonder?”

The question gave him an unexpected pause of self-reflection before he snapped back to the present. “Here? In England?” He gave a sardonic smile. “Just once.”

She shook her head at his impudence, still holding the same giggling smile that lit up the room and raised his spirits.

“Act quickly, my lady, because I’m afraid my love can only last until spring.”

“Why spring?”

“Because the weather is less violent for crossing the Atlantic. Not to mention, I am more than prone to seasickness, and you can imagine what that must look like after last night. Not pleasant, I vow.”

“So, you really did just come to visit, and you’re not staying? What will you do with this magnificent house?”

He gazed about the room, turning his head toward the exquisitely decorated ceiling with stunning inlaid tiles trimmed in turquoise and yellow. He focused again on her and shrugged. “Before last night, I might have sold it, but since you’ve now slept here, I don’t believe I could part with it. In fact, I think I’ll let you return to London so I may find the bed you slept in and crawl beneath the sheets because I fear that is as close as I’ll ever get.” The statement was most inappropriate, but she drew a playful side from him that he had buried long ago.

She chastised with a squinting look, but her rosy blush was proof enough of her attraction. “Do you know what I think?”

“I’m dying. Please tell me.”

“I believe we’ve yet to meet the true Remington Hawke because he likes to hide behind his arrogantly outrageous behavior.”

“Well, damn it all, you’ve found me out, Lovie Wright. Are you

interested in a bit of truth?”

She nodded eagerly. Her cup jingled the saucer as she put it in its place, and then, bright-eyed and ready, she folded her hands in her lap.

He leaned in. “I prefer the way you say Remington than Mr. Hawke.” He held her stare.

She relaxed, angling back against the soft cushion of the settee, draping her arm over the edge like someone who knows her worth. She turned a very proper rouge-colored traveling costume into an erotic garment. The jacket lay open, and her breasts filled out the white bodice, contradicting the conservative neckline. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

He matched her plucky grin and charismatic pose, angling himself against the other side of the sofa. They watched each other like a dare. “You hide yourself too, Miss Wright, but you cannot hide everything.”

She winged one perfect auburn brow at him—a direct challenge.

“You want to kiss me. Admit it.”

She crossed her arms, tapping her fingers nervously against her bent elbow. “You are an outrageous rogue of a man. And you’re mistaken.”

“Am I?”

“Yes,” she said emphatically. “This is just another ploy to keep the subject off yourself.”

He rubbed a finger behind his right ear, regarding her with narrowed eyes. “True.”

“Aha, you see!” She all but pointed at him.

“It does not alter the fact that you want to kiss me. You’re wondering about it right now.”

“I am doing no such thing. And I do not want to”—she licked her lips and swallowed—“kiss you.” She finished the last part in a whisper, like someone might hear.

“Then why do you keep looking at my mouth?”

Her throat worked.

“And now, you’re blushing again.”

“I think it’s getting late. We need to be on the road, and we cannot do that until the dishes are washed and put away.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Lovie wanted to deny it, but the man was right, and she was heart-thumpingly flustered by his too-accurate intuition. She'd been curious from the start, admittedly from the moment she'd met him at Rochester's. Her nights had been filled with wondering, fruitlessly, what a kiss from the roguishly handsome devil would feel like. She imagined a rough cheek, with the daring shadow of afternoon stubble, sliding along hers, seconds before his provocative mouth seized her with a kiss. The thought alone produced gooseflesh. She licked the tingle from her lips.

With the cups and saucers washed, she removed her apron and rehearsed mock conversations in her mind hoping to head off a blush before it began. It wasn't likely to work, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

By the time she returned to the drawing room, it was deserted. Mr. Hawke had apparently draped the remaining furniture with white sheets, reminding her to check the rooms they'd slept in and ensure they were tidy. There was no need to bother with her room since she'd straightened the bedclothes before coming down, but if Hawke were like most men, he would have left his room a disorderly mess. That was her experience living with bachelors. At least Hudson, at any rate.

With no trouble at all, she found Hawke's room. The door was left ajar, thank goodness, because she feared the proverbial knock and hearing his deep, commanding voice inviting her in. But it didn't matter. He wasn't there. His bed, however, was made up, which caused her to ponder his upbringing. Was he used to having his life lived for him, or did he take responsibility for his own happiness? Did he make his own decisions about what comes next? She rather preferred self-made men. It was one reason she

appreciated what her brother and her cousin were trying to do with billiards. Hudson was convinced the game would come to some renowned appreciation and would soon be a sport. With Rochester's nearly unmatched talent, the two were a marvelous team.

Perhaps if Hawke lived here, he could supplement his livelihood with billiards as well. According to Rochester, he was an excellent player. He could stay in the house he'd inherited and never return to America. Before she realized what she was thinking, her pulse ran away with the imagery, and she brushed a hand down her blouse, trying to press her nerves back into their cage of indifference.

The only other place she could think of to look for Hawke was the room she'd stayed in last night. Perhaps he'd had the same idea. His bed had been made. It stood to reason that he might inspect her room.

The door to the bedchamber in question was closed. Should she knock? He couldn't possibly be in there.

She turned the latch. The well-kept room she had left this morning was now in some disarray. The bed was no longer made, nor was it precisely unmade.

"What are you doing?" she asked Hawke, who was lounging like a man of leisure with his hands behind his head, and his body stretched out over the bed where she'd slept.

He inhaled deeply, a silly, playful grin on his face. "Citrus and lavender. Just like you."

"You're irredeemable."

"You wound me, sweet." He laid a hand over his heart. "Can you blame me?"

"Emphatically, yes."

"For what exactly?"

"Are you serious? Because you have mussed my bed when I'd already made it up."

"I am relieved. I thought you might be angry to find me lying on your pillow and drinking in the scent of you."

She had never met anyone so obnoxious in her life. She was exasperated with his antics and strangely flattered, too—*that* she could not deny. No one had ever wanted to smell her, not that she recalled. "Was it necessary to tussle the bedclothes?"

"I was denied the thing I'd rather tussle. So yes. It was necessary."

“I believe I’m starting to hate you, Mr. Hawke.”

He sat up, his smile disappearing behind a mask of genuine concern. “I apologize. Sometimes I go too far. Don’t hate me, please, Miss Wright. I admit that it has been awhile since I’ve had so much fun teasing anyone. But I’ve failed to see the signs of offense.”

She felt guilty for ruining his game because, in truth, she rather enjoyed his banter. It kept her on her toes. It refreshed her communication skills, which she sorely lacked. “I’m not offended.” She removed her gaze from the bedding.

He cleared his throat and stood, smoothing the bedsheets as he went.

“Does my pillow really smell like citrus and lavender?”

“Yes,” he said simply, without turning to look at her. She watched as he pulled the comforter into place and fluffed the pillow.

Lovie moved to stand beside him, offering assistance with a task that he seemed to be handling perfectly well on his own. She bumped his arm and apologized nervously. “Mr. Hawke.”

“Just Hawke.”

The sincere invitation to drop the formality of mister soothed her spirits and her guilt. “Hawke,” she said again. “You are not the problem.”

He turned to face her, giving her his full attention. “I’ve caused undue stress to you, and that’s a problem. You’ve already guessed more about me than most, Miss Wright.”

She folded one hand over the other, trying to maintain eye contact. “Lovie, if you wouldn’t mind.”

He smiled a little. “Do I dare?”

“Oh, yes. Please do.” She dipped her head away, trying to hide the immediate smile his words could produce. “You see, although I’m accustomed to living with men—and bachelors, at that—I am not used to the banter of real gentlemen.”

“Me? A gentleman?”

“You see?” She laughed, her stomach giving a little flip. “I would normally say something curt and ill-mannered because my responses have been honed on the family stone.”

“You’re perfect. Do you know that?”

She shook her head. “I’m a bit of a shrew.”

“Whoever told you that should be shackled in the town square.”

Sliding her fingers coyly over the marigold counterpane, she glanced at

him sideways. “Did you really come in here to smell my linens?”

“No. I came to check on the bed and make it if needed. Then I couldn’t resist provoking you a little, but the citrus and lavender were a nice surprise.” He reached out to touch a loose curl.

She leaned in, a whisper away. “Do you smell citrus and lavender in my hair?”

He closed the gap, and she felt his breath move the auburn strands when his nose nuzzled her ear. “Very much,” he whispered.

She licked her lips. “And that’s a good thing?”

“Lovie, are you seeking compliments?”

“Shamefully, yes. You have no idea how long it has been since I’ve had one. At least one that meant something.” She realized what she said and corrected, “Not that your opinion should mean anything.”

“Ah, but it does.” His hands, those strong, sinfully warm fingers, brushed down her arms, and she achingly wished she was wearing a summer gown without long confining sleeves.

She turned her face mere inches from his. “Perhaps.” Then she smiled, tilting her head. “But it doesn’t mean I want to kiss you.”

“Thank the mother of nature that we are back on that subject.” He ran a knuckle along her cheek and gave a small chuck of her chin. “Shouldn’t we be on the road?”

“Oh, yes.” She shook herself, backed up a step, and took one last look around the room.

The coach ride began with nervous silence, but unlike the trip there, she’d become familiar with his demeanor, and they fell into a comfortable camaraderie. She watched him under her lashes.

“Do you know why I invited you to escort me to my family home? Because I thought I’d have a chance to be alone.”

“I could take a seat on the roof.”

She smirked. “I knew you couldn’t remain silent, but I had expected to easily ignore you.”

“You are very bad for my manly ego.”

“Do you see what I mean? It’s those comments that keep me from quiet solitude long after you’ve stopped talking.”

“So, you think about me at night when you’re alone?”

“And there you have it again.” He had hit too close on that estimation. She had been inundated with mock conversations with him in her waking

dreams. “Outrageous.”

“But you’re smiling, so I believe your tactic is false modesty.”

She gasped, slapping her hand against her breast. “I never lie.”

He folded his arms.

“Never,” she said with more emphasis, widening her eyes, which drew a grin from him.

“Do you mind if I test your statement? I don’t wish to offend you again.”

He said it in jest, so how could she take offense when she knew for certain he would insist that some day she’d kiss him of her own volition?

Despite all her practice to keep her pulse in check and her cheeks warmed, she braced herself for a battle of wits.

He scrutinized her, tilting his head this way and that like he was sizing her up. “How many summers have you seen, Lovie?”

Her gaze snapped back to his, and suddenly she regretted allowing him her name.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Hawke would have to admit that he stepped right into that one. Asking a woman's age was always a risk and, wisely, a road less traveled. "Put the blades away, sweet. I only meant you don't look like a girl."

"Oh? And what do I look like? A young man, an old spinster, on the shelf? Please, your compliments are like butter to my bread."

He almost chuckled, but she folded her arms tightly and possessively across her chest. Clearly, she had taken offense, and would have taken more if she knew what her position did for her breasts. It rather gave him pause. If he irritated her the rest of the way, the view would be like heaven. Even her eyes sparked like fire as he imagined they would in passion. He was sorely tempted to keep her in this state of irritated arousal. "I only meant you look and act like a woman who knows herself."

"Well, I'm not eighteen."

"Exactly. You travel alone." He indicated the interior of the coach.

"I'm not alone."

"You travel with strangers."

"I'm not likely to nurse strangers back to health after they've imbibed so much as to be ill."

He grimaced and bowed his head. "Valid point. And I do apologize."

She pulled one hand free to wave him on and then replaced it under her bosom, her lovely mouth a grim line.

Sitting back, with one arm supporting his elbow, he rubbed his jaw while regarding her. "What I'm trying to say is you're a mystery, Lovie Wright. That's not a bad thing." He tilted his head, and she mirrored him either

unknowingly or mockingly. He couldn't tell. He sighed. "I take it you're not going to tell me your age."

"Does it matter?"

"No. Perhaps." He shrugged, giving her a one-sided grin.

"You're a cad, Mr. Hawke."

"I never claimed otherwise, which is why I know you are not a girl because I don't flirt with girls."

One auburn-tipped eyebrow raised. "Are you flirting now? I cannot tell. I'm accustomed to the flirtatious banter of well-mannered gentlemen, but this"—her gaze darted over him—"I cannot quantify."

"And that is my point. Girls tend to spend all their time giggling in herds. But you do neither."

"Herds?" She laughed with little humor. "Are we cattle?"

"Girls? Yes. Women? No."

"I don't know what to think of you, and you think *I* am a mystery? Mr. Hawke, I know what constitutes a gentleman because I live with gentlemen."

"Family."

"Yes. Even Rochester is more than a cousin. We are like siblings. I confess interaction with my parents was sparse, which may be why you perceive me as you do."

"Do you want to be a girl?" There was something more here than simple banter. More than mystery. She had the look of someone who had stopped dreaming, stopped living. "I know I've botched the charm."

She looked skeptical.

"But honestly, I am interested in how you came to be so independent. And that, my dear, is all I meant when I asked about your age."

She conceded a little by unfolding her arms. "Why did you not ask about my independence instead of braying like a donkey about my age?"

"Because I am a man, and we are notorious for sticking our feet in our mouths. We, apparently, have a fondness for the taste of shoe leather."

Her gaze trailed to his feet. "It would be a shame to ruin those boots. They look expensive. I should know because Rochester likes fine things, and I'm forever putting his boots away."

"You see? It's those kinds of statements that drive my interest. Like, how did you come to live together?"

She shrugged, turning her attention out the window. "It just happened that way. Hudson and I lost our mother, and as a result, we spent a good deal of

time at our uncle's."

"Where was your father?"

"He... was preoccupied with holding a house together, and truth be told, he spent less and less time with us over his remaining years. It had more to do with grief than anything else, I'm sure."

"And what about your grief?"

She gazed at him through her lashes and swallowed. An answer was not forthcoming, and perhaps she didn't have one.

"Forgive me. It's not my place. There are some subjects too deep for idle conversation." He had done a great deal of apologizing these last couple of days. It wasn't like him to offend anyone, and it wasn't like him to ask such personal questions, either. She did more than coax his curiosity or fill his boredom. She was alive. He could see it deep in her eyes, and he wanted more for her as if it were his place to provide it.

She gave the barest nod of forgiveness and licked her lips. "I'm five-and-twenty. Disgraceful, I know."

"So, you're not a girl. Big surprise." He teased, making light of it and hoping to see her shining smile. She had a right to keep her secrets, and he had no right to ask.

"As for my independence, I am forever in the company of my brother and cousin and am not overly involved with the seasonal amusements, which often leads people to overlook me, assuming I am accompanying one of them. You can go almost anywhere when you're invisible, as there is little risk of interference or scandal. After all, where is the fun in gossip when the individual in question is virtually unknown?"

"Whoever told you that you were invisible was clearly blind."

She looked away, but not before he saw a promising smile blooming on her cheeks. "It's possible to be seen and yet still invisible. In fact, that's probably the worst kind of invisible to be."

She said that as if it were personal, and he had already pushed his limits of charm and respected her enough not to pry.

"Tell me something of the infamous Remington Hawke. What is your livelihood?"

"Used to be a sheep farmer." He raised an ironic smile.

"Then I suppose you know cattle when you see them? I'm speaking of girls, of course."

"Of course. On both counts. My father worked in investments and

banking, much like your cousin, but when I was a boy, I fell in with a wicked runaway sheep, and the rest is history.”

“A runaway sheep?” Her shoulders shook with laughter. “Now you are obligated to share this story. I must know.”

“Oh, it was more trouble than you might imagine. I called her Betsy, but that was before I knew her real name—Forty-one.”

“Forty-one?”

“Because she belonged to a nearby farm, and it would seem our grass was greener than the other side, as is often the case. But we did not yet have a farm. It was Betsy who started the whole thing. My father had anticipated raising horses, but I was eight and couldn’t part with Betsy. I also couldn’t fathom how someone could lose a sheep. It was unforgivable in my young mind.”

“I take it you found the owner?”

“More like he found us. Turns out they did miss her, and I was forced to give her back, which my mother could not abide because she, too, had grown to like her. And why wouldn’t she when I had treated the kindly sheep like family and brought her to my room?”

She laughed outright now. “To your room?”

“I confess it was not the best idea I ever had.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You were a boy.”

“I was.” Even if he had tried, he couldn’t stop smiling. “Eventually, my father agreed to purchase me one lamb if I would learn how to care for it properly and promise never to bring it into the house. So, I asked the farmer who owned Betsy if I might apprentice under him. My father would not permit me to accept a salary since the benefit was in the education, so the farmer gifted me Betsy.”

She clapped, then held both hands to her mouth. “Bravo, to your father and the farmer.”

“To my credit, I did work for it. Do I not get a *bravo*?”

“You got a sheep. That was your reward.”

“Lovie, you wound me with all your withholding.”

She shrugged happily. Her lips, like his, permanently turned up at the corners. She beamed. “You are a scoundrel.”

“There’s more if you’d like to hear it.”

“Please.”

He cleared his throat. “This part of the story is far more entertaining.”

“I’ll be the judge.” She bit her lip like a dare.

“By the time I reached fifteen, I had a small flock, and I’d learned to shear and to draw grease from the wool. So naturally, as any good farmer would do, I began joining the fairs that began to pop up in different counties. Locally, the fair consisted of mostly sheep farmers, but their wives had little to do and were evidently eager for competition.”

“Naturally.” She rolled her eyes but held a grin.

“As a result, the women started creating preserves, jams, jellies, and even pies to sell.” He held up one finger. “And this is where it gets a bit sticky. Someone neglected to slide a bolt on one of the paddock gates.”

She tilted her head, a shining question in her eyes.

“All right, probably me.” He bowed his head humbly. “The sheep escaped, as one might imagine, and not just mine. When the raucous broke out, many mistakes were made during the chaos, and more than one pen was affected. By the time I knew of it, there were sheep everywhere, and of course, if you are yet to guess the calamity, mine were headed straight for the white linen-clad tables of jams and jellies.”

“No!”

“Oh, yes. The tables were upended, and several sheep came away jammed. Needless to say, I did not place that year, nor any after, because we eventually moved, and my interests turned elsewhere.” The last word was forced out by a sharp bump and a sudden halt. Hawke leaned toward the window to ensure it wasn’t a highwayman or something equally dangerous. He saw the coachman scramble to the front toward the horses. He excused himself and went in search of answers.

It didn’t take long to ascertain the problem. Directly in front of the team of four horses was a large felled tree.

“I cannot say if there’s a way around this anytime soon, sir,” the coachman said when Hawke joined him.

After evaluating the debacle, he returned to Lovie. The coach bobbed as he took a high step into the cabin because he hadn’t bothered with the steps. “A rather massive tree is blocking the road.”

“Will it take long to rectify?”

“I’d say it will take several days to remove such a large trunk. By the time men are gathered to the task and axes honed, the day will be gone. There’s little chance they’ll even start on it before tomorrow or the day after.”

“Lovely. So now what?”

He looked about the cabin. "Either this is our hotel, or we return from whence we came. I vote we return since we'll likely starve here."

Lovie sighed heavily, her shoulders slouched in defeat. "I was hoping to make it back before tomorrow."

"You have plans?"

"Only the usual."

"We'll make it a holiday, and you can show me how remarkably independent you truly are. Unless you'd like to search for another road around."

"No." She shook her head, closing her eyes. "The other roads are not as well maintained and are likely to be caked with mud from last week's rains. We could make it to my uncle's, but I wouldn't suggest it. Rochester's father and brother are not good company."

"How bad could it be for a few days?"

"Bad enough. My words do them a kindness, and I don't wish to be there."

"Well, my new home is grossly understocked."

"Which leaves my family home. Travel shouldn't be a problem, and the house has a small staff and a stocked pantry. What do you think?"

"I think you're stuck with me for a while longer. I will do my best to behave and not vex you." He kept his voice lighthearted, but her demeanor was stiff and sharp-edged.

"It's not you. You didn't uproot the tree. I'm just not good at unexpected plans. I like everything neat and orderly."

He wondered if it had something to do with losing control of her life at an early age. From what he could surmise, she was the only daughter in her family, and it was possible she had grown up too quickly, passing up her childhood in lieu of taking care of her household. With each passing moment, it made more sense.

A footman rapped on the door, and Hawke opened it, leaning forward. "Plenty of room for moving, sir. We'll turn about. Just need a heading."

Lovie scooted close to the open door and leaned into the conversation. Hawke couldn't take his eyes off her. "We'll be returning to my home, Mr. Jakes." She held a confidence about her that he suspected she didn't feel.

"Yes, miss." The footman bowed and shut the coach door.

Still leaning in, Lovie looked through her dark auburn lashes, her gaze settling on his mouth before she lifted her eyes to his.

“All you need to do is lean in a bit more.” With that, he pushed himself forward just enough to be within her range. Teasing had a way of distracting most people. “Never doubt I wouldn’t kiss you back. If that’s your concern.”

“Your ego is a constant reminder of why I would never deign to do such a thing as kiss you willingly, Mr. Hawke.”

His lips turned up in an ironic smile. “My *name* is Remington if you’re inclined to use it. I would even understand if you shouted it.” He emphasized his name again, since she purposely refused to use it, which was more telling than anything.

“And in what circumstance, do you suppose, I would need to shout your name?”

He said nothing, just straightened, sighed, and moved back against the cushions, folding his arms.

She slowly sat up, her gaze locked with his. “I believe you were about to finish your story about the lost sheep. We are certainly not short of time, Remington.” She said his name without breaking eye contact, like a dare.

The coach forged ahead, making as sharp a turn as possible while he and Lovie bobbed side to side, each bracing a hand against the seats before the vehicle gave a hardy jolt, and the springs settled as they fell back into a balanced position.

“Let’s see, where did I leave off?”

“The sheep got themselves jammed and jellied.”

“Yes. It was more than a fiasco. Women screamed, which only confused the sheep all the more. The whole area looked like a keg of gunpowder had been unleashed. The poor little lambs were in tears. And when I say little lambs, I mean the women. By the time I came upon the scene, it was pure chaos. The sheep had mutinied. Farmers scattered, searching for their prize-winning cattle, and my father was shouting at the top of his lungs.”

“You weren’t there when they escaped?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Why do I have this odd feeling that you may have been to blame for it all?”

He laughed, holding the strap and peering out the window. “It was likely my mistake that started it. But I was distracted”—He shifted his gaze back to her, his cheeks sore with smiling—“by a girl.”

Her cheeks dimpled by the force it took to keep from grinning, although she looked adorable trying to keep it in check. “Was it your famous dare-to-

kiss-me game?”

“I never play games when it comes to something as serious as desire.”

“You are too much. You know that?”

“I do.”

“How did it end? Did you get your kiss? Did everyone locate their sheep after the stampede?”

“You will be delighted to know that I did not get my kiss, but I did retrieve the flock despite my father’s help.”

“Your father knew nothing about sheep?”

“Sheep are fascinating animals. When it’s almost impossible for a stranger to collect them when they are loose, it’s almost as easy as a whisper when you are their caretaker.”

“Then they really do follow the shepherd.”

“Indeed. I whistled and called, and they were there in a thrice.”

“They knew their master.”

“It’s about trust and care. I liked them.”

“I think you loved them.”

CHAPTER NINE



Lovie didn't want to admit it, but she was thankful for a break from the normal chaos surrounding the holiday season. Two days had passed since they arrived at her family's home. At first, she had thought Hawke might be eager to leave, but the ease of their conversations had alleviated her of that notion.

"There you are," Hawke said, passing the open parlor where she sat in a wingback chair hidden away from the day's festivities. "You disappeared after the Christmas feast. Are you missing your family?"

"No. Hudson and Rochester are undoubtedly playing billiards for shillings with the servants and losing on purpose."

"I thought you might be worried they were concerned when we didn't arrive back in time."

"Oh, Hudson knows better. This isn't the first time something like this has happened. I honestly believe he agreed for you to escort me because he was afraid of this very thing, which speaks of his trust, or Rochester's. I have a feeling it took a little persuasion from Rochester that you were harmless and safe to escort Hudson's spinster sister."

"You use spinster as if it's a bad word," he said, walking farther into the little parlor where a cozy fire burned and the candles created a soft glow. "I brought hot chocolate. I hope you like it with milk and sugar. I can't abide it with water and no sugar." He carried no tray, just a cup in each hand. He strolled to the chair where she sat and handed her a serving. With the tea table between them, he sat on the settee. "Spinster simply means a lady who earns her own way and doesn't need a husband's income."

"Which is also to say, on the shelf. And I don't earn my own money."

She said over a sip of Christmas cocoa.

“Is this your house?”

“Strictly, it’s Hudson’s.”

He tilted his head and gave her an exasperated look. “You’re splitting hairs.”

“I’m melancholy and not good company, I’m afraid. We spent only a few holidays in this house, but the ones we did spend here created good memories.”

“You think the good memories are gone, and there will be no more?”

She watched him closely. “Yes, I suppose I do. What about you? How do you feel spending Christmas with strangers?”

“This isn’t the trip I had planned, but I did expect a certain amount of grief. I’d consider this a boon under the circumstances.”

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me.” She put the cup down.

“Why? Because you’re curious?”

She slanted him a dubious brow.

“I’m not speaking of a kiss. I’m simply saying that it’s not untoward to question one’s motives or life or feelings, especially when that someone has been residing in your home for a week. Between here and your cousin’s house in Mayfair, we’ve spent a fair amount of time together. We’ve talked, laughed, and even been ill.”

“One of us has been ill.” She bit her lip. “I confess that I wondered a little if you were dependent on drink. I’m happy to see that you’re not. And not because I would think less of you, but because it makes life unbearably difficult.”

“You sound like you know.”

“My father drank to cover his sadness. Hudson and I are careful never to imbibe for the purpose of burying one’s feelings.”

“That’s wise. I didn’t expect you’d find me in a bad way.”

“Well, according to you, I was early. I’ll take the blame for the sake of peace. I’m generous that way.”

He sat back against the corner of the sofa and regarded her with a gleam in his eyes. “I brought you a gift in keeping with the occasion.”

“Besides the chocolate? You shouldn’t have done that. Where did you find the time?”

He grinned like the devil and pulled from his breast pocket a sprig of mistletoe. “Just in case you needed an excuse.”

She laughed despite the inappropriate suggestion. She'd begun to look forward to his teasing. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Oh, but I'm not. I am but a willing participant."

She popped her hands on the arms of her chair and stood. "I have had about all I can suffer on that accord. So," she said, strolling around the back of the sofa. "I will take that." She bent over his shoulder, snatched the mistletoe from his fingers, and held it over his head. His eyes were merry but round with shock as she placed one hand under his chin, tilting his head back. She relinquished the greenery long enough to boost herself up on her toes. She leaned over his face and kissed him upside down.

It was a short kiss. An awkward kiss, to be sure. And, something else. The smell of his shaving soap, his spicy cologne, and the taste of chocolate on his lips was enticing, indeed.

"There," she said, pulling back. "Are you satisfied?"

"Not by half." He looked over his shoulder.

"I could have told you that." She threw the mistletoe at him, and he caught it, barely saving his hot chocolate from spilling all over his trousers.

"I dare you to try that again, face-to-face."

"We were face-to-face."

He crooked a finger at her and set his chocolate down.

The gesture jarred her insides with excitement.

"If you please. For my poor soul's sake."

She took a deep, determined breath and marched toward him. When she stood close enough, gazing down at him because he remained seated, she held out her hand, and he humbly, but with a wicked smile, placed the greenery on her upturned palm. She swallowed. "Best to get it over with then."

He hardly had a chance to get a chortle out before she braced her hands on his shoulders, bent her head, and pressed her lips to his. This kiss, however, did not feel awkward, and it was not brief. At first, her mouth was tense, but the tingling shock of doing something so outrageous spread like an electric storm through her veins, and her lips softened and parted. She heard a whimper come from her throat. Hawke wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

There was no protest in her when he took the lead, his palms on her cheeks, tilting her head for a devouring kiss. He tugged her chin, and she opened her mouth, and the onslaught, what he did with his tongue, was more

than she'd ever expected. Without thinking, she ran her palms up his shirtfront and around his neck, folding into him, pressing her body to his. Hawke growled. It was the first time she'd ever heard such a sound. It gave her courage. She even smiled against his mouth.

"You little minx," he said before taking her lips again.

Her heart pounded, and her chest ached with a thrill that reached every nerve ending in her body. She felt him shift under her bottom, and he suddenly pulled his mouth from hers.

Neither of them said anything. Lovie cleared her throat and allowed him to help her stand. He scratched his forehead.

"Well." She straightened her skirts and felt a rush of heat in her cheeks as she held each breath into a steady, even, normal rhythm. "That was rather untoward of me."

A suffocated chuckle came from the sofa where he sat, and she shyly looked at him. "I hadn't expected it myself. Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

She walked on shaking limbs back to her seat. She took her cup, holding it out toward him in a toast. "Merry Christmas, Remington."

He raised his cup. "You have made it so, Miss Lovie Wright."

She lowered her cup directly. "If you're going to join the charade, you'll have to use my name properly, as in singular."

"Was it a charade?"

She eyed him over the rim of her cup, wishing it was something more potent than chocolate, like brandy.

"You aren't going to answer me, are you?"

"I believe it's my prerogative. And now the boot is on the other leg, as they say."



The following morning when Hawke sat on the edge of his bed and picked up a boot, he remembered with enthusiasm what Lovie had said. *The boot on the other foot*. He decided to try it, slipping his right boot on the left foot. He grimaced as he jammed his toes into an unnatural position, making the boot feel two sizes too small. An idea sprouted, except it was apt to make her more uncomfortable than him, even with his boot on the wrong foot. He left it there

and pulled on the other, left side to right foot. Limping to the wardrobe, he grabbed his greatcoat and hobbled to the parlor he left her in last night. Surely, she would be there.

“What? No mistletoe?” He tried not to grimace as he stepped into the warm room decked in winter colors of storm blue and marigold yellow. Lovie was sitting on the settee where she’d kissed him last night. Oh, that kiss. It twisted his insides. What had been a farce, a tease, a means to see her blush, had turned into something he couldn’t easily forget, and he wasn’t certain whether tempting fate was a good idea. Before he could change his mind, he added, “I think we need to get out.”

She turned in her seat, her arm resting on the back sofa cushion. “I thought you’d be breaking your fast. If I’d known you would visit my hiding place, I’d have stayed in my room.” The statement lost all effect when he saw her grin as she turned away.

“I wanted to show you something.”

“Outside?”

“Eventually.” He rounded the settee, fighting the grimace and the urge to grunt with every step.

“What are you doing?”

He sat next to her on the settee, and feeling like a pretzel, he crossed one oddly booted foot over the opposite knee with a painful sound coming from his throat.

She looked at his feet. “What have you done?”

“Exactly what you suggested. The boot is on the other foot, and it’s damn uncomfortable.”

She hid a giggle with a hand to her mouth. “You are a dunderhead. Take them off.”

“I can’t.” To his credit, it wasn’t exactly a trick because he had no living idea whether the boots would come off easily or not. “I may need your help.”

“Why did you do it in the first place?” Her gaze swayed from the boots to his face. “Never mind. I can see I’m wasting my good sense trying to figure out your idiocy.”

“Such names you call me. Idiot. Dunderhead. I like Remington better.”

“Well, Remington, hand me your foot.”

He laid back against the sofa arm, holding out his leg and enjoying the enticing view as she bent to the task of yanking his boot free. Her dress was demure enough when she sat straight, but leaning over his leg, he could see

the nice soft curve of her breasts as they met into an enticing vee supported by tight-fitting stays. Women's clothes were a curse to remove, but they were sometimes heaven to look at.

"I cannot believe you actually did this. Doesn't it hurt?" she asked as the other boot dropped. "There." She brushed her hands together. "I think you're capable of putting them back on."

"Only if you show me the grounds here at Wright House. Unless, of course, you'd rather kiss me again. I'd stay right here for that."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not that I'm aware since I did *do* as you requested."

"The shoe?" She cast him a remorseless glance with a teasing twinkle in her eyes.

He nodded with a wide grin.

"You're a child."

"If it makes you feel better to disarm me with an insult rather than charm, I am up for anything today. In fact, I believe your insults are quite charming."

As a chuckling smile grew, she lowered her eyes. "The property. If you don't mind the winter chill and fields of tall grass, I'll show you the cattle."

"I'm at your service."

"Let me get my cloak."

CHAPTER TEN



Hawke waited in the foyer for almost twenty minutes. He began to wonder if she'd played him for a fool and meant to leave him standing in the hall for the rest of the day.

"What are you doing?"

He whipped around to see her in a hunter-green cloak tied at the throat, her hands on her hips, her eyes a sparkling mystery.

"I thought I was waiting for you."

"I was waiting for you at the side entrance. I've been there for a quarter-hour. I was afraid you lost your nerve."

He pressed a finger to his chest. "Me? Not likely. And I'm not good at reading minds."

"Or women?"

"Do I hear you saying that women don't have minds? Lovie, you are a contradiction." What she was, was a joy. "Lead the way, my love."

"And you are ill-bred." She threw the statement over her shoulder with an easy air of teasing grace as she led the way down a long corridor to a door that opened onto a portico and a carriage drive.

They walked through gardens of wintering flora, through shrubbery the cold winter color of green, and toward the pastures set apart for cattle. She showed him the stable where the horses were kept and then, farther on, a barn where cattle feed was stored. The grounds were pretty and well-kept. He saw a couple of cottagers' homes in the distance, but mostly they walked along a fence rail through low-stepping grass. The pastureland was spotted with cows, their sleek coats a deep red and a swish of white at the end of their

fuzzy tails. They were nose to the ground, oblivious of the interlopers.

She hiked her skirts with every other step, distracting the hell out of him. In places where the cows had not found the greener grass on the other side, she held her skirts high enough for a peek at her white-stockinged calves. Unfortunately, her short boots did a nice job of hiding her ankles. Since she had already called him childish, he decided he owed it to himself to enjoy the view and not just of her calves but her hips as they gently swayed. The outline of her delicious derriere only visible when haunting wisps of breeze lapped at her cloak. Saluting the sun, he looked to the midmorning sky and a trace of clouds that might become something more ominous if the wind picked up.

He ignored them. The solitude with her, the privacy, was too tempting to pass up.

“Lovie?” He used her name to see her reaction and whether she truly meant to allow it or if it was simply obtuseness that caused her to engage him so informally.

“Hm?”

“We’re completely alone now, no coachman or footmen, no servants or gardeners, just a man and a woman walking unaccompanied. Against all propriety. Aren’t you a little afraid?” He longed for their usual repartee of tongue sabers.

“Not in the least.”

“Not afraid of wanting to kiss me again?” He refrained from putting a dare into the inflection, increasing his stride to see her better.

“Don’t be absurd.” The nervous laugh gave her away.

“What about an attack on your person? You’re not afraid I might have my way?” He caught up with her, walking beside her, his hands clasped behind his back, caught between keeping an eye on the trail ahead and watching the emotions play across her charming face. Seeing her ruby-red lips grinning against the chill gave him ideas.

“Out here? And where would you have your way with me? There’s no convenient bed around.”

“Such daring, Lovie Wright.”

She gave him a sidelong glance, her brow knit. “How is it that I am daring?”

“The conversation alone.”

“Then change it. It doesn’t matter to me.” She adopted a carefree gait,

rolling her hands in the air as she talked while high-stepping through the higher brush in the direction of a small hill straight ahead.

He couldn't let it go. Playing with her was too much fun. "Are we speaking of the same thing? I just want to be clear." Her pace picked up, but it was of no consequence. She could not outstep his long stride.

"I am keen to your meaning, and I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

He let the slight against him go for a much more tempting subject. "Am I to understand the act is not possible without a bed? All this time, I had it wrong."

She halted her stomping through the brush and looked at him. "Married couples retire for a reason." She said, as if that explained it all.

He raised a brow, waiting for her to continue.

"To bed." With her hands on her hips, she looked at him as if he were addled. "They retire to bed. I'm ignorant, but not that ignorant."

"There are numerous ways of engaging in intimate relations that do not require a bed. Coupling takes many forms, and with an active imagination, the possibilities are endless."

"All right, if I believe you, then I am still safe since I can't imagine you'd want to wallow in the dirt and mud." Her head was tilted in exasperation at what she viewed as his blatant stupidity, no doubt.

He cocked his head, shutting his eyes for a moment and trying not to envision the act at all. "Why not right here, standing in a field?"

"Both people upright? That isn't possible."

Hawke wanted to laugh, but she looked so adorable, with her green eyes huge and round with ripened curiosity. He didn't say a word, just pointed over her shoulder toward the fenced pasture. She turned to see a bull and cow in the throes of matrimony. He clutched his hands behind his back, trying to hold on to the innocence he saw in her shocked expression. If her cheeks were pink from the winter chill, they were certain to be hot now from the blood-pooling conversation. Her soft skin had turned into the color of summer strawberries. She moved her hand to absently grip the fence rail, but Hawke reached out just in time, saving her from being pricked by the barbed wire.

The action broke the spell, and she looked from his hands to his face, her lips parted, which made him want to kiss her.

"Do you mean to say that people...?" Her throat bobbed, swallowing the

rest of her sentence.

He nodded, biting his lower lip.

“You’re teasing me.” Her voice did not come out accusatory. She sounded more amazed than anything—a healthy curiosity by his accounts.

It dawned on him that she was grossly uneducated in the subject, perhaps even more than most women her age. “You mentioned your cousin is like a brother to you. Are there any female cousins close to you? Does Rochester have sisters?” He asked the question with friendly candor, hoping he hadn’t scared her off the subject.

“No female cousins, just Rochester’s brother.”

“And your aunt? His mother?”

“My aunt died about the time I was born. Rochester’s mother and mine were sisters. It’s tragic, isn’t it?”

No stranger to heartbreak, he grunted. Right now, his interest lay elsewhere. “And he has no sisters, and you have no sisters. Any other cousins?”

“No. Why?” She looked up at him, accusatorially confused—if that were a thing.

“So, you never had a conversation with your mother or aunt, and you have no female siblings or cousins.” He made the statement, glancing over her head, watching the bull and heifer finish the task. His gaze fell back to hers, and she wrangled her luxurious auburn hair around her hand as the breeze picked up.

“I know what you’re trying to say.” She moved around him, walking along the fence, taking surreptitious glances toward the rutting animals as if trying to comprehend. “People? Like that?” She pointed toward the beasts.

The bull walked sluggishly in a way that Hawke fully understood. Meanwhile, he was content to walk behind Lovie as she lifted the soiled scalloped hem of her cream muslin skirt while her cloak lapped at the wind.

He pulled his coat together and looked at the sky. Ahead it was fairly clear, but behind them, as they strolled, a storm brewed in the distance, and the closest structure with a roof was a barn, a good half mile back. “I’m afraid our walk is finished.” He could smell the thunderstorm, wet, fresh, with a spark of electricity in the air. Or it was the woman beside him.

She pivoted, releasing her hair to whip about her in the coming storm. “It will be upon us in minutes. We’ll be drenched before we get back.”

“We could wait it out in the barn.” As he said it, the first drop hit her

square on the forehead.

She wiped the rainwater from her eyes, searched the nearby grove, then pointed in the same direction. “There’s a small woodland cottage. You can’t see it for the trees, but it’s closer than the barn, and I should think it more comfortable.”

He took her upper arm and began briskly guiding her toward the line of trees. Short gusts caught at her skirts, tangling them about her legs when a clap of thunder exploded. A cloud opened up. Water poured from the sky. “Lead the way,” he shouted, and to his surprise, she grasped his hand, and they ran for cover. Sure enough, a cottage, painted green like the trees, camouflaged in the cover of leaves, popped out of nowhere. She slammed into the door, pushing on it while he thrust his hand around her and tried the knob. The door fell open with a rusty squeak. She practically fell through the doorway, a chuckle stumbling out of her.

The room smelled like damp wood, nutty and musky like the forest. But not unpleasant.

Her laughter floated toward him like a melody he’d never heard before, but one that his heart responded to. He fought the urge to taste the rain on her lips, to feel her chilled body next to his.

“Don’t just stand there like a bumpkin. Take off your coat.” Her smile lit the room, and her laughter warmed it. “Here,” she said, rounding on him, tugging the heavy wool from his shoulders. “There must be wood in here somewhere.”

He mentally shook himself from the fantasies he couldn’t afford to have. “You find some candles. I’ll work on putting together a fire.” Despite the cold that seeped into the threads of his shirt, he felt comfortable as he watched her lay out his greatcoat and then her cloak over two chairs.

“My skirts are wet. How about you? Are you dry enough?”

Like an idiot, he looked down. “I believe I’m not much worse off than you. I’d say we made it just in time.”

She briskly rubbed her hands up and down her arms, shuddering with each misty puff of cold air.

“Right, we need wood.” He nervously snapped a finger. He might have dreamed of such an opportunity but never expected it to come to anything. The cabin boasted a large room with a wood stove, a closet with a few blankets, and a room with a makeshift kitchen that was fortunately still stocked with wood. There was only one other door, and he assumed it led to a

bedroom, so he decided to avoid it like the plague. Other than that, there was a sofa, a table with two chairs, and a modest carpet no doubt as dusty as the bare floorboards.

“When was the last time anyone lived here?” He brought the wood and a handful of kindling from the kitchen.

“I wouldn’t know since Hudson and I are rarely at home. We spend most of our time in Mayfair.” She crossed his path, and they both gave a nervous smile. “Did you see a lantern in the kitchen?”

“No,” he called over his shoulder as he knelt by the wood stove. “Check the utility closet.” Lord, he almost felt married. Then again, married couples used beds. He smiled to himself.



Lovie found the utility closet along with a large blanket, which she stuffed under one arm. The shelf, too far over her head, appeared empty, so she slid her hand along the dusty edge feeling around for anything helpful, like a candle. Instead, she felt the piercing jab of a splinter. “Well, that smarts.” As she examined her finger, the floorboards creaked behind her. She felt the warmth of Hawke near as he bent his head over her shoulder, his hair tickling her cheek.

“Let me have a look.” He brushed a thumb over her palm and gently stretched her finger flat.

Her heart tripped, and she wondered if he felt her pulse increase.

“There’s too much shadow right here.”

“I thought to find a candle on the top shelf, but I’m not tall enough to see.”

Hawke, on the other hand, had no problem. “It looks like several rolled to the back,” he said, retrieving a long tallow candle. “The vase on the stove had a tinderbox and a spill, so at least we’ll have a fire. But first, I want to see that finger. Let’s get you close to a window while it’s still light enough.”

She followed him, holding her finger in front of her with the blanket wedged under her arm. When they neared the window, he took the blanket from her and tossed it on the maroon sofa. Despite a fine layer of dust on everything, the cabin was otherwise clean.

“Hold still,” he said, trapping her arm under his and tenderly fanning her

fingers out. "I think I see it."

It stung a little as he pressed into her skin, trying to expose more of the thread-thin speck of wood. But even the little jabs of pinching pain didn't equal the overwhelming flutter in her chest as his fingers held hers. His hands were large and somewhat rough, attesting to the kind of work he did. She began to wonder what to believe of the story he'd told her about his home. His were not the hands of a banking investor. His grip was too measured, even gentle when need be, and the pads of his thumbs felt like outside, wild, textured, with a tale of adventure about them. She liked the way he touched her, the way he smelled like wood and spice, and maybe a touch of lavender. Fresh and alive. The way she felt when she was with him.

Making his fingers like tweezers, he brought the short nails together repeatedly, working at getting a secure grip around the splinter she couldn't see. He then flicked his fingers, brought her hand close to his face, and stuck the tip of her pricked finger into his mouth. She watched in awe, little shivers running the length of her body in a wave.

He looked at her from under his lashes and broke into a smile that charmed the cynic right out of her. "Forgive me. You were bleeding a tiny bit." He wiped her dusty fingers on his cravat, uncaring of the trail of grime left behind on the white silk.

She pulled her hand back, but he stopped her long enough to bend down and kiss her cheek. She yearned to turn her cheek and find out what would happen if she offered him a true kiss, more than a dare of mistletoe, more than a gentle peck on the cheek, more than anything she'd ever done before.

She licked her lips, raised her eyes to his, and felt a charge as temporal as sin. "Would you like to kiss me?" Her voice, a near whisper, was breathy and out of control.

His gaze devoured her mouth, and he nodded.

"Do your best, Remington." Her voice quavered, belying her confident words.

Less than a quarter inch away, he looked into her eyes. "I want more than your lips for a fleeting moment. More, Lovie. Much more. And this place... it challenges my conscience."

She put a finger to his bottom lip, stroking it to the corner of his mouth.

He took her hand and kissed the knuckles. "There are things you don't know about me."

"I know everything I need to know right now." She knew he was a

gentleman, an honest worker, by the looks of his hands, and a very good kisser if last night were any indication. His gaze fell to her mouth. “Kiss me, Remington. You know you want to.”

He labored to breathe, and his eyes were a conflict of emotions. “Very badly.”

“There’s no mistletoe. No more dare. Just you and me, and I want you to kiss me.”

Before she could finish that sentence, his mouth crashed into hers. His beautiful hands slipped up her throat and cradled her jaw, and then he crushed her in an embrace that covered every fear, every alone moment she’d ever had after so much loss. He tasted like the future, unknown and wild. Her hands gripped his forearms, hanging on to an erotically tilting world.

His palms sliding over her shoulders created an intense tingling feeling throughout her stomach, not to mention what it did to her pulse. When his hands met her gown, he gripped the layers of fabric, including her chemise, edging them down to where her stays kept it all in place. He stroked the swell of her breasts, never relinquishing her mouth, and she was a prisoner of her own desires now, wanting him to touch her, needing him to touch her.

With the sleeves of her gown pulled so low, they held her arms practically pinned to her sides, preventing her from running her palms up his chest. Her hands rested on his middle, and she suddenly felt too confined. She pushed free, turning her back to him, pointing over her shoulder as far as the confining fabric allowed. “The buttons. The stays. I assume you know how they work.”

His arms snuck around her waist, just under her breasts, pulling her back against his chest. His fiery branding kiss on her neck made her light-headed, faintly dizzy. “Let me start the fire first.”

But he already had. Inside of her burned a need so hot she could not imagine anything could quench it.

Cold air whispered over her back where her skin had been hot against him a moment before. She felt him move away. With her eyes closed, she blocked out every word that would discourage her from what she knew would happen next because she wanted it. She wanted him. She shyly turned to see him kneeling by the small fireplace, setting the kindling, creating air for it to breathe, which just seemed odd since she was having a devil of a time catching her breath. She saw the blanket on the sofa. The outer folded part of the wool had a little dust, but when she opened up the fleece, the inside was

clean, and she laid it over the sofa. Remington didn't even blink, just gave her an unprincipled, roguish grin, but his gaze was soft and warm.

With her back to the hearth, she reached behind and started working the buttons of her gown, then felt his warm finger tracing a tingling path down her spine, popping one button and then another. He freed the ribbons of her stays, too, and she dropped her arms, leaning back against him with a sigh. He made a pleasing sound, warm against her neck, and his palms moved from her shoulders to her elbows and wrists, removing her clothing until she stood naked from the waist up.

There was no shame in her when she wrapped her hand around his neck, her breasts exposed to the cool air, her nipples pulled tight against the chill, and all on display for his leisure. He caressed her torso and her stomach with feathery strokes. His hands cupped her breasts, and those wonderful thumbs teased back and forth across her nipples while he bit her neck. It was her turn to moan now. Her knees were jelly, and her insides a spring collection of fluttering butterflies.

She felt weak and slack in his arms. He must have sensed that she would fall if he let her go because, just then, he scooped her up and laid her on the sofa. He pulled at the knot in his silk scarf, the dirt from her finger smeared across the front. Next, he pulled his shirt tails from his breeches and tugged it from his glorious body. His stomach looked every bit as hard as it had felt under her hands. His musculature rippled. It may have been a trick of the candles and fire, but his skin glowed like bronze. This man did not work in an office at a desk lifting nothing heavier than a quill. She wanted to shut her eyes, but she didn't dare. The sight of his gleaming biceps enthralled and excited her. Even his neck, which had been draped with a knotted cravat every time she'd seen him, was tanned. She wanted to bury her nose in the curve of his shoulder and smell him.

His gaze ran the length of her, starting with her passion-filled eyes, down her body, and then she saw him smile like the devil as he kneeled on the floor and began removing her boots.

"You shouldn't have any problem because mine are always on the right feet."

He looked at her under his lashes with one smartly bent eyebrow. After he dispatched her shoes, he clutched her calves, sliding his hands upward, and she thought he would remove her stockings, but instead, he teased a finger under the ribbon and then relinquished them to finish removing her

skirts, which he did with surprising ease.

She reached down. "Do you want me to remove my stockings?"

He grinned wickedly. "Oh, no, darling. I want to feel those against my skin." He leaned a knee between her legs, bending over her. "And around my waist."

She raised both eyebrows.

He nodded, his hands pressed into the cushion beside her head. He kissed her lips. "Do you doubt me?"

She shook her head. "You clearly know more than I." Then she smiled when he sighed and placed his head against her collarbone. She took the opportunity to run her fingers through that curly head of nut-brown hair. Teeth nipped at her shoulder. "This sofa is too small. That much I do know."

He tweaked her sides, and she giggled, wriggling under him, making it clear that they would not fit because he still had one foot on the floor. "If I didn't know better, I would pin you against the wall and show you how it's done standing up."

"Why can't you?" Her brow knit with confusion. "Am I too short?"

He chuckled. "No."

"Too heavy? I can walk there myself. I'm certain my legs have recovered."

He chuckled harder. "No," he said louder.

She started to sit up. "Then why?"

His eyes closed on a long sigh, and he sat on the end of the sofa while she pushed herself into a sitting position, folded her legs underneath, and leaned toward him. She interlocked her fingers on his shoulder, resting her chin there.

He eyed her. "Lovie, you don't understand."

"You told me that anyone with an imagination could couple standing up."

"Yes, that's true. And if I thought you'd ever done this before, I would not hesitate. God only knows why I am now because you're perfectly naked, and I can feel your breasts stroking my arm." He looked into her eyes, and she didn't blink. "You don't know."

"But you do. So, tell me."

He licked his lips. "Because I don't want to hurt you."

"I see. Because it hurts the first time. And you think I don't know that."

For a long second, he was speechless, staring at her. "You... I assumed because of our conversation." He stopped, started to speak again, then quit

trying when nothing came out.

“Now, who is the ninnyhammer?”

“Me?”

She giggled while kissing his cheek. “I understand the mechanics,” she whispered in his ear and was satisfied when his neck flinched and gooseflesh appeared. “I simply don’t know all the possibilities.”

He turned his head and kissed her. “By the fire. On the blanket.”

“Like a picnic.”

He almost choked on a cough.

“What did I say now?”

“I’ll tell you later.” He stood, putting out a hand to help her up.

The fun of the conversation disappeared as he looked down at her while she unfolded her silk-clad legs and stood before him.

He made quick work of the blanket. “Do you mind?”

She shook her head as he undid his breeches. It was on the tip of her tongue to say something sarcastic or funny, but then he peeled out of his drawers, and she was caught up staring at his magnificent body. A wry smile tugged at his mouth as he threw his clothes on the sofa.

He reached for her, gathering her into his arms, and a firestorm, like she’d never known, lit the room beyond anything the hearth could hope to do. Her nipples grazed his chest. The feel of his hands on her bare back, crushing her to the length of him, sent a shiver through her. He knelt before her, kissing her navel, kneading her buttocks, and he groaned into the crease of her hip. All this left her aching, her head too fuzzy to make sense of any of it, just wanting more and more and more. And then his tongue flicked her there, between her thighs, and she felt a jolt of wanton desire as his tongue teased her.

When he stopped, it took a few seconds to realize the panting breath she heard was coming from her lungs. Her eyes had been squeezed shut, but now she looked down at him, and he stared at her with longing. No roguish grins, no smiles that coaxed and played. There was only wanting, almost animal-like, and every instinct in her said yes, and more, and yes. She knelt beside him and pulled him down to lie with her. And he worshiped every inch of her until she wanted to scream, just like he’d said when he teased her about shouting his name. If she did that now, what would he do?

Whimpering moans racked her like sobs of ecstasy.

“Remi...” her breath broke on a sob, and she couldn’t get the rest out. He

teased her body with his hands and kissed her with full intention. She opened her legs for his caress, pressing into his hand while he pushed one, then two fingers inside her. His tongue was hot against her nipple while he worked a rhythm between the thrust of his fingers and the pull of his mouth on her breast. Without a thought, she reached down and grabbed his wrist, working with him toward something that felt so delicious, so incredibly powerful that she abandoned herself to reaching for it.

On another gasp, she cried out as waves of pleasure came over her. And he held her there until her breathing settled and the erotic beat between her legs slowed. They looked at each other. "Kiss me, Remi," she finally said.

He swallowed hard and took her mouth, searing her with his own passionate response, but he did not finish. He did not put himself inside her, just groaned against her mouth, and she knew he was purposely abandoning his own need.

Lovie reached between them, taking him in hand. The length of him was harder than she expected, and the skin smoother than she would have guessed. He clasped his hand over hers and worked in the same rhythm as he had just shared with her. But this wasn't what she wanted.

"I want you inside me."

"No," he panted against her mouth. "No, love."

Then she remembered what he said about her stockings, and she rubbed her silk-clad toes up his thigh, her legs making room for him, and he groaned. Encouraged by his response, she wrapped both legs around his hips, lifting hers to meet him.

"Yes," she whispered, placing her hands on his cheeks. She brought him down, letting her thighs tempt him, her silk stockinged feet work away at his resolve. And he finally gave in.

At first, he went slowly, but his fever for her was already in a frenzy by the time she taunted him to continue.

"I'm so sorry, love," he said just before he thrust hard.

She swallowed a gasp because she didn't want him to regret this, to feel bad for her. His movements quickened, and the pain, although it was still there, made it all feel real. A desire to please him bloomed inside her as he surrendered to his own pleasure. He drove into her once more, then buried his head against her collarbone with a loud sigh.

She gloried in the sound of him, the smell of him, the feel of him in her, around her, over her. He rested on his elbows, and the weight of him was like

a dream. It felt like heaven. There were no consequences that existed. Not yet. Not while she was falling in love.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Lovie's head lay cushioned on Hawke's arm, and he relished the feel of her silky hair against his skin, wanting to believe for a little while they were the only two people in the world. It had been a long time since he felt so safe and at home. The way they had come upon the cottage was as if fate had manifested around their feelings, creating a cocoon for something more profound. More meaningful than a dalliance. She was not someone to be trifled with.

These were feelings out of his control and ones he could not box in or tidy up. He couldn't stay in England, and even if he could, he wasn't certain how she would react to his truth. He wasn't just an investor. He worked hard for a living at something he loved. Raising sheep for wool and lanolin was more than a boy's hobby. But she was a refined woman with ties to the social elite, and he was not the man to fill those shoes. He might be able to keep her well, but he would never be accepted in her world.

"How long do you think it will be before someone comes looking for us?" Lovie asked, stroking his sensitive skin with tantalizing fingers like tickling feathers along his arm.

He kissed the top of her head, inhaling the scent of lavender and fresh rain. "I suppose it depends on the extent of merry-making yesterday. Most of them are likely to be spinning and warding off headaches this morning." They were both dry now, lacking any physical reason to stay except for the afterglow of emotion and feelings that neither seemed to have words for yet.

"If you don't regularly spend holidays here, do you and Hudson spend them with Rochester?"

"More than not, we spend them at Rochester's family estate, but since his

Mayfair home is more livable now, he stays there exclusively. Aside from that, Hudson and I share the burden of travel between Mayfair and here. But Hud makes the trip less frequently because I manage the household accounts.”

“For two estates? Rochester’s Mayfair address and this one?”

She nodded, snuggling close, his arm draped around her. Her soft derriere tucked into his hips, made him hard for her again. He tried to ward off the thought, but it was too late. “I’m sorry you weren’t with your family this year.”

“I’m not.” She continued to stroke his arms. “We would have never been able to get away like this.”

His gaze washed over her, and she drew his arm more firmly about her, examining his hands, the tips of his fingers and his palms.

“You don’t have the hands of a banker.”

“Because I’m not a banker. My father worked closely with investment companies, sitting on several boards and managing accounts. He taught me much the same, and I did agree to continue his watch over one or two, which I have done in good faith. But after he died almost three years ago, I moved to a property he had gifted me.” With her hair twisted between his fingers, fanned out at the end, he brushed it against her jaw and down her throat until she cinched in her neck and giggled. “Now, I spend all my days tending a Merino sheep farm.”

“You lied. I knew it.” There was no accusation in her voice, but there was a hint of question.

“I led you astray a little, I’ll admit.”

She looked about the tiny room. “You’ve led me astray quite a lot.”

He narrowed his eyes, trying to look severe, but his unapologetic smile wouldn’t allow it. “Agreed.”

She turned in his arms. “Why not tell me that you went back to raising your sheep? Did you think I would think less of a farmer?”

“Perhaps.” He sighed heavily and gently withdrew his arm, pushing himself into a sitting position. He pulled one of the sofa pillows under her head. “I left out a few details of my life. Things I should tell you now, like I’m only here until spring. I have to go back, Lovie.” He watched her for signs of disappointment.

“I’m not a ninny.” She sat up, and he helped her pull the blanket around her while hanging on to just enough to keep himself partially covered.

“You’ve said that before. I knew you were going back. I did.”

He licked his lips, pulling his brows together. A serious pall fell over the room. “Lovie, my feelings—”

“Don’t say it. Do not, I beg you.” Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

“Lovie.”

“No. Not a word. Don’t tell me you love me, and don’t tell me you’re sorry. Nothing like that, do you hear me?” She got the words out in a rush of desperation.

“The spring.”

“Yes. You’re going back in the spring.” She turned her back, dropped the blanket, and reached up where her things hung over a chair, pulling them into her lap. She slipped her chemise over her head. “No words. No sorry. No feelings.” She shimmied into her stays, motioning him to help with the ties. “I’m not sorry.” She turned to look at him, holding his gaze. “I’m not, Remington. So don’t say something that isn’t true or that you haven’t thought about, and neither will I. This doesn’t need to be anything more than what it is.”

The words plagued him while they dressed, while he folded blankets, blew out candles, and doused the fire. They tormented him as they padded along the fence rail where the cows had been, trekking back the way they had come. Before the barn was upon them, he stopped. The rain had become a damp mist but was manageable. “You need to know some things about me.”

“Why?” She stood several feet away, her cloak pulled tight around her throat. “You were right when you said I wanted to kiss you. Where’s the harm in that? Why must this be anything else?”

“Because it is. At least for me.”

Her grip on the cloak eased a little.

“You think me so cavalier with my feelings?”

“Perhaps I’m the one who is cavalier,” she said with too much confidence, her chin held high.

Stepping forward, he held her face between his palms and kissed her softly. “What don’t you want me to say?”

Tears misted her beautiful eyes. “That you care too much.”

He chuckled softly the way lovers do. “Care too much? Or that I’m falling in love with you?”

She shrugged. “Either one.”

“Are you falling in love with me?”

“No.” She shook her head, leaned into him, hugging him about the waist, and rested her cheek against his chest. “Not falling.”

He tilted his head to see her. “Lovie Wright, you *are* in love.” His mouth turned up in a soft smile meant to coax and encourage.

She wrapped her arms tighter, squinching her eyes closed. “How can that be?”

He pulled back. “How can it not be? There has been a spark between us from the moment we saw each other. Did you not feel it?”

“Only like a bolt of lightning.”

He bent forward, taking her hand. “But I haven’t been honest, and I need to be.”

“Yes, I’ve heard, you’re a farmer.”

“It’s easy to be someone else when you are not in your own backyard. It was a pleasure, for a while, to give up the ghosts who are always with me. But I did not expect you to happen. For us to happen.”

She held him off, standing there in the mist and chill, insisting they get back and that anything he needed to say would be better said in the warmth of a parlor. Except Lovie continued to stave off any serious discussion. She busied herself, putting the house in order before they left.



Lovie knew Remington had something weighing heavy on his shoulders. Something about home, something secret, and something she didn’t want to know. In her mind, he was married, convincing herself it didn’t matter because he would eventually return home, and she would stay here. They’d grow apart, and the little fling that felt like something extraordinary would fade over time.

If she did not indulge her baser instincts with flirtation and haunting kisses, perhaps she could temper the flash of pain chipping away at her heart.

Two days following their liaison, a note arrived saying the roads had cleared. She knew hours of confinement would likely lead to the conversation she was most afraid of having.

She allowed Remington to help her into the coach, but she’d managed to waste what little time they had together with worry.

They were an hour into travel when she relented. “All right. I’ve been avoiding this conversation for days, so have at it. Tell me you’re married. Tell me you have a mistress, or children, or a family somewhere. Tell me everything.”

“Is that what you’ve been thinking? That I’m married? Oh, Lovie. Have we not missed enough time in silence?”

With her chin tucked, she stole a glance at him. “Is it worse than marriage? Because I think I could stand it if you were married but not if you had a mistress. I would be more than happy to fill that part, however.”

He started to laugh. “Why would you ever settle for being a mistress?”

“Because men get married with little choice, but they choose mistresses.”

“I believe we chose each other.”

“For a little while, yes.” She swallowed.

“I only wanted to explain why I lied to you about my livelihood. I am mostly embarrassed about it, not for what it is, but for what I did that almost destroyed it.”

She pulled herself up, regarding him with interest. “I’m listening.”

He sighed heavily. “It’s a cautionary tale, really. I had come so far in my knowledge of wool and wool grease. I had learned and loved the business, although my father wasn’t as keen. We lived in a little town of two dozen families, perhaps, and I liked a girl.”

She smiled at the thought of him with a boy’s crush. “As long as you didn’t marry her, I think I can handle the truth,” she said, teasing him and pulling some of the guilt from her heart for keeping him at arm’s length.

“She didn’t care for me in the same way, but we had been friends since childhood, and the boy she liked was also my friend. I was a bit of a third wheel, I’m afraid.”

“How dare she. Did she not take a good look at you?”

“I was fifteen and gangly thin, looking much like the boy I’d been. I was a late bloomer.” He raised his eyebrows and batted his dark lashes.

“You’re quite handsome now. I imagine she’s sorry for her decision.”

“Doubtful.” He chuckled softly, more to himself than her. “Samuel, or Sam for short, was my good friend, and I wished him well. I truly did. And Bethany—”

“The girl,” she interjected.

He nodded. “Yes, the girl. They were half in love with each other. Even at fifteen, it was obvious there was something between them. Anyway, they

were found by Bethany's older brother engaging in a bit of sport."

She cringed, feeling sorry for the poor girl.

"Kissing, hugging, that sort of thing. Nothing too scandalous. But Anthony—Bethany's brother—didn't see it as sporting fun. He was three years older and overconfident. He thought to call out Sam for his roguish behavior. The unfortunate reality was that if Anthony had let it lie, there would have been no repercussions. No town gossip. No cautionary tale. But Anthony was bent on defending his sister."

"I'm afraid to ask how."

"Exactly, my love. He called out Sam. Of course, Sam thought to protect his young love for the fair Bethany and agreed to meet Anthony on the field of honor. If not for falling from his horse that evening and breaking his arm, perhaps it would have gone differently. But I was his best friend."

"No. You stood in?" The thought of him putting himself in the way of a bullet at such a young age terrified her.

"I was his second. I was not going to let him down. And let us not forget that I had a bit of a crush on the girl. So, I volunteered my father's pistols, which he knew nothing about. I handed one to Anthony, and we made a mess of loading the damn things. Bethany was incensed, as any wise woman would be. But we were pigheaded and idiots. We thought that real men did not listen to women."

"Oh, no. I should think not." She teased him, enjoying the story but still a little worried about the outcome.

"Well, we took our paces, turned, and both had agreed to delope even before we started. After all, neither of us fancied dying. But we were green, and the kick of gunpowder fairly stuffed into the barrel took him by surprise, and the bullet whizzed by my head. I had an unconventional grip on the gun, terrified if truth be told, and my pistol went off half-cocked, with my hand high on the grip. And if you would stop laughing, please."

She couldn't help it. The words cock, hand, and grip sent her mind in the obvious direction. "Continue." She rolled her hand.

"When the hammer failed, the gunpowder exploded, and the incorrect hold threw the hot metal back into the web between my thumb and forefinger, nearly ripping a hole in it."

"I noticed the scar when you were indisposed."

He spread his hand open, examining the wound.

She could see the recollection in his distant gaze, and the downturn of his

mouth made her rethink her laughter.

“My inexperience was more serious. My error and poor judgment did more than cause a tear through my hand. The errant bullet struck Bethany.” His countenance grew somber. His throat convulsed.

“Remington.” She reached out and touched his knee. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed.”

“No, you should have. It was stuff and nonsense until it so gravely involved Bethany.”

“Was she... is she all right?”

“Now, yes. But for a few days, we could not be certain. The bullet lodged in her arm right here.” He pointed to the soft skin between the inside of his elbow and his wrist. “The doctor had to be called from another township, and the bullet stayed there for several days. She was sick with it.” He ground his teeth and tried to smile at her reassuringly. “Thankfully, she survived. But her brother was jailed for a short time because of his age. My father managed to keep me from jail *because* of my age, and the townsfolk didn’t much care for that.”

“You were only a boy.”

“A stupid boy who should have known better. Later that year, we moved away.”

“What happened to Sam?”

He sucked in air through his teeth and bobbed his head side to side. “Five years later, he and Bethany married. Her brother was forgiven, and I was gone.”

“Are you friends now?”

“No.”

“That wasn’t fair.”

“It was more than fair. I could have gone to jail for a long time. Fifteen-year-old boys go to war. Anthony spent two months in a cell and never spoke to me again.”

“But it wasn’t your fault.”

“It didn’t matter whose fault it was. I was there. I shot Bethany.” He shut his eyes against the words. “We were all very lucky. After that, I promised to learn everything I could about investing—about my father’s chosen trade. I hated it. Numbers and figures are subject to desks and paper, and I wanted to be outside. When my father passed away, I returned to my first love. I think he wanted that for me. Else why would he have purchased a plot of

farmland?”

She didn't say anything. She had no right to an opinion, and instinct told her he would not appreciate it. He held some pain from the experience that perhaps he needed. A lesson hard learned.

“Do you have more family here? Or in America?”

“Not really. If I have any family here, they are distant, and there are none back at home that I'm aware of. My mother had been an orphan when my father met her. So you see, I had but one grandmother, one grandfather.”

“Remi? Why don't you stay here in England? You are English by right.”

“Remi, is it?”

She shrugged. “I think it has a nice sound. What nickname would you give me?” she asked in fun, putting the conversation behind them.

“You? You don't need a pet name. You *are* a pet name. Lovie.” He winked at her. “Who named you?”

“My father. I was the first and only girl.” Her knees brushed his, creating a hush as the coach labored over a pit in the road, and she realized there would be no more contact when they returned to Rochester's home.

He cleared his throat, reaching across the seat and taking her hands. “Lovie, I must return to the States, but I'm coming back. Do you understand?”

She nodded, but in truth, she did not understand. She wanted him to stay. She was afraid if he left she would never see him again.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Lovie was thankful for the twelve days allotted to her and Remington. He had agreed to stay for the Epiphany, but that was almost a month ago. She had seen little of him since then and only in the company of Rochester or her brother. He had gone home to his grandmother's estate, where she imagined him burdened with melancholy and drinking himself to sleep. She wrote him, and he wrote back, but the words were never enough, even if he did end every letter with *Love, Remi*.

The last face-to-face conversation with him had turned into an argument about him leaving. She wanted to go with him. He wouldn't hear of it.

"There you are," Rochester said, standing in the doorway of his chaotic library. "Now that we've settled on the right doors, I'm forever lost in this house."

"And I am forever happy you finally added them." Lovie looked up from where she sat on the floor like an island in the middle of a hundred stories. "You know Rochester, these books"—she waved a small leather-bound edition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—"are valuable, and you treat them like disposable parchment."

"Yes, but not the ones on gaming."

With her skirts spread in a circle around her and books piled in small stacks on the muslin hem, she picked up three more, turning them on their edge and checking the spines. "When do you have time to read?"

"Never, but a proper house must have a library. Besides, it was already here when I moved in. Minus the books, of course."

"So, it's for show."

"Let's not be cruel. I am a man of detail." He pushed away from the door

casement, where he was leaning, and crossed the room to her. Kneeling on his haunches close to her, Rochester began perusing the books piled around her. “Do you really care about the books? Or are you hiding from the household?” Lovie watched him warily as he continued to search titles with nonchalance.

She shrugged, more for herself than him. But in the end, it didn’t matter because Rochester could read a lie a mile away. “I wanted to be out of the way. You and Hudson seem to be very busy with your tournament planning.” In truth, she was bored and sad.

“You know, Lovie, you never said how Christmas day went.”

“It was the usual fanfare with a feast and a merry gathering for the local cottagers and their families.”

“That sounds very noncommittal. I know you normally like that sort of thing, which is why I didn’t worry about you while you were away. Even Hud assumed you were glad to be caught in poor traveling conditions.”

“For some reason, this year, the celebration made me melancholy.”

“Lovie,” he said, gently touching her arm to stop the endless busy work. “What happened while you were there? Was it a mistake to allow Hawke to travel with you?”

“No. It wasn’t a mistake.” The answer meant something different to her than it would to Rochester.

“You two seemed to be at odds before you left, but I assumed it was innocent banter.”

“It was.” She knew her answers fell short of satisfying Rochester’s curiosity and brotherly concern.

“He was almost as short of answers as you are.”

She looked up suddenly. “Please do not tell me you’ve been harassing him with the same inquiry?”

“Am I harassing you?”

She gave a deep sigh, long and drawn out. “Of course not. I don’t know what happened, Rochester. Except he shared stories with me, and I came to like him, to understand his plight and loss. He... we talked of personal matters.”

Rochester changed his position, sitting on the floor, one leg drawn up. He put the books aside, but it didn’t stop her from nervously sorting through the same books and restacking them in different piles. He simply watched her with concern written in the pinch of his brow.

“He’s been through so much in such a short time. He lost his mother and grandmother in the same year and his father some years back. And his childhood. Oh, Rochester, he has stories that are funny and sad. I don’t think he has anyone. Where I had wondered at your sanity for bringing home a stranger at Christmas, I am now glad that you did. I hate to wonder what his holiday would have been had you not done so.” She pinned Rochester with a sincere look. “I found him drunk at his grandmother’s estate.”

“Like you found the both of us on the night I brought him here?” The question, the inflection, was clear.

“No, not the same. He was... not enjoying it,” she finally said.

“Was he close to his grandmother?”

“Perhaps. I believe they kept up with correspondence even an ocean away. He’s lost everything, Rochester. Everything important. What’s to happen when he leaves and returns to America?”

“Honestly, I haven’t heard him speak of returning. I don’t know why, but I assumed he was staying.”

She shook her head. “In the spring, when the weather clears for travel, he plans to return.”

“And that bothers you.” He dipped his head to see her.

She turned away and picked up another book.

Rochester leaned forward, sliding the book from her fingers, and she fought back burning tears. “You don’t want him to go?”

She couldn’t face him. “There’s no reason for him to stay.”

“Isn’t there?”

She gave a sharp look of denial. “No. There isn’t.”

Rochester rolled to his feet and walked to the sideboard, where he poured two glasses of Irish whiskey. Holding one by the rim, dangling from his fingertips, he bent down and handed it to her.

“You think I need this?”

“No,” he said. “I think I need this.” He held out his drink, tapping hers with a clink. “To wanting what you cannot have.” He took a sip, making his way to a comfortable chair.

She paused with the drink just under her nose, breathing in the smooth undertones of oak and wondering at Rochester’s toast. She sipped. No sputters. No coughing. She’d learned to drink alongside Hudson and Rochester alike. The warmth and familiar aroma soothed her more than the drink itself. “Was that toast for me or for you?”

“I wouldn’t presume to know.” He pulled back another drink, raising his eyebrows, which hinted at a few secrets of his own. “Can you share what he told you? Not that I’m prying.”

“Of course you are.” Setting her glass aside, she went back to the books.

“No, Lovie. I truly am not. It’s only that you made it sound so dire.”

“He told me a story from his past when he was a boy of fifteen.”

“A life-changing event?”

“Something like that.” She gave him a dubious look, wishing he would drop the subject.

“It’s none of my concern, I’m sure, but *you* are. I’d like to see you happy.”

She slid him a speaking look, pressing her lips together in a near frown.

“I don’t mean that you haven’t been, but sometimes the sacrifice is worth it.”

She wanted to ask him about that comment, but she didn’t have the energy at present for the answer. Rochester was fighting his own battle working through a reputation he had all but destroyed. And she suspected his heart belonged to someone. His every action the past year had shown her that much. But Lovie didn’t know the woman’s name. Not even Hudson knew.

Rochester cleared his throat. “It’s obvious his soul is scarred.” He spoke of Hawke. “Perhaps he needed a Christmas miracle.”

“Don’t be trite. Christmas doesn’t make miracles happen. They are available all year.”

“Perception places them heavily on the holiday, however. But since the holiday is past, and you claim miracles all year, then there is still hope.” He set the glass aside and gathered his hands, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, looking like an arrogantly comfortable gentleman. “You can heal his scars, Lovie.”

“I cannot. It’s too much for one person.”

“Not for you. Not the great Lovie Wright. Your name alone is made for it. Your heart too.”

“My dear cousin, if anyone deserves love, it is you.”

“We’ll see. Right now, my concern is your welfare. Hud’s worried about you, too.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s worried. He’s taken issue with his own ego. Not a small challenge, I’m sure. Not for either one of you.”

Rochester chuckled deep in his chest. “Because he thinks Remington

Hawke is a better billiard player than I am.”

“Is he?” She winged a brow.

Rochester eyed her, a dangerous twist to his mouth.

“You want to kill him.” She exaggerated a wide-eyed response.

“Only a little.” He made a minuscule space between his thumb and forefinger, peering through it with a wink. “Actually, I rather like him. Competition makes a better game and a better player.”

“I don’t think he’s interested in your line of capital, anyway.”

“He better get interested in cattle real fast because that property he’s inherited is prime for farming and livestock.”

“He’s familiar with livestock, that much I know.” She turned aside, feeling her cheeks flame with the memory of their discussion about the heifer and the bull. She made a humming giggle in her throat.

“Something funny?”

“No. Not really. Just something he said about a cow.”

Rochester watched her suspiciously. “What makes you think he knows farming?”

“He told me so. He raised sheep as a lad, but then his family moved away, and he gave it up to learn finance. Or so he said until I noticed that his hands were not soft like a banker’s but rough like a farmer’s.”

Rochester looked dubious. “I won’t ask how you know that.”

“For the love of God, between you and Hudson, one would think I’m a ninny of sixteen.”

“Aren’t you?” He winked, chuckling again, teasing her like an older brother would do.

“Rochester? Do you think love can heal such tragic events as losing someone?”

“I think love covers a multitude of sins.”

“Perhaps that’s what you need.” She watched him closely.

“That subject is better left closed.”

“For now. But you have too much to offer to stay a bachelor. Just look at this house?” Her gaze arced over the room.

“When did this conversation turn? I missed the fork in the road somewhere between billiards and farming. I assure you that I am the least of your worries.”

Rochester was right. She did have trouble of her own brewing unless her courses started soon. She’d already missed one right after Christmas. Not

unheard of to miss one. But two? That was grounds for concern. As uneducated as she had been about the act of love, this was another matter. She was well aware of the mechanics of it, the *where* and *how* babies are born. Her ignorance had only been for the options available to those with an imagination, according to Remi.

She wasn't sure how to feel. There was a side of her that was excited at the prospect—the side of idealistic dreams. And then there was reality. He was leaving in the spring.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Maple Ridge Manor was coming along, but progress was slow, and Hawke needed a break from the business of his grandmother's estate. He had been in the house for as long as a week before knowing the house had a name. After a month, his focus was exhausted, and he figured he had stayed away long enough to make a visit to Mayfair appropriate.

He missed her. He wanted to see her, touch her, and breathe her deep into his lungs, like a part of his soul. Those twelve days after Christmas had been heady sweet even if he and Lovie had only shared a few stolen kisses in all that time. A part of him wondered if she missed him, too. He had to believe that she did, but time had a way of changing the shroud of perception into a dark shadow. Under such a cloak, one could have nightmares.

Because Rochester had left him an open invitation to visit, he decided that no fanfare was needed. Hawke set out for Mayfair with nary a word of warning. Lovie's reaction to him was a bit of a test. An unfair one, to be sure, but one he would allow.

The first thing he noticed when he arrived back in London was the increase in refined ladies and gentlemen taking the air. Women with tiny curls, like springs, wore fancy dresses with festive ribboned hats while parading up and down the sidewalks.

He adored Lovie's hair at its maximum potential, long, silky, and unpinned.

His hack had been stalled thrice by the number of carriages in the streets, and Hawke decided to continue on foot. The house was only a few blocks away, and he could use the brisk walk to bind his anxiety over seeing Lovie again after weeks of solitude.

Hawke recognized the young woman with strawberry-blonde hair who answered the front door as the maid named Margaret. The grand foyer was devoid of people. His footsteps were a resounding echo that traveled the length of the house.

Removing his hat, he asked the maid, "Can you tell me where your mistress is?" He didn't stop to consider what the maid may have thought of his strange request because he hadn't asked after the owner, Rochester. He didn't care. He just wanted to see her.

"She's right here," came the siren's voice he heard in his sleep. To the right of the door, she stood in the middle of an archway that hailed the corridor leading to the drawing room. Her countenance was a practiced, modest calm. But her eyes blinked back surprise, and she moistened her lips.

"Good afternoon, Miss Wright." He forced his voice to remain steady.

Lovie nodded toward the maid. "Thank you, Margaret. I'll see to Mr. Hawke."

His mouth stretched into a half grin, and he held back a vital stare of pure lust. But his pulse was full of love, strong and true, properly containing his wishes, and he watched as Lovie pivoted on her heel and led the way.

When they reached the drawing room, she waited for him to step fully inside, and then she shut the newly hung doors. Before he could react, she turned about and ran into his arms. He dropped his hat, binding her to him, relishing the feel of her body.

"Let me guess," he said near her ear. "You missed me."

Without another word, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed the smile from his lips. He had no reply but complete surrender, answering her plundering attack with his own heated response. His breeches shrunk around his growing need for her, and he nearly lost control when he felt her hands move to unbutton them.

Tugging hungrily on her gown, he bared her shoulder, kissing her hot skin while she unraveled him with her anxious movements. "Is anyone home?"

"No one," she said, then kissed him again. "Show me how it's done."

"Here?" He chuckled against her open mouth.

She nodded, throwing her arms around his neck while the fall of his breeches lay partially open.

Hawke lifted his head, looking over her toward the door. "You're certain?"

“Does it matter?”

“A bit, yes.”

She raised a brow and slid her fingers over the length of him.

He made a lustful groan in his throat and hurriedly finishing the unbuttoning job she'd started. Then he bent down, grabbed hold of her skirts, and lifted her off the ground, twining her legs around him. He shifted her until he was at the threshold of entry, then pulled her ravenously down. They each paused to sigh for a moment, and then he carried her toward the dark paneled wall, leveraging her back against it. He held her, both hands under her perfect bottom, posting her up and down in an erotic rhythm like riding a horse.

It took no time for her to learn that if she squeezed her thighs and pushed up with her calves, she could have her fill and her pleasure at her leisure.

As for Hawke, he wasn't sure he had much leisure in the time it would take him to lose control completely. “You better come, darling, or I'm going to beat you to it.”

At that, she whimpered against his mouth, pressing firmly against him, quickening her movements to the pace of her wholly feminine panting. She came around him, hard, fast, with sexy whimpers, and he answered with a pleasurable groan, holding her to him while the world beat fiercely around them.

Her head lay against his shoulder. “Not that I care to leave you, but how does one get down?” Her mouth tickled the curve of his neck.

Hawke looked over his shoulder, still holding her pressed against the wall. “We are in a bit of a mess, aren't we? Should I call for the maid?”

She giggled. “Only if you're planning a fast wedding.”

He turned to open his mouth, pretending with a heaving breath to shout.

“No.” She wriggled her legs around him. “You wouldn't dare.”

He smiled into her eyes. “You tempt me with wild ideas.” He kissed her once more, pulled her up, wrapped her petticoat between her legs, and set her down. “It's not ideal, but it's better than the messy alternative. Can you manage?”

“Can you?” she asked, a smile on her face while she rearranged her clothes.

She was right. His cock was in no neater condition as he rebuttoned his breeches.

“Are you staying?”

“If the invitation is still open?”

“I’ll have your room readied.”

“This is my room, darling.” He motioned to the drawing room, eliciting a laugh from her, as he remembered waking up on the sofa.

“Come with me.” She took his hand, and they snuck from the drawing room like children and ran up the stairs to Lovie’s room. “What will they say to find a man hiding in my boudoir?”

“They’ll call for a vicar.”

She smiled, her eyes twinkling with pure joy as she walked to her wardrobe, disappearing behind the door. “There’s a basin behind the screen,” she raised her voice to be heard from the dressing room.

It was a dangerous game they played, but Hawke didn’t care. He’d marry her now if she’d have him. He washed up. She changed her skirts, and they snuck back into the hallway. “Take me to the billiard room,” Hawke whispered.

“There you are, Sister,” Hudson said as they rounded the doorway to the billiard room. He was in midshot but straightened when he saw Hawke. “Where did you come from?”

“I got here a little while ago, and Miss Wright was kind enough to give me a small tour.”

Hudson eyed him quickly, and then he let loose a white ivory ball. “Of what? Half-empty rooms? I’m certain you were impressed with this unfinished masterpiece after inheriting a large manor, from what Lovie tells me.”

“Right. And remember, I also told you that Mr. Hawke is in grave need of direction. He has little experience with running a household. I took him through the kitchens. We didn’t hear you come in,” Lovie said, if not a little breathlessly.

Hudson eyed her, then glanced at Hawke before returning his gaze to his sister. “And did you find what you needed?”

“Mostly,” she said. “I wanted to introduce him to the new cook, but I’d forgotten that Rochester doesn’t keep her on Fridays because the two of you are rarely here. What happened to the gameplay today? You said you had lined up several exhibitions.”

“I did, but the last two canceled,” Hudson said, returning his glaring speculation over Hawke again. He wrinkled his brow. “Are you staying, Hawke?”

“If no one minds. I do need to see my grandmother’s solicitor. There are matters to attend to before I return home.”

“Home, as in the States?”

“Of course.”

Hudson smiled then, as if talk of Hawke’s permanent departure was a relief. He waved the cue stick, idly pointing it at Hawke. “I believe Rochester left an open invitation, but I’m not giving up my room this time. I’ve taken over the guest room you stayed in.”

“I don’t expect it. I’m sure there are plenty of rooms to let.”

“Hudson?” Lovie chastised. “Rochester invited him. He doesn’t know the city. He’ll stay here.”

Hudson shrugged with a little smirk. “The drawing-room sofa is comfortable.”

“I’m much obliged,” Hawke said blandly. “You interested in a game?”

“I’m no match for you. But I’ll play.”

They spent the next hour with Hawke teaching Hudson a trick shot or two, and Lovie left them with drinks in their hands. Hawke had little doubt that Hudson knew something was between him and his sister. But without tangible proof, he was gentleman enough not to shout his speculations. However, the day would come eventually. The sooner he and Lovie were engaged, the better.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“How did your meeting go with the solicitor?” Lovie asked Remington. She had been waiting for his return in the library because she knew they would have the most privacy there since the room was still in disarray.

Remington looked at the floor, passing a gaze over one shoulder and then the other, as if he could not believe the mess. “What are you trying to do here?”

“I’m organizing Rochester’s books because he doesn’t seem to have the time or care. Besides, we should be alone here, and I wanted to see you.”

“You could see me in the drawing room.” He gave her a wry smile—a bit of a challenge.

“But I can kiss you here.” She stood and went to him. With her arms around his waist, she reached up on her tiptoes and molded her lips to his.

“I recall, two days ago, you did more than kiss me in the drawing room.”

“Hush, someone might hear you.”

“If they didn’t hear us then, they can’t hear us now,” he whispered.

“Oh Lord, don’t remind me. I do hope no one heard us together. You didn’t warn me about the noise. Who would have thought that coupling came with so much gusto.”

He chuckled, brushing her hair back behind her ear. “Oh, only everyone, my dear.”

“You must think me an uneducated idiot.”

“I neither think you uneducated nor an idiot. I think you’re beautiful and funny. Have I told you I love you today?”

She laid her cheek against his chest, squeezing him tight and hoping he wouldn't be disturbed by her news. "I love you too, Remi."

He pulled back, holding her face between his hands. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Sort of." She stepped away, waving him in, checking the hallway before she shut the door. "Don't kill yourself over the stacks, but do sit." He looked concerned but did as she asked.

"I'm sitting. Now, what is it?"

She bit her lip and wished she had cleared a path for pacing because she was caught between two stacks of books and a tea table. She folded one hand over the other repeatedly. With her gaze on the ceiling, she took a breath. "I've missed two months. One would not be cause for alarm, but two..."

"Two, what?" Then he grew silent, and she looked at him with trepidation, but what she saw took her breath away. He was smiling. Joyfully smiling. "Are you certain?"

"Well, I'm certain how late I am, and I do feel different. Not quite sick, but queasy at times. I thought perhaps it was my nerves." She stopped fidgeting, her brow tightly drawn.

He stood, tripped over a book, bent to pick it up, then tossed it on the table—all in stride—to get to her. He enfolded her in his arms. "You thought I'd be upset, didn't you?"

"I couldn't be sure. But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure how I feel. We're not married. What will people think?"

"They'll think we're in love." He pressed a bruising kiss on her mouth and then released her. He searched the room, rubbing his chin as if gathering his thoughts. "This changes things."

"No argument there."

"I had thought to marry you when I returned from the States after I closed up my business there."

Her heart sang. "Then you're not going back?"

He turned abruptly. "No, I *am* going back, but I can't wait for spring weather. I'll need to find travel soon."

"It's not even March yet. You can't go." The more she thought on it, the angrier the whole idea made her. "How can you leave me here with child?"

"Lovie, I'll be back before the babe is born. I never meant to stay in England until you happened to me. Does that not soften your annoyance at the inconvenience?"

“Inconvenience?”

“Not this.” He stepped forward, placing a hand on her flat belly.

“I won’t wait for you. I’ll marry someone else.” She said defiantly, in the same way an irrational person says silly things they don’t mean.

He smiled at her tenderly. “And you think I’d let this imaginary man live? I wouldn’t just kill him. I’d torture him,” he said, teasing her, rubbing a work-worn thumb over her cheek.

“Then I won’t marry you until you return.”

“You will. You must, for the baby’s sake.”

“It will be legitimate if you return before the birth. You can’t argue that, except you will because you also cannot promise you’ll make it by then, can you?”

“Nothing in life is certain. You and I both know that. But this”—he pointed between them—“this is certain. Our love is certain.”

Pain and fear warred inside her. She could not accept that he’d leave her. “Give me time to think. I’m swimming in heartache.”

He hugged her to him, cradling her head against his chest. The steady rhythm of his heart brought her rapid pulse under control. After she turned twenty-five, she discovered something rich. It wasn’t that she had waited to marry. She thought she would never marry. No one had ever come close to tempting her with the offer of marriage. But deep inside, she knew the first time she laid eyes on this man, her life was changed forever.



Remington remained with them for the time being, and for three days after her announcement to him, he said nothing about marriage.

She took it to mean that perhaps he had decided to stay after all. Thanks to Hudson’s suspicious glances, she imagined he had been the one to ensure she and Remington had no further private contact. He couldn’t know that it didn’t matter because the damage, as it were, was already done.

She rubbed her belly, smiling secretly, wondering how on earth this lovely thing as falling in love had happened to her. She would forever thank God for the rain.

She was still wearing her secret smile after breakfast when she walked into her bed chamber and witnessed Margaret fussing over a dress lying

across the freshly made bed. Margaret lifted the hem of a green velvet gown to show her the delicate gold applique gracing the edge like tatted lace.

“What is the lovely gown for?” she asked the maid.

“I believe it’s a special gown for a special day. We’ve little time. Would you care for me to help you dress?”

Just then, the doorknob rattled, and a knock sounded. “May I?” Rochester said loud enough to be heard through the door.

“Come,” Lovie called over her shoulder.

Rochester poked his head in, wearing a silly grin. “Would you like me to give you away or Hudson? I thought I’d ask since allowing Hud close to Hawke might put your wedding night in danger.”

“My... wedding night?”

“You are getting married, I hear.”

“Today?” She’d spoken of none of this to Rochester or Hudson.

“It’s all arranged. I suggest you make quick work of the frippery.” He smiled like the Cheshire cat.

“It’s not arranged. Where is Remi... I mean Hawke?”

“Remi?” Rochester chuckled, opening the door all the way. “Oh, Lovie, you are in deep.” He looked at the maid. “Miss Margaret, do you mind?”

The poor girl was constantly being asked to leave a room. The fact that Rochester had asked her to go left Lovie with a nervous roll in the pit of her stomach.

“Today is best, but if you insist on postponing things, I’m afraid it won’t go well.”

“Rochester? The man is leaving me. Did he tell you differently?”

“He’s coming back, and as much as I’m certain your argument is valid, I’d think you’d want to marry before he leaves.”

“My what?” she asked a bit too loud, her hands settled on her hips. “What argument? Who have you been speaking with?”

“You mostly. Do you think I’m dimwitted? Your brother is playing the fool for your sake, but Lovie, no one in this house is blind. Or deaf, I might add.”

She felt heat rise up her neck, and her cheeks blazed.

“There’s no need. Do you think I blame you? No. But I don’t want to see you hurt. Am I speaking out of line?”

“Perhaps,” she accused harshly and then relented. “Did he tell you?”

“No, I believe you just did.”

She rolled her head and let out a hissing sigh.

“And I heard a few words of the argument you had. Before you get angry with me for eavesdropping, think about where you had the discussion.”

The library where she and Rochester had discussed Hawke before. Rochester must have walked by when she raised her voice, and Hawke tried to shush her.

“All right. Why today?” she asked.

“He’s leaving, Lovie.”

Tears stung her sinuses and burned her eyes. “He can’t. He just can’t.” She sat dejected on the bed next to the jade-green gown. She ran a hand over the velvet wishing it could be different.

“He must. He has to settle his affairs unless you’d like him to wait and then miss out on the first year of your child’s life.”

“I don’t want that.” She gave in to the embarrassment and decided that a candid discussion would be resolved faster. “I want him to take me with him. That’s why I refused, in case you missed that part while you were drifting past the library.” She flared her eyes at him.

“Not in your condition.”

“It doesn’t matter. He denied me the trip before he knew. He said it was too dangerous. Have you considered it’s not quite spring yet, and the sea may be rough?”

“As I said, he can go now and hope to return before the babe is born or wait and leave before your confinement ends and miss out on even more.”

He was right. “Can I speak with him?”

“He’s downstairs. I’ll get him.”

“Where’s Hudson?”

“Watching him like a hawk, for lack of a better word.”

Her lungs deflated. “Hud knows.”

Rochester didn’t comment, just left the room to find Remington. But in the end, it didn’t matter because they were right. She needed to marry before Remington left, and the fact that he had planned and managed to accomplish a small church gathering at none other than St. George’s Hanover Square was a feat for a wizard. Margaret had helped with the shop-made dress, placing her own touches on the gown and adjusting the seams to fit correctly.

There had been little time for revelry because the odious man had acquired a ticket on a merchant ship heading out the very next day.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Woolwich Harbor

“I cannot believe you would marry me one day and leave me the next.” Lovie couldn’t stop the tears while she stood on the dock doing her best to say goodbye. “What if we never see you again.”

“Lovie, I’m coming back before the babe is born. I promised.” Hawke held her by the shoulders, bending his head to see her beneath her bonnet, a strand of auburn hair snapping in the wind.

“You cannot promise what the weather will be, and I’m not simply suggesting a storm or a terrible accident because the thought is too much to consider. But what if you can’t find passage back in time? Is that something you considered?”

“I’ve considered everything. Twice. I need the funds to start a family. Maple Ridge Manor will be successful someday, but it will take time and money to accomplish that.

“So, we’ll live with Rochester.” She glanced at him, pouting a little. When they locked eyes, and she saw the telltale signs of crinkles at the corners of his, they both burst into a rolling chuckle.

“Oh, he’ll just love that.”

“In truth, he would do anything for me. And Hudson and I would do anything for him.”

“Did you know that they both offered to help with cash flow? Even your brother, who threatened to throttle me three days ago.”

She shook her head. “Why not accept their help? We’ve all been flat, Remi. They understand.” She hugged him around the middle. “After all,

they're your family now, too." She stayed in his embrace, silence lengthening while neither wished to put a period at the end of the feeble argument.

He rubbed her back and kissed her head. "Thank you for marrying me, Lovie."

"Did I have a choice?" She turned her face up to him.

"You always have a choice. I robbed you of an extravagant wedding."

"How did you manage St. George's? I counted four weddings on the register that day alone."

"I'm persuasive. Did you have any doubt?" He teased her. "And believe it or not, Hudson jumped in and created room. He's very good at what he does."

"He's charming."

"I'm not certain I agree. Not yet." He smiled, then turned serious. "I love you, Mrs. Remington Hawke."

Tears flowed down her cheeks, hot streaks of salt and pain. "I love you too." She kissed him softly on the lips. "Please come back. I need you."



Her heart had exploded into a million pieces watching him board that ship. The tears were a flood that could have filled the Thames.

It was the first week of March, and she prayed for good weather.

"And today?" Lovie asked Hudson at the breakfast table.

"Weather looks good."

"Did you go to the docks and ask?"

"We can't travel there every day, Lovie. I know you're worried, but he's only been gone a week. Take a deep breath for the baby's sake if not yours."

"You don't have a romantic bone in your body, do you, Hud?"

He cocked a brow at her. "I'm refraining from commenting because you're not speaking with clarity." He reached across the little table and took her hand. "Please eat something. I'll go this afternoon and check the reports if it will make you happy."

She nodded with relief. "Thank you."

No one had to tell her that it was raining. That much she could see, and her imagination ran wild, wondering where his ship was. From the foyer of Rochester's Mayfair home, she heard the banging echo of the front door

blowing open and slamming into the wall. Rochester's voice blustered a curse. She and Hudson exchanged a look when the sound of boots stomping over the marble floor reached their ears next.

"Do you think he needs help?" Lovie asked Hudson.

"I think he's angry because that door latch is heavy enough to have damaged the wall if it hit hard enough."

"Nothing a little putty can't fix," came Rochester's voice. He didn't look overly upset as he stepped into the breakfast room, brushing down his jacket and waistcoat.

Lovie looked at his boots, wet and shiny from the rain. "You should take those off and tend them before the water damages the leather."

"They're rather made for that, I think."

Lovie's head snapped up, and Hudson pivoted fiercely in his chair.

"I've been soaked for nearly a week. I think I'll change my clothes. Would you like to help, Mrs. Hawke?" It was Remington's achingly familiar baritone. He stood directly behind Rochester, his hair damp, his boots glossy, and his brows pressed together in a little vee.

Lovie almost could not find her feet. "What... what happened?"

While she stood there frozen to the spot, Remington strolled forward, and when he was within arm's length, he reached for her, grabbing her in a hug that drove the breath from her lungs. Ignoring everyone else in the room, he took her cheeks between his hands and kissed her hard. His lips were cold from the wind, water dripped from his hair onto her shoulder, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, clutching him like a lifeline. She heard the scrape of a chair, and then the door close after her brother and cousin left them alone.

"You didn't go," she said, amazed. "Where have you been for a week?"

"I made it to Cornwall, where we stopped for supplies, and I couldn't wait to get off that blasted ship. From there, I found a post coach, where I spent the next four days and nights. I don't know which was worse, the ship or the coach."

"Why did you come back?"

He leaned in and bit her ear. "Why do you think, Lovie Hawke?"

"Because you're afraid of me," she said blandly, without a hint of a smile until he looked at her with startled confusion, at which point she broke into a grin.

"You terrify me." Suddenly he pulled back and reached into his pocket. "I

almost forgot.” He grinned nervously. “Wrong pocket.” He slid his hand into his watch pocket and pulled out something. Kneeling before her, he gazed up, holding out an emerald ring encircled with winking diamonds. “Will you be my wife for always, Lovie Wright?”

She laughed. “You’re silly.”

He slid the ring on her finger. “Well, we’ve done everything backward. Why not this?”

“Everything?” she asked wickedly.

He raised a brow. “Wherever your imagination takes us, I will go.”

She bit her lip. “I’m thinking upstairs. You in a hot bath, and me bathing you as your devoted maidservant who happens to be ridiculously in love with you.”

“Agreed.”

They headed to her room, smiles beaming.

“Should I pay you?” he teased.

“Whatever you’d like, darling. But I warn you. My imagination is very expensive.”

“I’ll sell the Manor.”

“We can live with Rochester,” she said without missing a step.

Laughter echoed down the stairs, and Lovie didn’t care who heard. Not this time.

EPILOGUE



December 1824

Hawke woke the day after Christmas with a sleepy smile. One year ago, he would not have conceived of the plan that would move him from his childhood home, from all the good lasting memories he had made there, from the only real life he had ever known, to this extraordinary life.

And what had also seemed inconceivable last year, lying in bed next to him, was the very real culmination of a love so great his heart was not big enough to contain it. It seeped out of him in joy, in kisses, in family—a very opinionated lot and fiercely loyal. Misfits one and all. Rochester and Hudson were so much a part of his family that he and Lovie were spending the holiday in the country house, which now belonged to Hudson alone. Last year, there had been no room for him at the inn, as it were, and this year, there was room aplenty in heart and home alike.

Hawke leaned on his elbow, waving a finger over Anna Elizabeth Hawke's bobbling hands as she tried to grab for him. Her aim was still erratic and sloppily adorable. Little curly locks of auburn hair feathered the mattress beneath her tiny head. Two and half months, and she was starting to smile real smiles. Now and again, he could encourage a hiccupping coo from her. He considered that his greatest achievement to date, with the exception of the love between him and his beautiful wife.

Lovie was not lying on the other side of Anna this morning, though. She must have stepped away while they slept. He played with Anna for another

five minutes and then rolled out of bed. Little dark button eyes followed him about the room as he dressed. Then like most mornings, he changed a nappy and swaddled the baby in a clean gown and blankets. Lovie had called him a natural.

“All right, little lamb, let’s find your mum.” Hawke ventured to the breakfast room, but it was empty. He stopped by the family parlor and found Hudson reading the paper.

“About time you rose for the day,” Hudson said, completely obscured by the dailies, the paper rattling as he turned the page.

“Where is my wife?”

“My sister has not been seen.”

Every chance he got, Hudson ribbed Hawke because he knew how much it riled him. But not today. “And if you knew, would you tell?”

Hudson forced the paper into an ill-cornered fold and set it beside him on the settee. “I might not. Why don’t you give me my niece while you scout.” Hudson was already standing, making his way toward Hawke.

“It’s not like Lovie to disappear. What if the babe gets hungry?”

“Nonsense. She looks fit and sated to me. Besides, you’ll have more freedom to look for Lovie. Now hand her over.”

“I’ll ring for a nurse.”

“Don’t you dare,” Hudson said, taking the baby into his arms. Anna transformed the facial expressions of everyone who held her into a smile, even Hudson’s. He grinned like a doting uncle, which of course he was.

Hawke decided he was right. He left Anna to Hudson and searched the rest of the parlors. He ended up back in the drawing room. The bow windows were decorated with greenery. Mistletoe hung over the door. A bowl of punch was at the side table, and he smiled remembering last Christmas in this very room where Lovie had kissed him.

He snapped his fingers. “Of course, you little minx,” he said to an empty room before he retrieved his greatcoat and headed out into the elements. A slow drizzle of rain had started, and he knew where she was.

He hurried, cutting through a field and cursing the mud. When he came upon the cottage, he was unquestionably soaked.

“There you are,” Hawke said when he opened the door and found his beautiful wife seated on the sofa, her arm resting on the back cushion.

“I’ve only been waiting all morning.”

“How did you know I’d find you?” He shut the door against the cold and

basked in the warmth of a blazing fire. He was wet and chilled until he saw her smile.

“I had faith that you’d figure it out before long.”

“You should have told someone where you would be. What if Anna gets hungry?”

“I fed her just before I left. She should be comfortable for at least another hour, so I’d make good work of the time were I you.”

“Hudson took her from me.”

She laughed. “Is that resentment I hear?”

“Perhaps a little. I want all her smiles.” He took off his coat and hung it on a peg, then shook the rain from his hair.

“She has enough for us all, I promise. And Hudson adores her. Besides, I asked him to take her.”

“You did not.” He tried to sound harsh but couldn’t manage it because he didn’t feel it. In truth, he liked Hudson. “Don’t tell me he knew you were here because I asked him.”

“Of course, he did, and I told him not to tell you.” She smiled, satisfied as she patted the clean sofa covered in a ruddy damask slipcover. A far cry from last Christmas. “Come sit with me and tell me how you figured out my hiding place.”

He did as she suggested and sat down beside her. “Because one year ago today, a woman asked me how to make love standing up, and although I did not oblige her request, I did make love to her right there on the floor before the fire.”

“I did not ask you to make love to me standing up.”

“You did. But I’d rather not waste time on semantics. I’d rather get out of these wet clothes.”

“Would you? Well then, my love, let me help.”

And she did. She helped him with so many things, like making a new home, a forever family, and love. He’d never had siblings, but Lovie’s cousin and brother accepted him with ease, although Hudson didn’t like to admit it.



Underneath the weight of her wonderful world, Lovie Hawke lay with her husband before a roaring fire of her making.

“Remi, how did you know I wanted to kiss you when we met?”

“I could see it in your eyes. The spark hit me right here.” He pointed to his mouth. “And here.” He pointed to his heart. “And here.” He pointed to his groin with a teasing lift of his brow.

“Where did it hit first?” Her smile was a promise.

“In a place only you could touch.”

“Your heart,” she said breathlessly.

He chuckled. “No, darling, everywhere at once. I belong to you, and you belong to me. Never doubt it.”

“I didn’t want to like you.”

“I know,” he said with an understanding smile.

“You think you’re so smart.” She gently shoved him. “I wager you did not know that I meant to lead you to this cabin.”

“Today?”

“No, last year. The barn would have been easier, and we were just as soaked either way. But my imagination was running wild, Mr. Hawke, and I wanted you to tame it.”

“I have found your imagination to be endless and untamable.”

“It is as endless as my love for you, Remington.”

“Then I count myself the luckiest man who ever lived.”

THE END

Thank you for reading *Until Spring* by Shannon Gilmore!

If you enjoyed Miss Lovie Wright’s story, you’ll surely love the next book in the Breaking the Rules of the Beau Monde series. Book one, *For a Scandalous Wager*, picks up where *Until Spring* left off, featuring Miss Wright’s cousin, Dalton Rochester, in a friends-to-lovers trope with his best friend’s little sister, Evelyn Markham. While Rochester yearns for a peaceful year, Evelyn proves to be a rule-breaking menace and a pebble in his shoe. He’ll do everything in his power to avoid her inappropriate summons for help, but soon enough she has him breaking a few rules of his own.

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ABOUT SHANNON GILMORE



Shannon Gilmore loves writing character driven romance, with plenty of banter and whimsy, where the plot revolves around the hero and heroine, and the steamy scenes fit like magic.

Shannon, a multi award-winning author of historical romance, is a California native who developed a passion for romance after reading her first book by Johanna Lindsey. Her second book in the Ruined Rakes series earned the favor of FAB five judges to win the Silver Quill® award. Every Time You're Near was also notably nominated for the coveted Golden Heart®.

In her books readers are likely to find an unchaperoned heroine and a hero who thinks he knows what he wants.

And when she's not doing writerly things like drinking coffee heavily laced with chocolate, she's crafting, quilting, crocheting, and listening to the

ambient sounds of ice-hockey with her real life happily-ever-after husband.

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IN PURSUIT OF A
CHRISTMAS BRIDE

A SOCIETY OF SCANDALOUS BRIDES NOVELLA

REBECCA PAULA



In Pursuit of a Christmas Bride by Rebecca Paula

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Can a red-headed beauty break through a barrister's icy exterior in time for Christmas?

One evening changes everything for notoriously grumpy barrister Henry Davies. When he meets a beautiful stranger at a masquerade, he loses his heart, but after one perfect kiss, their night ends too soon, and life-altering news separates them forever. Or so he thinks.

Matilda Brennan is London's darling of the stage, but she's guarding a secret that if discovered, would ruin her and the family that depends upon her. She fiercely protects her heart until she meets a handsome stranger one evening who is altogether kind and enigmatic and leaves her questioning everything. Not that it matters. She'll never see him again, after all.

When fate reunites the pair at a country Christmas house party, they're offered a second chance at love. Can Matilda defeat her fear to leap at love and rekindle their connection? Or will Henry's icy heart prove too hard to melt?

CHAPTER ONE



Henry Davies had but one wish—to retire early at his bachelor’s apartment that evening after a long day at court.

In silence.

There would be brandy, a good book, and perhaps a small fire to chase the anticipatory chill of the coming autumn days. He would turn in for the evening at nine, promptly.

Many would consider it boring, but for him, it would be heaven. Or very close to it.

Instead, Henry was flanked by five colleagues prodding him none too gently to join in on their fun evening.

“No thank you, gentlemen.” He grabbed his texts and stood, examining the dwindling crowd in the courtroom. What a day it had been. He had argued his case, and well, but the judge had been tough, and he feared he would lose.

“Come out with us. We promise to find you some company.”

“Yes, of the female persuasion. Might do you good.”

“Not necessary.” He stood, glaring at everyone. “I have no interest in company. No time.”

His friend Benjamin Currey threw his head back and laughed. “No time? That is all you have outside of the law.”

Henry navigated the narrow aisles and weaved his way out into the hallway. His friends could laugh, but he had worked years to reach this point, and he wouldn’t take his eyes off his goal of becoming attorney general. It was hard now, and it would be for a while, but he had a duty to his family to

make something of himself like his father.

“Come on now, Davies, it’s my birthday. Couldn’t you allow yourself to break free for one night?”

True, Stephen Greenwald was in fact celebrating his thirty-fourth year, but why Henry...

The simple fact of it was, Henry had no interest in spending his night at the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens with his fellow colleagues, seeking and participating in all sorts of raucous trouble. No, he had a near-flawless reputation for a reason, and he would not be tempted.

Could not be tempted.

He tugged at his *jabot*, convinced it wasn’t straight.

“Are you telling me that the tightrope act won’t lure even you out of your apartment for the evening and away from your precious law texts? There will be fireworks as well,” said Benjamin.

Henry scoffed, glancing back over his shoulder as his friends chased at his heels. “I study the law so that I am the best.”

“And you are,” Stephen said, tossing his arm around Henry’s shoulder. “You are the very best at what you do. Your mind is something men will study for years to come.” He held out his free hand and waved it. “Your passion, your devotion to the law...”

“They’ll say ‘What a prized, legal mind Henry Davies possessed.’” His friend Michael Webb jogged a few steps ahead, descending through the front entrance, about to burst out onto the streets of London.

Henry might as well have been a wallflower, trying his best to remove Stephen’s arm and retreat into the small sliver of silence London had to offer—his apartment.

“One night. That’s all,” Michael insisted, spinning to address him on the street after they all poured out of the courthouse. He tore off his wig, revealing a head of black matted curls.

“Better yet,” Stephen said, pulling a flask from his jacket and draining the well-worn vessel, “give me one hour. Surely you can afford to spare one hour from your evening?”

Henry normally hailed a hackney to convey him home, but tonight, even that wouldn’t be fast enough.

“No.” He glanced up the street, then down, searching for any escape as his colleagues encircled him.

“I promise it will be the best night of your life.” Stephen reached for

Michael's flask and handed it to Henry, who flatly refused. "May I remind you about my first point? There will be women there—"

Henry growled, shoving the flask back against his friend's chest.

"At some point, Henry," Benjamin cut in, "you will need to admit that your unpleasant arse needs female companionship."

Complete rubbish. He needed nothing of the sort. More like he needed a quick escape, so he could retire to his apartment. Alone. Have that brandy and enjoy a book. That was what he needed.

Women, love, even his bloody acquaintances... he had no time for such nonsense. He had no interest in spending his nights rambling around London drunk and gambling and visiting the brothels. He left that to his younger rake of a brother, Lieutenant Rafe Davies, lately of the Royal Navy.

Henry knew his strengths, which consisted precisely of the law and being the dutiful eldest son. He considered anything else a waste of his time, which he fiercely guarded. He considered time a far more valuable and precious currency.

"You are beautiful when you blush," Michael teased, elbowing Henry as he stretched up onto his toes to search the busy street for a hackney.

This was London, late in the afternoon, on a beautiful September day. Where were all the damn hackneys?

"I am not going. I wish you a happy birthday. Now, excuse me..."

"Wait!" yelled Stephen, grabbing Henry's arm. "I can arrange a dinner with Judge Leeson."

Henry froze, studying his boots and playing over the name in his mind. He had tried to have his dinner with Judge Phineas Leeson for almost two years now. Knowing him would serve Henry well. He wouldn't always be arguing civil cases. He had ambitions. There would be nothing more pleasing to him than spending his days seeing those who commit wrong in the world pay their due.

"Come for one hour this evening, and I will see it done."

Everything within Henry tensed, and he swore he felt the beginning twinges of a headache pulse at his temples. The temptation of home was all too alluring, but he pushed past the knot in his throat and glanced up at his ruddy-faced friend with narrowed eyes.

"He owes my father a favor. It can be arranged next week."

There was something to be said about merit. Henry wished to be recognized by his talent, not necessarily by his connections. His time in

London had taught him otherwise. It was not necessarily who you were, but who you knew. And Henry craved to become something. He was hellbent on making something of himself.

He would do nearly anything as long as it was legal, of course. That was often the moral sticking point for barristers. The better ones, at least.

He whacked his top hat against his thigh, glancing up at the September pink sky as dusk quickly approached.

“Fine. One hour.”

The group cheered and pulled him down the street in the opposite direction from his apartment. Carriages rumbled by on the street, and a little girl stood by a fruit stall clutching a wilting handful of flowers.

“One last thing, Henry,” Michael said. “You’ll need a mask for the masquerade.”

“I didn’t agree to costumes.”

“Technically,” Stephen started, “you agreed only to an hour. There was no discussion of attire for that hour.”

There was no point in arguing with a solicitor, especially one who excelled at discovering the loopholes in a case. He might as well have been a hound smelling out a fox.

“Very well. One hour and a mask. I will not make any further exceptions.”

“Of course not. We wouldn’t want to ruin your carefully planned evening of poring over law cases.”



Fifty-five minutes into the agreed-upon hour, Henry was lost among a swarm of people descending upon Vauxhall Gardens with such merriment, the excitement buzzing around him was almost catching.

Almost.

Henry was convinced the excitement was more because he was nearly five minutes closer to freedom.

He snapped his father’s timepiece shut. Four now...

The warm September night wrapped around him, but he swore he could smell the faint hint of autumn. Time was on a cusp, and Henry stood there, overlooking the party, and felt rather adrift. He felt far too restless lately, and

he couldn't shake the feeling.

It never usually bothered him. Being alone, that is. His father had passed away when he was ten, then he'd been sent to live with his uncle's family in London. At the time, he had craved to be with his mother at the pink seaside cottage in Wales, running wild with his younger brother and sister, chasing the seagulls darting through the crashing surf. But he had lived in London on and off, and his younger brother Rafe was sent to become an apprentice to his father's friend, Captain Ackerman, or rather Admiral Ackerman now. And as for his sister, Mari, well... they were never close before, and it was certainly difficult after the accident.

"Davies!" Stephen shouted above the din, waving Henry over to a very merry and very large group of women.

No time in his thirty-one years had Henry wished to flirt or frequent brothels or, worse, fall in love. He had one goal, and one goal only.

Henry removed his watch from his vest and pointed to it as an answer, but it didn't matter because Stephen was already continuing with whatever one did at a masquerade. Which seemed like a lot. A lot of drinking, a lot of laughing, and a lot of behavior that normally the *ton* would frown upon in the grand ballrooms of Mayfair.

Funny what rules could be pushed when darkness swept over the city and masks were worn.

London was a social battleground with mamas hungry to make excellent matches for their daughters. It was often black and white, so why men were allowed to live and play in the gray was baffling to Henry.

Zeus and all his lovely wives, but Henry's mask was damned uncomfortable. He wished to tear the stupid thing off.

He turned his back to the crowd and tugged at it, burrowing his thumb under the left eye hole so it would fit better. Henry was certain it was scraping off the bridge of his nose, and though he had been teased for his long Roman nose throughout school, he wished to leave the masquerade whole.

Henry peeked over his shoulder, toward his friends in the supper box, a small pang radiating in his chest. He should stay, but he had promised an hour, and his time was nearly up. It was finally time to retire for the evening. He had plenty of studying to do.

One day, his life would be what he worked so hard to create. One day, he would prove to everyone that Henry Davies wasn't only Captain Davies's

son, he himself was distinguished.

He weaved through the crowd, nearly tripping over his own feet because of the damned mask. Henry cursed to himself, adjusting it once more before slipping behind a tree to take the blasted thing off.

His fingers fumbled for the tie at the back of his head when a branch snapped. He froze beside the tree, his arms still stretched up behind his head when an emerald blur raced into him.

Well, not run into—rather plowed down.

“Oof.”

The impact knocked him over, and he struck his head against a stone lodged at the base of the twisted sycamore tree. For a moment or two, his ears rang while pain radiated up his neck. Perhaps that was why, when the soft female body collapsed on top of his, he thought he had died.

Because angels walked the earth.

The air left his lungs in a heavy *whoosh*, and he blinked up to a mess of fire-orange hair and a smile DaVinci would be jealous of. Mona Lisa had nothing on these two perfectly lush crimson lips, curved with an enticing amount of mischief.

“Damn it, not again,” the woman muttered.

He would have laughed if he had any breath left, but all sense had been knocked out of him it seemed. He was speechless. What an absurd thing to say. He didn’t for a moment miss the Irish lilt to her voice, soft and warm like that brandy he had dreamt of all day.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

The woman blinked, staring back at him with the lightest green eyes he had ever seen, like pistachio cream. She smelled just as sweet—vanilla and jasmine.

“I haven’t hurt you, have I? Oh, I have, I have. Let me just...”

She sat up and scurried backward, grabbing her discarded champagne glass. “Careful, it broke.”

Henry pushed himself up to his elbows, his head throbbing. Everything spun, and somehow it felt more like July than September as he studied the woman in front of him, sprawled on the ground in an emerald gown and a gold mask with a broken champagne glass in her gloved hands.

Again?

Did she have a habit of running into men?

She set aside the broken glass and leaned forward. In the dim light from

the lanterns hung overhead, he noticed her squinting. “Are you well?”

Well, enough, enough to know that something bigger and well beyond him had happened.

Well enough to know he had plenty to say and yet couldn’t speak a single word because he was so utterly struck by this stranger.

“You should watch where you are running,” he snapped instead.

Henry sat up, rubbed the back of his head, and gawked when his hand returned with blood smeared against his fingertips.



Tilly had almost made the perfect escape before running smack into this man...

She tilted her head, studying him and his dark eyes peering back at her from behind the black mask.

Oh, blood! Right. For the love... she had really outdone herself this time.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You’re bleeding.”

Tilly reached into the bust of her gown, fumbling as a button on her glove caught at the lace trim of her emerald satin bodice. The dress was magnificent if not entirely too fancy for a masquerade, where it seemed the majority of people were attending in hopes of not being seen. Temptation lay at her feet, literally, but her reputation was all she had left. Without it, she would find herself lifting her skirts in some East End alley to ensure her siblings and Ethan were fed and had a roof over their heads.

Too much had happened, and she had worked too hard to give up what she had now at Drury Lane.

She ripped the handkerchief out from beneath her neckline, waved it around like a white flag of peace, and hoped the stranger wouldn’t inquire about her name or why she was running, or where he could send his physician’s bills. Because she had hoped tonight would be one night where she could live the fantasy of being almost anyone else besides Matilda Brennan.

The mask certainly helped.

Perhaps it was habit, but she glanced behind her to ensure she hadn’t been followed. He always seemed to follow her. Or worse, this morning he had delivered a simple missive and so easily shattered her day. He threatened her

life and those she loved.

He had, mere moments ago, had the nerve to place his hand on the small of her back and lean in for a kiss while the rest of London milled about.

Mr. Roger Haskett was a royal arse, and unfortunately her stage manager.

Tilly climbed up to her knees and leaned one hand on the ground as she reached behind his head with the other.

“I’ve not met someone like this before,” she whispered. Maybe more to herself than to the man who bowed his head indecently close to her bust as she pressed the handkerchief against the cut at the back of his head.

“First time for everything,” he grumbled.

His voice vibrated against her skin, sending a dangerous shiver down her spine. Welsh, if she heard correctly. And that made him all the more interesting.

The stranger had thick, black hair brushed back, with not a piece out of place. And his cravat was perfectly tied, his face just as flawlessly clean-shaven.

So, he was like that.

“I apologize,” she said, at last, removing her handkerchief from his wound.

But the stranger surprised her and clamped his hand over hers. She gasped, her body instantly tensing, her heart racing in her throat.

His eyes widened, and he released his touch. “I didn’t mean to startle you. It needs pressure, is all,” he explained. “I have it, so you can let go.”

She withdrew her hand and moved away, hissing as she felt the glass pierce her white glove and embed itself near her wrist. Tilly sat back on her heels, laughing to herself as the panic subsided.

“What a pair we are.”

She gazed down at her glove as red dotted the fine fabric, quickly spreading into an unsightly blob.

“Zounds!” The stranger quickly fumbled at his cravat and pulled at the knot until the crisp fabric slipped free, revealing the base of his throat. “Hold your arm up,” he instructed.

It wasn’t the first man’s throat she had seen in her life, yet she couldn’t look away. She blinked hard, inhaling through her nose as she tried to steady her nerves.

“Miss? Hold up your arm to help with the bleeding.”

“Right. Right,” she mumbled, laughing at herself. She had only had two

glasses of champagne, but she felt a bit woozy. When had she eaten last? It had been a long day of rehearsal at the theater.

He motioned for her arm. "May I?"

"May you..." she repeated. Tilly couldn't concentrate, too focused on his mouth just then. And how he had a hint of a dimple on his left cheek, even as he blustered at her. It was altogether confounding, even though he was so surly.

"I am going to remove your glove and the piece of glass from your arm, then tie this length of fabric around the cut to stem the bleeding. The wound appears deep."

Tilly was about to glance down, suddenly sick to her stomach.

"It helps if you don't look. Are you unwell?"

He reached for her arm and turned it, laying it softly over the length of his thigh. His firm thigh. He was quite tall, this stranger. And his mouth was... kissable. Oh, and her stomach didn't like the sight of blood.

She shut her eyes and inhaled again slowly. If she tossed up her accounts all over this stranger, she would be mortified.

A very handsome stranger she couldn't keep her thoughts away from.

His fingers scraped against her skin as he gently slid her glove down the length of her arm, stopping short where the glass had pierced her. How perfectly intimate.

How scandalous to have his fingers caressing her bare skin here at Vauxhall Gardens, alone and in the dark.

No, no scandal.

She swallowed her silly fantasy of him removing the entire glove and dropping a kiss in her palm, though that would be perfectly romantic. This was not the time to let the champagne go to her head. Tilly could muster up some composure.

"You're sighing."

"Hmm?"

"You are sighing. Please refrain as I try to remove this piece of glass."

Tilly winced, instantly understanding. "You can't remove a piece of glass if I sigh?"

His head was tucked close to hers. She could smell the lemon and sage notes of his cologne and feel the heat of his body against hers.

"I am not a surgeon by profession, and the lighting here is terrible. I don't wish to make this worse."

“We could have fetched help.”

He grunted, and she laughed.

“Right, no sighing. I will refrain from breathing as well, yes? Wouldn’t want to trouble you too much—”

With a quick pull, the glass slipped from her wrist, and his hand quickly circled around her arm to pull the fabric tight over her wound.

“This will help but don’t look now.”

Tilly had experienced a lot, but she hadn’t ever almost fainted from the sight of her own blood.

“Have I ruined your breeches?”

“They were ruined the moment you collided into me, and I was smashed into a tree.”

Very well. Her stranger was like that. “Sorry, I know how you Mayfair boys are.”

It was impossible to tell with the mask covering his face, but she was near certain he arched his brows in a challenge. “Oh? How’s that?”

“Particular.”

The man brushed at the grass stain at his knee before glancing up in her direction with a smug smile on his face. “Interesting conclusion, however incorrect. I don’t live in Mayfair.”

“Well, that’s very fine for you, then. Never mind.”

“You’ve caught my interest now. You might as well explain your theory.”

“Only that men who hail from Mayfair either have no respect for the rules of the *ton* and are the worst kind of rakes and scoundrels, or they are attached to their mother’s hip and eat and breathe etiquette so that they may remain in the good graces of society.”

“My mother still resides in Wales and will likely remain there until the day she dies.”

Tilly’s heart sank. Humility was not a virtue of hers, much to her mother’s disappointment. “So not attached at the hip?”

“No.”

“You’re not wrong,” he said after a time, peering out through the trees beyond to the party. “I aspire to reside in Mayfair, but I’m not sure I love how you have painted us men. I like to think I might offer more than a terrible reputation or boring morality.”

“As if your sex doesn’t paint all women as troublesome, nagging, or sinful. We’re a burden. You need not tell us again, believe me.”

“Have I treated you like a burden?”

Tilly glanced down at her wrist wrapped with his cravat, then swallowed hard, seeking out the courage to meet his heated stare. “Not at all.”

It was the oddest thing, but she didn’t wish for this stranger to leave her, even after she had been rude and was the reason behind the gash at the base of his skull.

“I suppose you’ll head back then, yes?”

“I was leaving when...”

“You ran into me.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“Now I’m also invisible? Well, thank you for your honesty.”

She threw her head back and laughed, reaching out her uninjured arm and placing her hand on his shoulder. It felt so forward and yet so natural. She didn’t know the man’s name, and yet she was ready to bare her soul to him. What was that madness?

Certainly not too much champagne.

It felt as if she had known him always, maybe in another lifetime, as her mother would say. And surely even if that was a bit of magical thinking, it would only begin to explain why she continued talking to him as if reconnecting with an old friend.

Well, not friend entirely.

She was much too preoccupied with thoughts of kissing him for that to be true.

She might not have initially seen him before crashing into the man’s chest, but truth be told, she hadn’t been able to look away from him since.

“Why were you hiding?” she asked, ignoring the urge to peek back over her shoulder.

“I wasn’t. I was leaving. Why were you running?”

She scrunched her nose and placed her hands in her lap. “I fear we don’t have enough time to discuss that.”

The stranger stretched, winced, then reclined back against the tree. “I don’t have to leave.”

“But you wanted to.”

“That was before I knew you were here.” He glanced down at his boots and chuckled. “That is, if you will allow it, I would like to talk with you further. You are very interesting.”

Interesting? My, she hadn’t heard that in years. Tilly instantly knew that

self-deprecating laugh, and softened even more toward him, this strange grumpy man.

“How is your arm feeling?” he asked.

Tilly peeled back the blood-stained cravat and winced at the slice on her arm. Roger would be furious that she had been so careless. She hated how often over the past few months she needed to hide herself away to protect herself further.

“Oh, I’ll manage fine enough. I suspect I won’t lose it, and that’s a winning outcome.”

Again, that same exhale from the stranger who sounded similar to a laugh. Yet, not quite a laugh, as if he didn’t trust himself enough.

“If only I will be so lucky. I should plan on leaving soon to find a surgeon.”

Tilly leaned forward and held her hands out, desperate to keep this between her and the trees at Vauxhall. “Is it so bad as that?”

“Having a hole at the base of my head certainly isn’t great.”

She sat back and sighed. “I suppose not.”

“Tell me something you hate,” he asked.

“Hate? That’s a strong word... Wait, should we introduce ourselves?”

“Names would make this too real, and I am still half-convinced I am knocked unconscious at the base of that tree. I propose no names for now. The mystery is an intriguing novelty.”

She loved the way he spun his words. The formality was altogether endearing.

“Very well, something I hate...” Tilly was generally optimistic, despite growing up on the stages of Dublin, helping to care for her siblings after her father’s illness caused the family to lose their farm. “I dislike those who act kind but are the very opposite. Do you fall under that trap?”

The man gently shook his head, hissing as he turned his head left. She would never forgive herself if she seriously hurt him. She only wished for some space from Roger this evening. He had his eye on a new production and had made sure she was seen around Town this week. There was much to be gained by Matilda’s flawless reputation—mainly, benefactors for the theater.

She might have a house of her own that she shared with her family, and she might have money of her own, but none of that would protect her if the truth was ever released. And for five years now, she awoke every morning wondering if it had been revealed and went to bed every evening wondering

if it would be the last day she had before London turned on her.

Because they would.

She was certain of it. And worse than losing their fickle appreciation, she feared losing Ethan and everything she had built for herself.

Women had lost everything for much less. Why would the world treat London's favorite actress any differently?

"I hate parties," he said, breaking up the silence. "Including this one. Would you like to leave?"

Tilly lifted his cravat pressed against her cut, then glanced back at the stranger. Her heart felt as if it were floating outside of her body. He was so...

Well, Tilly might be sunshine, but this man would be Hades at the gates of Hell looking none too pleased spring had arrived.

"Never mind." He muttered something else under his breath, which she didn't hear, before he continued, "It is forward of me assuming someone like you attended tonight's party alone. I will take my leave and let you have a fun evening with your..."

Tilly pressed her lips together, attempting to stem the smile threatening to emerge. Should she let him sit there and spin a tale that wasn't true? She had never been married, never been engaged. Roger had seen to that. "Friends," she finished for him, pity winning out. "I came with friends tonight, though I am sure I am not missed."

"That is their loss then, isn't it?"

She lifted her nose, smirking. "But I suppose your gain."

CHAPTER TWO



Once, and only once, Henry had kissed a tavern maid in London after consuming one too many clarets. He hadn't stepped foot in a tavern since, and more importantly, he hadn't kissed another woman. It wasn't as if the opportunity didn't present itself, though it hadn't often. It was more the fact that Henry didn't concern himself with love.

Or women.

He hadn't a clue what to do with women.

They were such confusing creatures. They would flirt and smile, and he didn't know what to say next. And as for kissing, he was worried he was doing it wrong. And he preferred to be great at whatever he spent his time on.

No, there was a reason he preferred his law texts every evening—he was confident that his studying them would bring about a positive outcome. The law was black and white, and much like the way London society operated, women were gray.

And here he was, completely fascinated with the gorgeous stranger opposite him.

He was so far out of his depths, but when she smiled, he was sure he never wished to find land again.

She stood up and tugged at the knotted cravat around her wrist, frowning. "I apologize for the inconvenience. If you give me your address, I'll make sure this is cleaned and returned to you."

"No names, no addresses. I appreciate the thought, though."

He removed her handkerchief from his wound and studied the bloody piece of embroidered linen. "I suspect you would like this back, however?"

She pursed her lips and swung her hips. Her emerald dress swished to the

side like a church bell. “Well, I wouldn’t be against it, no.”

Henry slowly rose to his feet, groaning as the blood rushed to his head. She reached out, touching his arms with her fingertips, and the effect was all too dangerous. She stood almost eye to eye with him, only needing to tilt her head slightly to meet his heated stare. He must have hit his head harder than he originally thought because, as she swayed closer, all he could think about was what it would feel like if her lips pressed against his.

One kiss, that was all.

“Perhaps you should return to your friends and find a surgeon?”

That would be wise. Henry couldn’t explain it, however, but he didn’t wish to be parted from her.

“Hmm.”

“You don’t wish to?”

He shook his head, studying her face. Even half-hidden behind her gold mask, he was positive the most beautiful, intriguing, and confounding woman had run into him.

“Do you like to eat...” He searched his brain for the correct word. “Dinner?”

She laughed, glancing over her shoulder before turning back to him. “Depending on who’s cooking it. Yes, I suppose I do.”

He attempted to stuff his hands into his pockets, only to remember this jacket didn’t have any.

“That’s good. I do too...”

The woman leaned forward and scrunched her nose. “Are you sure we cannot know one another’s names?” She bounced back, standing tall. “I would like to know very much.”

“If we are meant to know, then we will find out.”

How did he think of this drivel?

“That’s surprisingly romantic of you.”

The cravat was still tied around her wrist, but he checked his collar, nonetheless, certain it was tied too tight around his throat. Henry Davies, a romantic?

“No, no, no. I wouldn’t say that.”

She spun around, backing up a few steps toward the party. “It’s past dinner, but would you like to go for a walk? Maybe a tavern? There’s one nearby.”

He preferred this small sliver of heaven in a cluster of sycamore trees.

The lantern lights hanging by the paths illuminated the space around them. Here, they were free to talk. Here, they were free from the judgment of others. Once they removed themselves, London would swirl around and tear them apart.

And he had wished to leave only moments earlier—until he met her.

“Dance with me,” he said in a burst of panic. He hated to dance and had made it his life’s mission to avoid such merriment.

She barked out a surprised laugh. “You most definitely need a surgeon.”

“Why? Do you not like to dance?”

“Oh, I like dancing fine enough. But I’m almost certain you don’t like dancing.”

He grinned, clasping his hands behind him. “Normally, you would be correct.”

“What’s different then?”

You.

“There is no one here to see.”

“You prefer to dance when no one is watching? What is the fun of that? Oh, you don’t seem to be the type to enjoy fun.”

“I think you might be teasing me, but you are correct. Dancing, parties, I avoid them whenever possible.”

“I am most definitely teasing you.” She licked her full lips in a slow, sensual sweep of her tongue. “What brought you here this evening?”

“My colleague’s birthday. I agreed to stay only for an hour.”

“Remind me to never invite you to one of my birthday celebrations.”

“I am still here, am I not?”

“I knocked you over, and you bashed your head against a rock. I believe you might be here under duress.”

His cheeks hurt from the stupid grin spread across his face. It pushed the troublesome mask up against his eyelids, and he wished to remove the blasted thing. But that would do no good. Was it supposed to hurt when you smiled?

“Will you dance with me, lady mischief, or shall I stagger out of these woods alone, and a little worse for the wear?”

The stranger peered up toward the sky, revealing the long line of her neck. Henry wondered for a moment how soft her skin would be there, and if she would shiver if he trailed kisses from the hollow of her throat to her mouth. These questions were so strange for him to consider. He didn’t quite understand this madness, but he knew he would die a little if she refused his

invitation to dance. And he also knew that until this very moment, he despised dancing more than taxes or mushy peas.

She narrowed her eyes behind her mask and lifted her nose, studying him before holding her hand out for him to grasp.

His heart, which had for thirty-one years worked well up until this night, tripped a beat. Enough for him to catch his breath as his hand reached out for hers, and her gloved hand slipped into his palm. And then he tugged, erasing the distance between them there in the dark circle of sycamore trees.

Their own private space as the rest of London carried on with their raucous masquerade.

“I don’t believe I have danced in the middle of a forest before.”

Henry had only danced in precisely one ballroom, only one time, as a favor to a friend whose younger sister was a sworn wallflower. Perhaps it had been his friend’s attempt at matchmaking. Either way, it didn’t stick, and he and his dance partner had parted ways amicably, both happier to be by themselves.

But this stranger?

They barely knew one another, and he was too much of a gentleman to pull her close and draw the back of his hand against her cheek as he wished. To feel the softness of her skin. And how her lips would feel against his...

He wished to know her depths. He craved to know more than this masked version of her, running through the woods at Vauxhall Gardens. He wanted more than minutes.

And that is what they possessed between them.

Minutes.

She was borrowed brilliance, and soon she would dash out of the woods to be with the rest of glittering London. Like some jewel. And he would retire home, as he had wished, except now it would no longer be a safe haven. Now it would be a reminder that once he had met something truly remarkable.

If they shared names, it would only make the pain of what was to come more real.

“I suppose if we are not sharing names, then we are not sharing other details, but I do know you are too caught up in your thoughts right now.” She laughed and pressed her thumb against the creases between his pinched brows. “I can tell you have a great mind. That is something to be proud of.”

He didn’t know what to do with a compliment. Most everyone hated him for his mind and the way it obsessed over the smallest of details. Even if he

had been proud of his mind, and once he had been, now it mostly felt like a burden. As if he owed everyone an apology for working his way through the world with some unfair advantage.

“I do well, thank you,” he said awkwardly.

Henry spun her, watching her emerald dress fan out around her there in the dark. But her hair was fire, and he was a moth drawn to flame, desperate to burn himself for the pleasure of one more touch.

It didn't make sense.

None of this did.

The stranger twirled back, bracing one hand against his chest to avoid colliding with him. He was desperate to know what that would feel like. What it would do to him to feel her weight against him, her skin to brush against his? He was never a gambling man. He left that to his brother Rafe, but he would guess her hair was soft as his favorite Savile Row silk vest. And she would taste, well, he couldn't venture to guess that. Her perfume was altogether alluring, and if she were to taste like honey cakes and tea, he would lose what he understood of the world.

Because until tonight, he hadn't believed in love.

He hadn't believed he wished to find it.

“You, poor, silly man,” she cooed, bracing his face between her silk-covered palms.

His heart, that cold, icy organ rumored to be in his chest, beat, blooming into something unrecognizable with each proceeding drum. As if, after all this time, he had been sleepwalking.

“I don't understand you or this,” he whispered. He shuttered his eyes toward her, melting into her touch. “Can you make this make sense?”

“Life may be this big, sweeping thing, but love is discovered in between the million tiny moments when you learn to live your life. I have lived my life fully, much to the disappointment of many. And I assure you that I have never found someone quite as intriguing as I have found you.”

“You mean knocked unconscious at the base of a sycamore tree?”

She paused, words almost visibly tripping up on her full lips. “Wit can only push you so far in this life. You learn by feeling.” She pressed her hand against his chest. “Here. I promise, if you feel something, then you are living, and nothing is wrong. Madness lies in nothing. I might not enjoy everything I feel, but I have found the courage to embrace the pleasant and unpleasant. That is something to be proud of. That is something so many in this world

never reach. Don't be another. You are far too special to walk around this world stuck in your head, too afraid to open yourself up to what awaits."

Henry always had a retort. It was his job, after all. But that speech was beautiful.

She was... beautiful.

"I need to know your name," he whispered instead. "*Please.*"

She shook her head. For a moment, he thought she would push him away, but instead, she curled her fingers into the lapels of his waistcoat and tethered herself to him. Rooting him there in this existence he never thought possible.

He could not be in love because he hadn't known this woman for long. Hell, he hadn't known her one whole night.

"I can see you trying to make sense out of something that doesn't make sense. Stop."

He swallowed, his palms suddenly sweating. She was mere inches away, and he couldn't kiss her.

Henry so desperately wished to kiss this stranger.

"What will you do tomorrow?" he asked instead.

She shrugged. "The same as every other day, except now I will have met you. And I don't know if I'll be sorry or glad of it."

"Glad of it, I'd like to think."

"Wouldn't that be lovely?" She closed her eyes, and her long eyelashes fluttered against the holes in her mask.

"You're lovely." Henry cleared his throat, instantly wishing he had kept that thought to himself. He hadn't had a drink earlier, and still, he was walking around uttering the most inefficacious things to a stranger who nearly bashed his head in.

He drew in a steadying breath, pulling his focus to his feet on the earth, the cool September evening breeze that brushed across his face, the silk of her gown in his palms.

And that's where the center of his world tipped. Henry Davies, barrister extraordinaire and virgin, had a woman wrapped in his arms, and he was more focused on his words than his actions. Which likely accounted for why he was a virgin.

"What if we snuck away?" she whispered. "I am so ready to leave them all behind. Would you take your chance on me and try finding our way out of here?"

"Where would we go?"

“Anywhere.” She laughed. “I realize how that sounds. It sounds like I hit my head and not you. No, no. Then maybe I should return to the party. I won’t keep you any longer.”

“What if I wish to stay? What will you think of me?”

“I will think you made an excellent choice.”

He grinned then. Something split open in his chest. Maybe it was his heart shaking off years of cold and ice to accommodate this beguiling woman.

He didn’t have the slightest idea of kissing. And Henry was sure he was about to do it all wrong, but he also knew he had to kiss this woman.

Especially as she stepped up on her toes and dragged him closer by his jacket lapels. “Kiss me first, then take me away. For tonight, I wish to only be with you.”

Henry leaned down and pressed his mouth firmly to hers. But that didn’t feel right. So, he softened the pressure, tasting the champagne on her lips, light and tasting like pears and honey. He tilted his head, adjusting his approach, groaning as she returned his kiss in equal measure.

Kissing, it turns out, was not the end of the world. Nor was it a terrible pastime.

He enjoyed it.

And he wished to continue.

The mechanics of the act faded from his mind and whether he was doing it right or wrong, then he melted into the feel of her lips against his, the slight breath she would issue if he nipped her bottom lip with his teeth, how she swayed against him as the rest of London seemingly swirled around them there in the dark.

She pulled back, resting her cheek against his for a moment. He swallowed, attempting to gather his thoughts which were spinning wildly about in his head. He tilted his face and dropped a soft kiss on her forehead, and he thought she sighed once more.

“How was that?” Henry asked, clearing his throat. “I mean... was that pleasurable for you?”

The beautiful stranger gazed up at him, studying his eyes as if she were about to unlock a big mystery. “That was perfect.”

“Where shall we go?” He stepped away, offering his arm to escort her out into the dark September night.

She froze, glancing over her shoulder as the sound of angry shouts

approached.

He stepped in front of her, searching her eyes, realizing only then he would need to step away, and they didn't know one another's names. This would be it. He had only met her and already, he was losing her.

"I want my money, and if you won't pay me," a voice said on the other side of the trees, "then I will challenge you to a duel. And I won't be a gentleman about it. I never am when it comes to coin."

He didn't wish for whatever trouble was brewing to spill over and endanger the stranger. He reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to the top. Damn gloves and all the other silly fripperies women must wear in public.

"I'm so sorry. This is not what I wanted," he whispered. "I hope I will see you again."

"Don't go. Please."

Footsteps and rustling leaves erupted. Any minute they would be discovered, and he wouldn't risk her ruined.

"I must, sweet." He sprinted toward the edge of the woods, leaving her there alone under the sycamore trees. "I must, and I wish so very much I didn't have to. Meet me here next summer if you are able. A June evening. I will wait every night."

She laughed, brushing at her cheeks with her gloves. "That is absurd. I am... I must wait until then? What if you can't make it?"

"I give you my word. Next June. I will be here, waiting. We've only met, but I promise I will wait years for another evening with you."

He jumped out back into the party, blinked at the lanterns hanging in the trees, and scanned the crowd for the men who were arguing. Wrong or right, there must be an answer besides a duel. And as usual, he would see justice served. Damn him and his logical mind.

He glanced back toward the woods, swallowing down the nerves that ricocheted inside his body, certain he had just lost a part of himself.



Tilly remained in the dark for a few moments, pressing her gloved hand against her lips, certain she had just experienced the most perfect kiss of her lifetime.

And he had just dashed back out toward the party to play knight-in-

shining armor, and she was none too pleased about it. Chivalry was overrated.

She laughed to herself, curling her free arm around her middle. She would need to face her colleagues from the theater. They likely missed her, but she enjoyed fading into the background for a little while.

Tilly grew up on the stage in Dublin and didn't know any different. And with seven brothers and sisters, her house was always a chaotic jumble of shouts and singing and dramatics.

She hadn't known anything different, but she certainly was ready for a change.

London held women to such a high standard, and she worked hard to maintain that image. She realized just how quickly she could be tossed aside as London's sweetheart and end up in the East End, or worse. She had real talent, and she wished to be recognized for it.

But if London discovered the truth, she would lose everything.

He would lose everything because of her mistake.

And she couldn't stomach that. She couldn't do that to Ethan.

She brushed back her hair, straightened her mask, and slipped back out into the party, watching everyone dance and laugh under the last glimmer of summer. The weather had been so agreeable that Vauxhall Garden was open uncharacteristically late for the season.

She would audition for a new role in the morning, one that would stretch her skills and certainly one that could cement her status in her social circles. She never wished to be just another actress, she wished to be Matilda Brennan who brought audiences to their feet with each performance. She wished to be appreciated by the critics of London. She wished to support herself and not rely on the strings that came with benefactors.

And she wished, most of all, that Roger would find another actress to swan about after because she was tired of him threatening to take everything away from her.

"Oh, there you are, Matilda."

Her friend and fellow actress Betina Meyers swooped in, hooking her arm through Tilly's. She was petite and curvy, and even when she wore her hair in blonde ringlets, she only stood to Tilly's shoulders.

Betina was known for her comedic acting talent and had performed at several London theaters before Tilly became her understudy two summers prior.

“Heavens, what happened to your wrist? You wandered away on us, and you missed Lord Bucksworth attempting to arm wrestle a German prince. I say attempting because Lady Amelia Jordan had to step in and stop it before the prince embarrassed himself.”

“I needed a moment,” she said, distracted by the commotion around her. The party, now several hours in, saw many of the guests well into their cups, and merriment and chaos abounded.

“He was looking for you,” Betina said.

Tilly whipped her head around to meet her friend’s worried stare. “It’s bad enough he dictates what I do on stage, but now he must follow me around as well.”

Betina leaned closer. “I bargain he wants more than to follow you around.”

“I know very well what he wishes,” she snapped, “and I’ve been clear I am not interested.”

“I don’t think that will stop him.”

Tilly nodded, scanning the crowd for Roger’s tall frame. He hulked around London, tossing threats around and controlling the purse strings on Drury Lane. It wasn’t as if he had earned respect from anyone, but he commanded it, nonetheless, because no one dared go against him.

Tilly wished to be married. She wished for a family. And she was certain Roger would never allow it until she made her way into his bed first. She had made that mistake once in Dublin. She vowed never to do it again.

“He’ll ruin everything for you,” Betina continued. “He is not a patient man, and if you make him wait much longer, I suspect you won’t be able to act in London again. Not to mention what happens if he exposes—”

“Not here,” Tilly rushed. The panic clawed at her throat. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t thought of it all before. She had worked for years from a young child touring with traveling theater groups. And now, some small-minded man wished to take it all away from her because she didn’t wish to be his mistress. He wanted complete control of her.

And she was powerless to do much of anything because of what was at risk if he exposed her.

Without a reputation, she would have nothing. Which was why she fought to keep her character pristine by attending endless charity events and teas. If attending an event, she brought her crabby chaperone and never strayed out onto a dark balcony. She was skilled in polite conversation, was excellent at

piano and needlework, and never participated in any flirtations with the many potential patrons who waited to be introduced at the end of all her performances.

Which was all the more reason why her behavior this evening was both alarming and surprising. It was careless, and yet she wasn't satisfied by one magical kiss in the forest.

She grabbed a glass of champagne off a tray from a passing waiter and gulped down the bubbly liquid. Her world had just been altered, and she wouldn't let Roger steal away what she had just discovered with her handsome stranger.

She would find him again, and he would be hers.

Funnier things had happened. Falling in love in an instant was not beyond reason. She had parted ways with reason years ago and had been much happier for it.

"Now come along," Betina insisted. "Come sing with us. Let's worry about Roger later."

Tilly did what she did best, forced on a smile and acted as though she wasn't being blackmailed by an utter cad, and the *ton* loved her all the more for it.



Dawn was quickly approaching, and Henry tumbled out of the carriage, laughing to himself as he stumbled a step. It wasn't like him to stay out all night with his friends, who now taunted him from inside the carriage.

After breaking up the duel, he left with Stephen to attend a private party somewhere near Mayfair before finding himself at a gaming hell. He hadn't seen her again.

He had searched.

Even with her bright red hair, she had disappeared.

But he would see her again, and perhaps soon.

"Get some sleep, Romeo," Stephen teased. "Being lovestruck suits you. I dare say you're tolerable now."

When Henry sobered up, he might take offense, but right now, it felt as if he could run for miles. It felt as if he could make the sun rise in the morning and set at night, and still have enough within him to summon the moon on the

stormiest night.

He hadn't had this much fun... in well, forever.

He had stood in London and felt as if he belonged, and everything was possible. He had certainly worked toward such an end for some time. He hadn't believed it though until this morning, lovesick and foolishly hopeful.

Henry would find her, surely.

He would find her, and they would court as she deserved to be courted and then... well, his heart ached to hold her again with each beat. He supposed once he found her again, they would take it one day at a time.

"I will marry her," he shouted, spinning with his arms tossed out wide. "I know it. And I am never wrong."

"Out of the road, Davies," Michael shouted. "You'll be run over by a carriage, then you'll never find her."

Raucous laughter erupted from within the carriage before it jerked and rode off, leaving him standing in front of his building.

His life had changed. And he was a new man.

With a silly grin still pasted to his face, he stumbled to his doorstep. Perhaps he had had a few too many drinks with his friends that evening. He rarely did, but he had enjoyed himself. And to think Rafe was having this much fun all along? What a blessing not to be the eldest son.

Not that he was bitter.

No, not at all.

Henry had done what his mother needed, at least according to his uncle. She was simply too sad after the passing of his naval captain father on a ship to Brazil. Henry was sent to London, Rafe was sent to become an apprentice of Captain Ackerman, and Mari had remained, looked after by a few of the women in their small Welsh village until their mother recovered from her grief.

He pushed through his door, missing the table when he tossed his keys. He pulled off his boots, dancing around the small sitting room tugging off each. The room was spinning too fast. He hardly had the upper hand in undressing.

It wasn't fair, really.

He tossed his boots by the door, then staggered a step to grab his keys, catching sight of the letter that had been shoved under his door. He lifted it, feeling everything tilt out of focus.

Fine, next time he wouldn't have so much to drink.

What a strange feeling to receive from holding a piece of stationery.

But he knew this was different by the seal on the back—elaborate and red. One that left him searching for a reason why he would receive a letter such as this.

His hands trembled as he opened the letter, and he read it once, feeling the floor give out beneath him. He sank down to the rug and clutched the letter in his hand.

His father's cousin had passed, leaving Henry an earldom and a crumbling family seat on the Isle of Wight.

And he was needed immediately for a meeting to discuss the transition.

Damn it all.

Henry leaned his head against the wall, clutching the letter and remembering the bloodstained handkerchief tucked away in his jacket pocket embroidered with a simple *B*.

Barbara, Beatrice, Bridget...

He hadn't even asked if she were married. Though he ventured she wouldn't have shared a kiss with him if she were.

And now, his world had, in fact, turned upside down.

He was the Earl Devlin, no longer Henry Davies.

Henry Davies, once hailing from Wales, now had inherited Cliffstone Manor on the Isle of Wight. He hadn't visited before. Hadn't a clue what life was like there. Or what the house was like—only described as “in a state of disrepair.” Or how he would be as an earl.

But once again, he wasn't given a choice.

As the eldest, this was his duty.

And if he had done anything successfully in his thirty-one years, it was to uphold his duty.

There was no allowance for daydreams, beautiful masked strangers, and heated kisses. No drunken nights with friends when he was tasked with turning everything around. Henry would return to work and devote himself to where he was needed wholeheartedly.

No matter how perfect his evening was.

It might as well have been a dream.

That glimpse of what life could be would have to wait. He would need to treasure his brief time with his beautiful stranger and meet up with her in June if not before. His family needed him, and he always answered that call, no matter how difficult.

CHAPTER THREE



December 1822

Tilly drew in a breath and started again, her fingers dancing over each key until, from behind, her house tumbled into chaos.

She angrily pounded at the piano until her patience broke, then spun on the bench. “I am trying to practice,” she called out.

Her siblings continued their mischief.

“I am a working professional who needs ten minutes of calm to practice.”

Still, they continued.

She loved them all madly, but some days, she wished to be far, far away from her Brennan brothers and sisters. Her parents were still in Ireland, as her father was too sick to ever make the move. The doctor advised him to stay out of the London air and remain in the Irish countryside near Dublin.

Tilly was the third oldest, her older brother and sister, Patrick and Imogene, were both settled now with families of their own. They both helped Tilly establish herself in London after having Ethan and, along with visiting, helped financially when they could. It was agreed upon that the other siblings would remain with Tilly and help with Ethan as her acting career became more established from playing smaller circuits to larger London theaters.

Nearly twenty-two, and Tilly felt as if she were years older. Her house was full of rowdy children, she worked long hours, and she was trapped in a relationship she wished to escape.

Younger, she had dreamed of more.

But so was life.

She pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders and stood, glancing

outside at the dull December day. Oh, how she wished for snow. It never felt like Christmas time otherwise.

“Really, what is all this racket?” she asked.

Then she stepped into the hall.

Tiny bits of paper rained down upon her as her siblings giggled and laughed, merrily singing Christmas carols.

“We’ve decided we need snowflakes,” shouted Maeve from over the railing. Maeve shared the same fiery orange hair as Tilly, though she was much shorter like their mother, and her face was dotted with freckles.

“Loads of ‘em,” Daniel added, popping his head around Maeve. At fourteen, Daniel was losing the rounded facial features of boyhood much too quickly. He made up for it with a head of wild chestnut curls and an impish grin.

The twins, Bridgid and Fiona, twirled down the hallway toward Tilly carrying an armful of ivy sprigs for the windows. “Yes, coming through. It’s time to decorate, Sister.”

“But why is it raining paper in my front hall? And more importantly,” she said, fighting off a smile as Ethan raced down the stairs in a crooked paper crown, “why are you decorating without me?”

The twins, tall and lean like Tilly, fussed with the ivy and red ribbon. Tilly had been so busy, she had only baked oranges and poked them with cloves. She hadn’t done much planning otherwise. She had spent her time at the theater far too much lately.

Ethan threw his arms around her waist.

Tilly sank down, dropping a kiss on top of his curly blond hair. “How are you, love?”

“They won’t stop singing,” he said, pointing to Bridgid and Fiona. They both spun around and stuck out their tongues before breaking into giggles.

She laughed. “Yes, well they do that sometimes.”

“Up here, Ethan,” Daniel called. “I need your help pasting these snowflakes.”

“It looks wonderful.” Tilly stood with her hands clasped in front of her, sorry for her absence of late. Sorry she couldn’t be there as her siblings needed her to be. Patrick and Imogen were too occupied with their own families to help. And Imogen especially didn’t wish to tangle her reputation with that of her sister. Having an actress in the family was shameful to her.

Which is probably why she had married a vicar and lived in the north

now.

And while Tilly felt a little sorry for herself, she was thankful her younger siblings reliably made her life chaos. She drove herself because she wished to provide them with a fine life, with fine schools, and the best social connections possible.

“Miss,” Mrs. Tufts interrupted. She was a mouse of a woman, petite, and silvered hair under her cap and her gold-framed glasses were always dirty and sat askew her short nose. “Children, this mess must be cleaned up. It’s too early to decorate. It’s bad luck.”

“I’ve told them so.” Tilly glanced toward the housekeeper, and her stomach sank. The woman’s green eyes were filled with worry, and Tilly knew without a doubt who was behind it.

“He’s here to see you,” she whispered. “I tried telling him you weren’t home.”

“But I see that you are, and I guess I am correct once again.” Roger strutted into the room in a large black overcoat, and removed his top hat, smiling at Tilly as if he had just arrived out of her dreams to whisk her away.

She felt sick.

The merriment was instantly sucked out of the room, and the Brennan siblings quieted.

“Morning calls exist for a reason, Roger.”

“Have you been practicing?”

“She’s been trying,” Ethan shouted from upstairs.

Daniel muttered a comment she didn’t hear, but the tips of Roger’s ears reddened so perhaps he had.

“Let’s leave them.” Maeve gathered the others and quickly ushered them upstairs and out of sight, just as Tilly preferred. No sense in letting Roger terrify everyone in the Brennan household.

Roger Haskett was tall, and probably considered handsome if his personality wasn’t so horrid. He walked with his broad chest puffed out and his tawny hair slicked back, and he always smelled of cigars.

Another reason why her stomach always turned as soon as he was near. The smell made her sick.

“Are you going to offer me a seat or some tea?” He tossed his top hat to the table in the hallway under a large gilded mirror. It knocked against the potted poinsettias.

“Why are you here?”

He narrowed his blue eyes on her, then stalked closer. “You left after the opera last evening without coming to see me. We had arranged for you to see me.”

“I had a headache.”

“We should see a doctor, then. Seems you suffer a lot from them.”

Tilly wrapped her arms around her waist and shifted her body away. Running off to Dublin and placing the Irish Sea between them still wouldn’t be enough distance.

“Well, don’t beg off from what I’m about to ask of you. You better find some miraculous cure for your headaches. I have arranged for you to attend a Christmas house party that the Duke of Maitland is hosting at Haddington Court. Lots of deep pockets in attendance. You will be performing for him and his friends.”

“I’ll be away? For Christmas?”

He reached out and snatched her wrist, squeezing to make his point. “You will be there, or I will expose you. I will ruin you.”

“You have said that for a few months now, Roger.” She yanked her wrist away, rubbing at the red bruise blooming on pale skin.

“Do you want to test me, dove? Want to see how warm a Christmas is out on the streets?”

“It’s not as if I am without family. I could return to my parents.”

“And you’ll dirty your pretty hands will you, with the sheep farming? Your father is frail enough as it is.”

Tilly lifted her nose at the ugly man.

“Don’t look at me that way. I hate when you look at me like that.”

“Stop threatening me and my family.” She balled her fists at her side, her heart thumping against her ribcage, feeling as if it would burst. How she hated this man. Just as much as she hated the man who left her with child when she was only a child herself.

Matilda Brennan was talented, she knew that, and so did the stage managers who tried to leverage her success to fill their pockets. Once she was pregnant with Ethan, she had left Dublin and the stage. She waited a year after his birth to return to the theater and started in smaller provincial circuits in England. She dropped her stage name, went by her family name, and had finally signed for her first of several performances at Drury Lane.

Roger had discovered her at a smaller production and offered her a role last year. That began a frenzy of other theaters fighting to gain her as an

actress in their production as well.

And now he wished to take it all away because she didn't want him.

"You don't own me, Roger," she spat out.

He reached out and squeezed her cheeks in his hand, gripping until tears sprang to her eyes, and she dragged in a breath. He hauled her close, pulling so tightly she thought her jaw might break from the force.

"You signed a contract with my theater, Matilda. You are mine. And I will have you or you will kiss everything I have given you goodbye. You'll be another miserable, hungry mother with ten brats to feed in Ireland and no coin to do it."

She met him in the eye the entire time, even as she wished to curl up and cry. This was nothing. She had a bruise on her arm from last week. He was always careful not to bruise her face. But today, that careful consideration seemed close to slipping.

"You're pathetic. You'd be nothing in this Town without me. Remember that, dove. Nothing. And when London discovers the truth about Ethan, they'll turn their backs on you, too. No one can afford to befriend a scandal. And that's all you are. You're a lying adventuress with a bastard child. London will find out."

"Keep his name out of your mouth."

Roger narrowed his eyes, grabbed her dress by the bodice, ripped off the green rhinestone brooch pinned at the top, then pushed his mouth against hers in what was supposed to be a kiss. For him.

For Tilly, it was torture. She stood there, frozen as his mouth moved over hers in greedy possession.

"Mine," he said, stepping away and stuffing the brooch into her pocket before stalking down the hall. "Pack your things. A carriage will be here in the morning," he shouted.

The door slammed, and Tilly startled, slowly remembering where she was.

Alone, in her home, with her siblings and son.

Roger was right. And without London, she would have nothing even if that meant leaving everyone behind for Christmas.

She would see them safe and untouched. Tilly would go to Haddington Court and spend Christmas away from those she loved because if she didn't, she feared Roger might finally reveal her secret.



Henry sipped his tea, thinking of one thing or another before tripping on a stack of books in his apartment. The china cup flew from his hand and shattered onto the rug. The small fragments scattered everywhere, and the tea splattered and stained his new shirt. He would need to dress once more.

He was already running late.

Perfect.

All he had wanted in the world was a cup of tea. Packing up his apartment to make the move to Cliffstone Manor wouldn't have been half as arduous if he didn't possess—at his best guess—five thousand books. Whether true or not, it felt that way anyhow.

He grumbled to himself, shuffling back through the crowded floors to fetch a broom to sweep the mess up. Did he even own a broom? His housekeeper came once a week to assist with tidying the place, so he surely had a broom. When he opened the small closet, more books tumbled out, falling at his feet, begging to be packed.

Henry didn't wish to leave London but matters needed to be sorted.

Duty. He loathed that word.

Never in his thirty-one years did he wish to be an earl. He had worked exceedingly hard to be the best barrister he could become. And now he would step away to balance ledgers, attend balls and the opera, and take his seat in the House of Lords. Being Lord Devlin sounded as if he would be expected to know everything and do everything perfectly while being surrounded by the peerage, who had been doing the same for centuries.

Sleet pelted against the window. December had London firmly in her grasp, and it was dark and cold, and the days far too short.

Christmas was only a week away.

And he would likely be spending it here, alone, by the fire with a glass of brandy. He'd be loath to admit as much, but he did miss his family around the holidays. The Welsh seaside cottage where he had grown up possessed a sort of magic he hadn't encountered since.

No, magic wasn't the right word. That was much too muddy of a term, and he preferred black and white, right and wrong, true or false.

Magic didn't exist within those parameters.

Just as he knew that beautiful stranger who he had met months earlier had vanished well and good, and he would likely never find her again. He blamed

his heart for getting ahead of his brain. As if she would meet him in that spot when the gardens opened next spring after one kiss?

A knock rapped at the door.

He glanced up from sweeping the remains of his teacup and growled. Actually growled because if one more thing went wrong, he wasn't sure what he would do, but it would likely involve a long holiday in Bath.

"Who is it?" Henry demanded.

"Is that how your mother taught you to answer the door?" A familiar voice asked from the other side.

"I don't have time to see you, Stephen," Henry called out. He virtuously swept up the remaining pieces and then scanned the carpet, discovering one last remaining shard of china.

It was better to find it now than later and stick himself like a pig.

"Let me in," Stephen said, playfully banging around on the door. "I promise to keep it brief."

Stephen Greenwald was a lot of things, but never brief.

Henry stalked to the door, whipped it open, and glowered at his friend.

"Doing a bit of housekeeping?" Stephen asked.

Henry was still clutching the broom and dustbin piled high with shattered china. "Now is not a good time."

"It never is with you." Stephen weaseled his way past Henry and strode into his apartment, stopping abruptly at the kingdom of books piled high on the floor. He removed his top hat, revealing the long silver scar that cut across his face from a carriage accident during his Oxford days. He wore his dark auburn sideburns bushy in an attempt to distract from the injury.

"You don't have to leave London. You will be back to take your seat, you know."

Stephen was the second son of the Viscount Rawlings and solicitor to the Duke of Maitland.

"I realize that." Henry closed the door, emptied the dustbin, and returned the dustbin and broom back in the closet. He gathered up the pile of blankets on the armchair and sank down with a sigh. "It's only this place isn't practical for when I return. It's halfway across Town to start. Perhaps someplace bigger for when..."

Stephen froze with his eyebrows arched high, waiting.

"I'll need an heir, Greenwald. I am not searching for a love match, only for a woman who is from a respectable family who has a comically large

dowry to help the estate dig out of debt.”

“Right, practical.”

“I am nothing if not consistent.” He scrubbed his hand over his face. He hadn’t shaved in two days, and the dark stubble covering his jaw scratched against his palms. “Do you have any need for these law texts? I thought about donating them. I could bring them to Cliffstone with me, I guess.”

Stephen removed his top hat, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes toward his friend. “Have you slept?”

“At some point in my life, yes. Recently? That would be up for debate.”

“I feel terrible for coming here today. If I knew you had this to contend with, I wouldn’t...”

“What do you need?”

“Well, a favor. A friend of mine is in a spot of legal trouble and could use your counsel.”

“He’s welcome to write a letter. I have—”

“It’s a delicate matter. One best discussed in person.”

Henry rolled his eyes, instantly understanding. “You know I will not help one of your well-off friends who think they are above the law.”

Stephen nodded. “You are now among the Upper Orders, dear Henry. Privilege does come along with money, but you will soon find out it comes with a whole host of other problems. Problems that are best kept out of the papers.”

“My inheriting an earldom does not change my views. I will not use my position to do whatever I please. A title is a great responsibility. It is a duty, and that position should be respected.”

“And you do so love to uphold duty, don’t you?”

Henry jumped to his feet, eager to have this meeting over with. “If I had known you were going to invade my privacy and mock me, I would have left the door locked.”

Stephen darted a glance around the room, shifting from foot to foot. “No, that’s not... hell, I haven’t slept either. Can I start again?”

“If you must.”

“You are a right arse sometimes.”

“And now you insult me.”

Stephen laughed. “I came to ask if you would consider visiting the Duke of Maitland. He’s in need of some legal advice that I cannot give as his solicitor. In return, the duke has offered you a room. He’s hosting a

Christmas house party, and I will attend as well. I have business here in Town to handle before I travel, but I can arrange for you to head to Haddington Court alone.”

“No.”

“What if you only went up for the meeting and left? No house party.”

Henry Davies, now Lord Devlin as he so liked to remind himself, did not do house parties. Not now, not in the future.

“There might be a few marriage-minded young ladies there as well. It might be easier to meet them at a house party than at a ball.”

Stephen had a point, still, Henry knew his limit. He would never be agreeable enough to last an entire house party. “Then I would need to contend with their mothers... or worse yet, their chaperones.”

“I will be there to assist with them. Mothers love me.”

“Does that explain why you have an incurable fondness for widows?”

“One day, friend, you will understand.”

His chest ached suddenly. It was happening more and more. The most minor thing could set it off. A mere memory of that night a few months ago, and his body rebelled. It made no sense, and he disliked it very much.

One kiss and he became sentimental.

“Tell me you will think about it. I can arrange everything since I know you are busy with other matters. It would mean a great deal to me, this favor. I can arrange for you to travel there for the day and return the next. No need to spend Christmas in one of Britain’s finest homes with a duke and his dearest friends.”

“I think you meant for that to entice me.”

Stephen navigated through the stacks of books and gently bumped Henry against his shoulder with his fist. “It would entice a great many people, but the fact that it doesn’t you, delights me.” His friend cleared his throat and dropped his smile. “In all seriousness, the duke would be a good friend to have now that you have a title.”

More gray. He had no plans to veer beyond what was allowed, not when he had a legacy to rebuild. “I will go. For you, not for any other reason. But I will only go for the meeting and wish to leave the next morning. Give whatever excuse necessary to see it done. I wish for a Christmas here in Town.”

“By yourself? Where is the fun in that? Come on, come enjoy some Christmas cheer.”

“One night, Stephen.”

His friend grinned, bowing before placing his top hat on his head and spinning for the door. “Very well. One night. I will have everything arranged and will send word when you can expect to leave tomorrow. Thank you, friend.”

The door closed behind Stephen, and Henry remained fixed to his spot on the carpet, certain he had made this very promise before.

And it only left him with a hole in the back of his head and a heart that was now prone to tripping now and again at the memory of a haunting kiss.

CHAPTER FOUR



Henry had never encountered so much snow in his life. It had been snowing for half his journey. The roads were practically impassable. And his damn feet were cold because he had worn the wrong boots, and the inside of the carriage was a death trap as it slid this way and that over the roads. He would need a sleigh to return to London tomorrow.

If he could return home tomorrow at all.

Why he ever agreed to help Stephen was beyond him.

Henry glanced out of the carriage, gazing upon Haddington Court and the grand home sitting proudly on a hill. Dread instantly tumbled in his stomach.

The carriage pulled up to the front of the towering four-story Elizabethan structure of Bath stone, with vast banks of windows stretching east to west.

Henry didn't wait for the door to be opened for him. He gathered his things and stepped out himself, turning up his collar toward the nasty weather.

"Come down," he called to the driver. "I'll see that you can stay the night and warm up."

"No need, sir. It's already arranged."

Right. He should have remembered as much. Being his first house party, he feared this wouldn't be his only blunder.

The footman opened the front door of the grand house, and another hurried down the freshly shoveled stairs to fetch the luggage.

"Good day, my lord."

Henry nodded, remembering only a moment after that footman was

addressing him. “Help him down will you, and see that he is warmed up and fed, please.”

“Yes, my lord.”

They would have been stuck on the road if they had left London any later. The snow came down like a giant blanket smothering the English countryside, and a wicked, frigid wind whipped it all up again.

“Please, let me help you inside, my lord,” another footman said, offering his assistance.

But Henry’s attention was drawn to the coach driver being helped down. “We will see that he is taken care of, my lord.”

He stood on the steps as his luggage was quickly carried inside, and the carriage was driven to the stable around back. Reluctantly, he continued up the stairs and stepped inside, thankful for the roaring fire in the ornate marble fireplace in the foyer. The grand house smelled of cinnamon and apples, and the evergreen decorations were being prepared to be hung with Christmas only three days away.

Once his overcoat was removed, he was shown to his room in the east wing of the grand house.

“We have been informed the roads are no longer safe, my lord. You will be our only guest for the evening. Please make yourself comfortable and let me know if there is anything I can do to make your stay enjoyable.”

Delighted not to have to meet everyone, Henry paced his room with his arms clasped behind his back. He had only planned to stay the evening, and now he would, but he would do so alone. But he was eager to tour Haddington’s six libraries.

Really, he hadn’t met the Duke of Maitland prior to today, but he could only hope to restore Cliffstone to a fraction of Haddington Court. But he knew, with a lack of funds and the challenges that lay ahead with restoring the dilapidated building, it would take a great many years for that to become a possibility.

A few hours later, Henry ambled down the grand staircase with a book in hand, ready to make good use of at least one library, when the footman opened the front door. The servants scurried about, the snow swirling madly outside as a figure slowly emerged. An older woman was helped inside, stooped over in a thick wool cape and clutching a cane.

“If my knees were better, I would kiss this immaculate tiled foyer. Oh, what a journey. I can’t feel my nose. Tell me young man,” she snapped at a

footman, “is it still there? It’s not as fine as it once was. The prince certainly admired it years ago now at a ball one spring evening. Not enough to make me a princess.”

The older woman shuffled into the home, oblivious to Henry standing there. And just as well. He was still thawing out and didn’t wish to socialize.

“No, no, leave it and come in,” another voice called out from outside.

The familiar lilt halted his escape. He quickly said hello to the older woman and stood by the door, struck as a woman dressed in an emerald velvet cape emerged. She shook off the snow and locked eyes with him, then she slowly lowered her hood.

It couldn’t be.

He was dreaming.

Perhaps he was dying on the side of the road some several miles back, freezing to death in a snowstorm.

His stranger stood before him with the warmest smile, melting away the ice clinging to his heart.

“Hello.”

Henry’s mouth was dry. He licked his lips, searching his mind for some string of letters, anything he could pull together to speak. And yet he was left staring daftly at her.

“Oh, I can feel my back about to go,” the older woman interjected. “I must sit down. I must. I must. Only a brandy will do now. What a journey, let me tell you...”

The older woman’s complaints faded to the background.

“Good day,” he said at last, his voice deeper than he expected.



The cold wind whipped across Tilly’s face, the snow almost cutting across her cheeks as she stood in the doorway, staring down a tall, dark man who appeared to hold up Haddington Court in the midst of utter chaos.

“I need a brandy and to sit by the fire,” Mrs. Craven, her insufferable chaperone barked. At nearly eighty-two years of age, the woman lived only for the present and did not like to be left waiting for fear she might expire. Or so she often told Tilly.

Mrs. Craven continued, even as the world slowed, and Tilly thought she

was dreaming.

She must be because he was just as struck as she, and she was near positive he was her stranger. Even if his voice was deeper, she would never forget the way his words softened in a Welsh accent.

But good day? That was so formal. She had dreamt of finding him these past few months and standing frozen in a snowstorm without a word to say was not what she pictured.

“Allow me to help you, m’lady,” a maid said, approaching to remove her cloak.

“Thank you.” The words tumbled out of her in a whisper. She couldn’t look away from the handsome man appraising her. His dark hair was cut in fashion, not a wayward strand to be found. He had a long Roman nose punctuated by such dark brown eyes they appeared black. He was handsome the night they first met, but now with the full picture of his face, she was struck.

And just as suddenly, as if a string snapped and he came untethered, he rushed forward.

“Are you well, miss? Are you hurt? Are you cold?”

“Give her a chance to breathe, young man. How do you expect her to answer?” Mrs. Craven said. “And do not trouble yourself, I am well.”

The stranger stopped short of touching her, and she was instantly sorry for it. Then he volleyed glances between her and her chaperone, his dark brows drawn in confusion.

“Are you well?” he asked, turning to Mrs. Craven.

“That was the worst carriage ride of my life. And might be my last. My nerves! I need a brandy or some claret. You,” she said, pointing to a footman, “make yourself useful instead of standing about and ready a place for us by the fire. We have survived a great ordeal. I need something to settle my nerves, or I swear I shall expire on this extraordinary Aubusson rug.”

“Mrs. Craven, I am sure they are doing what they can. The other guests —”

“It’s only myself. The others won’t arrive tonight. The roads have been closed.”

Tilly quickly scanned the magnificent foyer of Haddington Court, decorated with enormous oil portraits, before settling her gaze upon her stranger. “Oh.”

She supposed they were not strangers any longer.

“Who are you?” Mrs. Craven wriggled over, stepping between Tilly and the beautiful man in front of her.

“I’m Lord Devlin, ma’am.” He nodded his head in the perfect courtly gesture, all the while maintaining eye contact with Tilly.

An earl?

Oh, what a silly thing her heart was. Tilly would never mean anything to a titled man. They were all the same.

Mrs. Craven clutched the ivory handle of her cane. “It’s a pleasure, my lord. I am Mrs. Craven. I had no idea we would be snowed in with an earl. Imagine our luck. Where is the duke?”

“He fell victim to the roads, Mrs. Craven. I only know what I have been told, but I can relay that he is expected shortly after it is safe to travel once more.”

“Yes, yes,” she waved off.

Of all the companions in London, Tilly found Mrs. Craven both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because the woman considered napping among her very favorite pastimes. However, the old woman possessed the eerie ability of knowing everything and was the most meddlesome of gossips around.

“And this is Miss Matilda Brennan. I am sure you know of her. Almost anyone who resides in London does after her last performance as Volumnia.”

The earl shook his head. “I am sorry to say I have not had the pleasure of an introduction.”

Tilly felt the heat bite her cheeks from embarrassment. Or perhaps it was the memory of their kiss in the woods at the masquerade at Vauxhall Gardens. The way he had asked if it had been a pleasurable kiss. She had never once had someone consider her when touching her body.

And here he stood so close once again, and they couldn’t say a word in front of Mrs. Craven. They were to spend an entire week together at this house party and act as if they were strangers when that was far from the truth.

Especially when, after having finally found him after all these months, she wished to grab his hand and catch up by the fire and laugh and flirt and kiss some more.

Which only proved Roger right, she was the worst of harlots.

If she were not careful, her reputation would be shattered, and no one would pay to see her tread the boards of Drury Lane. She had fought too hard to give that up because of one kiss.

Because of one man...

“Can I help you find a seat by the fire, Miss Brennan?”

Tilly’s heart danced in her chest. And while the inside of her felt a riot rage on, outside she cooled her features and narrowed her eyes. If she could fashion herself from ice, then perhaps she could protect herself from falling madly and recklessly in love with the earl.

An earl. Oh. She had really done it now.

“Thank you, no.” She was surprised by the resolve in her voice. “Mrs. Craven is correct. It was an ordeal, and I wish to retire to my room.”

A lady’s maid hurried down the stairs and whisked Tilly away, leaving Mrs. Craven with the earl.

All she could think of as she turned the corner on the stairs was that she still didn’t know his name, and she was jealous he now knew hers.

If it mattered.

Did it matter?

Had he thought of her as often as she had thought of him?

It had been such a whirlwind evening. They shared only a handful of minutes together, but she had sworn that evening, and since, that they must have known each other in some other way. How else could she explain how she felt so completely at home with him?

Love wasn’t struck in an instant. It was built over time. It required trust and understanding. Lust at first sight she could understand. But kissing the earl in the dark in the ring of sycamore trees had nothing to do with lust.

But it was foolish to think it was love.

It couldn’t be.

Her lady’s maid showed Tilly into her room. It was a beautiful room overlooking a hedge maze that was flanked by a beautiful stone statute dusted in snow.

She curled up into her chair and tucked her feet under her. She pulled a blanket tight around her shoulders and closed her eyes, stealing a nap.

And avoided the conversation that awaited her downstairs with dark eyes.

Chapter Five

Usually, Ethan bounded into Tilly's bed before daybreak. Some days, he dressed as a pirate and on others, he insisted she look at his drawing when her eyes could barely focus from being at the theater too late.

But his pudgy hands would wrap around her cheeks and draw her gaze to his, and her heart would melt.

Always.

Only two days until Christmas and she would be forced to spend the holiday with a group of strangers. Well, except for Mrs. Craven. But Mrs. Craven might as well have been a stranger. Tilly didn't dare utter a word of the truth to the old woman for fear of what she could do. Being old and crotchety had enough power, and she didn't wish to share that Ethan was Tilly's illegitimate son. So much of protecting her reputation meant balancing how others regarded her, including which roles she selected, which parties she attended, and which charities she supported. A careless whisper from Mrs. Craven could send ripples throughout the beau monde, and the delicate balance Tilly had fought for to maintain the public's favor would be gone.

Five years and that secret never grew lighter.

If anything, it became something of a chain, binding her to Roger these past few months now that he knew.

But it helped that her family was supportive of her acting. The seven Brennan brothers and sisters stormed into London's theater scene after Ethan's first birthday with a story that Ethan was her mother's youngest, but with their father gravely ill, Imogen and Tilly agreed to care for him.

And the story stuck.

Imogen eventually married a vicar and left London, and Tilly's performances garnered enough attention that London adored her. For the moment, anyhow.

She was fortunate that she wasn't immediately cast off for being an actress. The *ton* embraced her and delighted in her company, and she had hung on to that for as long as she could.

But Tilly was tired.

Bone tired of pretending. Of not letting her guard slip. Of performing for everyone on and off the stage.

Of being alone.

She was so alone.

Tilly wiped at her cheeks, annoyed with herself for being overly sentimental. She would celebrate Christmas with the others when she

returned to London, and Ethan would be delighted at having the opportunity to celebrate twice. And she would do as Roger wished so that Ethan could do just that.

“Miss, I hope I am not bothering you. Mrs. Craven insisted I bring up a breakfast tray for you before you expired from hunger.” The lady’s maid floated into the room and set the tray by her bed.

Tilly propped herself up, forcing on a sleepy smile.

She had practiced lines far too late last evening. While she appreciated Mrs. Craven’s thoughtfulness, she needed more sleep now that she had the opportunity. Though, if she were being honest, five years of mothering Ethan had turned her into a reluctant morning person. There was not much sleep to be had with a rowdy five-year-old in the house.

The maid threw back the velvet curtains to reveal a bright white light. “Oh, I know the weather made travel difficult, but there is nothing more magical than a fresh coat of snow before Christmas.”

“I have only experienced snow for Christmas once before now. Has the storm finally lifted? The wind was horrible last evening.”

“It has, m’lady. And Haddington looks beautiful. If you wish to go for a sleigh ride later, I would be happy to arrange it for you.”

“Thank you.” Tilly reached for the teacup on the tray and drank it without a touch of cream or sugar. She preferred the bitterness in the morning to jolt her awake. “That sounds grand.”

“The duke might also have a pair of skates for you if you wish to skate the pond. The winters at Haddington can seem as if they drag on and on, but I find if one can dress for the weather, there is fun to be had. Is there anything else you need, miss?”

Tilly eyed her toast with butter and jam, and her stomach gurgled. “No, thank you.”

The lady’s maid whisked out of her room just as quickly as she had whisked in, and Tilly enjoyed breakfast in bed all the while knowing the earl was somewhere in this vast house.

Did he prefer the mornings or the evenings? What did he enjoy doing? She couldn’t see him singing along as she played the piano. Maybe he preferred the library or a game of chess?

It made no difference because she had no right to know. They were strangers, and a snowstorm saw them snowed in together in some cruel twist of fate, but they must remain strangers.

They must, or surely, she would lose her heart to him. If she hadn't already.

She quickly dressed, visited with Mrs. Craven, then decided to spend some time out in the country air.

The stone stairs were shoveled but slick as she made her way down to the sleigh.

"Would you like to join me?" a deep voice asked from behind her.

Tilly turned, holding her skirts tight to stop herself from throwing arms around the earl. What luck to find him again. And what horrible timing.

"Join you? I was going to enjoy a sleigh ride by myself."

"I had arranged for a ride as well. I apologize. I didn't realize..."

She had never been so tongue-tied in her life as she met his stare and swallowed in his earnest manners. Damn him and his gentlemanly ways.

"I will go skating. Please, enjoy—"

"I insist. I don't wish to interfere—" he said, speaking over her.

"—the ride. It's a beautiful day." She laughed. Well, not laughed. That would have required dignity, which she had none at the moment because she tittered like a schoolgirl. She couldn't speak around the earl, couldn't think around him. And now she couldn't act as if she hadn't already lived lifetimes in her twenty-one years.

"I will go skating," she insisted again, avoiding eye contact. "You can tell me all about the sleigh ride later."

"Very well."

The earl climbed up into the sleigh and settled beneath a blanket.

"Are you avoiding me, Miss Brennan?"

"I don't know you," she hissed, glancing toward the driver. "We have only met. And I cannot be in your company without Mrs. Craven as my chaperone."

He nodded. "I understand."

Guilt swallowed her up. First, she acted a fool, and now she was no better than a pretentious shrew. He was much too polite to make light of her excuse.

"I will go skating," she repeated, this time softer. "And though I should not say it, I am glad to see you once again."

For a moment, he was quiet. Seriousness settled over his features. "Are you warm enough to go skating? Should I send for more blankets?"

"I don't believe I need blankets to go skating. I will be fine."

"Fine," he said. It settled over his lips like he had swallowed a fly. He

signaled for the driver to move forward, and the sleigh took off, leaving Tilly there in the courtyard.

Alone.

And she only had herself to blame.



Miss Matilda Brennan.

While at dinner last evening, dining on the most delicious roast he'd ever had the pleasure to eat, Mrs. Craven had referred to her as Tilly after one too many clarets.

Henry would have preferred to have enjoyed dinner with Miss Brennan, but she had taken dinner in her room. Leaving him alone with her crusty chaperone and giving him the distinct impression that she was avoiding him.

She could tell him otherwise, but she could hardly look him in the eye. She acted as if she were afraid of him, which was odd considering they had kissed in a dark forest when they first met.

He didn't understand.

The sleigh rounded the corner, perched above the pond down below. Miss Brennan stood observing the pond, her arms akimbo on her hips. She was dressed in a beautiful burgundy cloak that only offset her fair coloring and bright fire-red hair. Her shoulders dropped with a deep sigh before she pushed off across the ice. With her arms wide out to catch her balance, she glided carefully across the ice before she waved her arms in giant circles and crashed onto her bottom.

He chuckled to himself the moment she tossed her head back and groaned.

Slowly, she struggled to stand back up as each limb went in the opposite direction she intended.

Henry climbed out of the sleigh and made his way to the freshly shoveled path down to the pond. He stood by, afraid to distract her.

She whirled around, her arms flailing and her eyes wide. "What are you..."

He rushed out onto the ice in his boots, instantly slipping and landing sprawled out on his stomach across the ice. The ice burned his cheek, and he was certain he would have a bruise on his jaw from the way he landed.

“I came to assist you,” he mumbled, reluctantly pushing up to his knees.

“It appears as if you are the one who needs assisting, my lord.”

Just as suddenly, she was on her back staring up at the sky and mumbling under her breath. “Oh, drat.”

“Perhaps we both need help.”

“It’s unnatural for humans to be on ice. That is what the matter is.”

“I believe you are wearing skates, are you not?”

“Pfft, would you care to try them?”

Henry inched across the ice and stood above her with a small grin tugging at his lips. “Mrs. Craven is well asleep for the afternoon. Can you trust me enough to skate with me for a few minutes?”

“How are you certain?”

“Because I watched her insist on a second claret jug be produced at luncheon, then finish it while spewing the most ridiculous diatribe regarding the current wallflowers of London. She had many opinions. We have become meal companions, it seems.”

A beautiful smile teased at her lips. He had foolishly thought she was beautiful with her mask the first night they met, but now?

Well, he wasn’t certain how he had been knocked over by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen but sure enough, that was just his luck. And he had never considered himself lucky. Hard-working, yes? Confident, well he more often toed the line of arrogant. He didn’t care much for semantics right now.

Not when she reached up and grasped his gloved hand with hers, and he helped her to stand.

“My lord, I mean this in the most respectful way possible. Please leave me alone.”

He blinked hard. She was a puzzle.

“Have I offended you?”

“No, you have been kind and earnest. And I will admit, I am still recovering from the shock of discovering you here after searching for you in London. I knew it was you instantly, and I appreciate you not letting on.”

Something within his chest shifted. As if his heart was preparing to make room. Which was a problem. If only he could care at the moment, but he couldn’t look away.

“You searched for me?”

“I…” she glanced toward the sky and puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

It was a cute quirk of hers that made her long graceful nose bunch. “I wished to inquire after your head. It was a nasty fall.”

“My head is fine, thank you.”

She clasped her hands in front of her and swung her skirts from left and right. She had done the same that night. “I am glad to hear it.”

“Will you tell me what you are so afraid of?”

“I am not afraid, my lord.”

“I wish you would stop calling me that.”

“I will not. I cannot afford to lend any appearance of familiarity with you when we never had a proper introduction. I will not invite a scandal into my life. I cannot be around you for fear...”

Henry shifted his feet, instantly regretting it as his boots slipped. He pulled what he feared was an unattractive face as he struggled to regain his center of balance. At least he didn’t fall again.

“I can assure you that my life is free of scandal. I only recently inherited an earldom and a crumbling estate. When we met that evening, I was simply Henry Davies.”

He liked that name best anyhow.

Henry Davies once had a rosier outlook on life, before his father died and he was sent to live with his strict uncle instead of being sent to sea as an apprentice to follow in his father’s footsteps. He had dreamed of doing so since being a young boy, so his disappointment was sharp when he was sent to London instead. His mother once confessed he was made for books and arguments, whereas his younger brother, Rafe, was to become a sailor. And after bravely fighting the French for years, Henry was actively discussing his brother’s possible promotion to captain with anyone who would spare him a few minutes.

“I can’t imagine being simply anyone any longer. I am Matilda Brennan to all of London.”

“That sounds exhausting, living up to the expectations of others constantly.”

With a soft, jaded laugh, she brushed back a piece of hair from her face. “As you likely know.”

How she knew, he didn’t know. But there was no denying it. Perhaps it was a universal experience to feel that crushing pressure to do as expected.

“What should I call you?”

She gazed down at the ice before darting a glance toward him. “Tilly will

do when it's you and me," she said, before she pushed off and attempted another go around the pond. "And when we are with everyone else, I am Miss Brennan. But we should strive not to be alone."

He stood in the middle of the pond beneath the milky cloudy day, clasping his hands in front of him. He was thankful for the wool gloves the footman lent him. He watched her wobble across the ice and flail her arms, and all the while, he had a grin on his face.

It was the strangest thing.

And might have been the longest he had ever caught himself smiling.

Henry did not make a habit of smiling.

"Would you like my help?" he called out.

"Absolutely not."

It wasn't the answer he had hoped for, especially as he appraised his exit.

"What, oops. Oh, Zooks!" Tilly flopped down onto her bottom again and burst into laughter. "I won't be able to sit for a week. Why do others consider this a fun pastime?"

"I asked if you would have liked to join me on a sleigh ride."

She slowly rose to her feet and struggled to right herself fully. "You can say what you wish right now, my lord, but I see you standing there too afraid to move."

"I am too busy watching you."

"No," she said, waving her hand out. "We will not have any flirting. Not allowed."

"There are a lot of rules now to have the pleasure of sharing your company."

"We met during a masquerade where there is mostly none save one. I understand your confusion. Nevertheless."

"Noted." He tested his footing, slowly creeping forward. "I will take my leave then. I wish you a pleasant afternoon."

"Wait," she said behind him.

Henry jumped, surprised by her nearness, and fell clean onto his arse. He sighed, reclined against the bumpy ice on the pond, and stared up at the clouds slowly drifting across the sky.

Tilly lowered to her knees, then lay on her back, her head next to his. "A sleigh ride would be nice."

"I promise to be respectable."

"You are the epitome of respectable, my lord. That is what I like about

you.”

She was teasing him again.

“So far you have claimed to know me, wish you didn’t know me, and asked me to leave you alone. I apologize, but I must ask you to be direct with me and tell me if you wish for me to go, or do you wish to join me on a sleigh ride?”

Everything quieted between them. A trio of crows flew across the sky, but there was only the sound of her shallow breathing surrounding him along with his heartbeat drumming in his ears.

“When I walked through the door of Haddington, I thought something horrible must have happened on our journey here because there was no way you could be waiting for me. But you were. And you rushed up to me to ask if I was well and all I could think of at that moment was that you must have hated me for disappearing when I should have found you.”

“Hate is a strong word, Tilly.”

She nodded, wiping at the corner of her eye and turning her face to study his. They were so close yet might as well have been worlds away.

“I feel like I must confess something.” She swallowed. “It’s not that I wish to avoid you, I don’t wish that at all, honestly. It’s only this house party is important for many reasons, one of which is my family. And I don’t wish to complicate things by continuing our flirtation.”

Right.

The set down.

Yet, without knowing all the details, he understood. Even if his family despised him for it, he would do anything to see them happy. Often at the sake of his own happiness. Duty didn’t discriminate.

“Flirtation.” It didn’t feel right as soon as he said it. No, he couldn’t explain it, and it was certainly something far beyond normal for him, but they shared something deeper than a flirtation. He didn’t wish to flirt and kiss. Henry wasn’t sure what he wished for exactly, only that he knew he didn’t wish to be parted from her and wanted no harm to come to her. Certainly not at his hands.

“And now you think the worst of me.”

“No, that’s the problem, Tilly. I haven’t started to know you yet, but there’s nothing I wish for more.”

A sweet, sad smile spread across her face. He could lose himself in her light green eyes. They were full of spring and hope, and days that held more

promise than the long, dark days of winter. He wondered what it would be like to wake up beside her and see those eyes in the early morning, filling his day with possibility.

His days were always heavy with expectation.

They both assisted each other up to their feet and slowly made their way off the ice. He reached back, led her up the hill to the sleigh, and was about to help her in when something hit his head.

Henry whirled around in time to catch a snowball in his chest. “What’s this now?” He bent down and quickly cupped the snow into his hand and padded it into a ball, but Tilly was faster. She hurled another snowball in his direction which he neatly dodged.

“Not so quick now, Miss Brennan,” he said, throwing his snowball.

She squeaked, jumping behind the sleigh to take shelter. “I surrender.” She tossed her arms up in the air, then slowly poked her head up, her large eyes wide and dancing with mischief.

He reached down for another scoop of snow, as another snowball knocked off his top hat and burst against his neck, sending an avalanche of cold snow down his shirt.

Flirtation, indeed.

Tilly giggled, then jumped and darted around the sleigh as he chased after her. The sun finally poked through the cloud cover, washing the landscape over with dark gold light. The very perfect weather for Henry’s first snowball fight.

CHAPTER SIX



Tilly glanced over her book to the snoring Mrs. Craven. Nearly an hour into the story, and her chaperone finally was asleep for the evening. Seeing Mrs. Craven to bed when they traveled was more dangerous than bedtime with Ethan.

The old curmudgeon was notorious for insisting on one more brandy or another few pages from her book. Since her eyes were failing, Tilly would read. And then there was the matter of being too hot or too cold, or not enough pillows or too many pillows and then her back would hurt. Last month, while traveling to Bath, Mrs. Craven insisted her hips would break because the mattress was too lumpy.

She quietly shut the book and slipped out of her companion's room to return to hers.

Only, she didn't wish to return to her room.

It was odd that Tilly often prayed for quiet only to finally have it and wish for anything but. Too much quiet fed the lies in her brain, which in turn only fed panic. And then she was alone, afraid of what she could lose if Roger proceeded with his threat.

Tilly craved peace.

Perhaps that was the difference. She didn't want quiet, she needed peace.

She quietly hummed to herself as she strolled the hallway. It smelled of Christmas, and the staff hadn't hung all the evergreens up yet.

Tilly thought of the twins hanging ivy...

And she would miss everyone on Christmas morning, instead spending it with a group of strangers so she could secure a benefactor for the theater's next production.

She paused in the doorway, struck at how handsome the earl was as he sat hunched over a small table studying a chessboard. His cravat was loosened around his neck, his shirtsleeves rolled up to expose strong forearms, and dark stubble shadowed his strong jaw.

She swallowed, her stomach a tangled mess of knots. It was best to return to her room, best to spend the evening in her own company.

But she didn't wish to do what was best. She didn't wish to let a moment pass when she could enjoy the earl's company.

"It helps to have someone to play against," she said finally, softly padding into the room.

She was nearly twenty-two, and she could make her own decisions, even if they were not the best decisions.

"Hmm," he said, stuck deep in concentration. Then after a moment, he glanced up, his eyes wide with surprise at finding her standing in front of him. "I... good evening," he said, clearing his throat.

"Surprised to see me?"

He fussed with his cravat and ran his hand through his dark hair as if sleekly putting himself back together for her. She liked the undone version of him better. It felt more honest. As if that grumpy, stern front was a piece of armor he wore after years of surviving in this world.

And that she understood.

She wore many more masks than the one he met her with that evening. Somehow, he understood that.

"You took dinner in your room again, and you left me alone with Mrs. Craven. So yes, I didn't expect you."

Tilly stepped around him and settled onto the sofa. She crossed her ankles and leaned forward, studying the board. "She was a terror this evening, so I venture to guess she wasn't the best of dinner companions."

The earl chortled. The noise took her by surprise, and she giggled, feeling that big, lazy grin return to her face. It almost always was there when she spent time with him. What a gift to be so relaxed around another. She hadn't experienced it before.

They were strangers.

She was sure of it. They had known one another for a handful of days. And yet it felt more like a string of years.

"Are you winning?"

He studied the board, not glancing up at her, but she saw his grin,

nevertheless. “You are teasing me, Miss Brennan.”

“Tilly, please,” she corrected. “Only Tilly.”

“I will agree as long as you stop referring to me as my lord. Henry will do. It’s done for most of my life.”

“Except for when we are in the company of others...”

“Of course. But don’t worry yourself. I came only for a quick matter. I will be leaving almost as soon as the rest of the party arrives.”

Everything within herself deflated. “Oh.”

She didn’t wish for him to leave. They had found each other once more, but something told her that if he left Haddington, she wouldn’t see him again.

“I don’t enjoy parties.”

Tilly reached out and pointed to the knight. “Here.”

He glanced up, and she felt herself tumbling into his dark brown eyes. They were endless and full of a low, simmering heat that caused her core to warm. She swallowed and licked her lips, desperate to think of anything other than Henry.

Henry.

And what it would feel like for him to touch her. To kiss her.

To bed her.

She jumped to her feet and navigated around the low table. No, she would not think of going to bed with Henry. True, she was already ruined, but she didn’t wish to ruin her family. And she couldn’t trust her heart. The last time she fancied herself in love, she fell with child, and he had abandoned them both.

“Would you like some hot chocolate?” Henry asked, defeating the knight and casting the game piece off to the side of the board. “I asked the kitchen to make some. It should still be hot.”

The fire crackled in the fireplace behind Henry. Tilly clenched her hands, feeling the silk of her dress, trying her best to strike from her mind any thought of the man watching her as if she were prey.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had hot chocolate.”

Henry picked up the silver pot from the table before him and poured the hot dark liquid in a teacup. A wonderful aroma suddenly filled the room—excellent dark Belgian chocolate.

“It’s perfect for a cold winter evening.”

He reached out to pass her the teacup and nearly hissed as her fingertips brushed against his in a brief, stolen touch.

Tilly assessed the teacup; she loved the intricate floral pattern. It was such a small detail in a large home brimming with extravagant features. She wished for something similar, but it felt so out of reach for her when she had a home full of siblings to care for and Ethan.

Was it wrong to wish for a rich life? Was it sinful?

Was it selfish for a girl who grew up on a sheep farm outside of Dublin, now gracing the stages of Drury Lane in London, to wish for a life that was full of comforts? She knew the answer and refused to accept it because a man never would. Her fellow actors proudly enjoyed what they earned from years of hard work. And Tilly was expected to be quiet, to be patient, to be appreciative of what she was given.

That didn't stop her from wanting more, no matter what Roger said.

"I've lost you," he said.

Tilly tilted her head. "Hmm?"

"You have the most extraordinary green eyes, and they are often so full of some magical thing. Some light. I can't explain it. But every now and again, it fades, and it's as if you are miles away."

Instead of answering, Tilly sipped the decadent dark liquid. The chocolate was luxurious as it hit her tongue and sank down into her belly, rich and filling. Delicious for sure.

Henry studied her, watching her as if he was both captivated and hungry.

"It's snowing," Tilly said as she pressed her hand against the glass doors. The chill bit her palms. "You're going to miss Christmas," she said absently.

"Christmas will happen whether I'm here or in London. I won't miss it."

He stood and padded over to her. And she tilted her head to get a better look at him as he stood beside her. He smelled of ink and leather. He looked about as undone as she felt standing so close. She preferred him this way most of all.

"Christmas will happen like any other day on the calendar, but it's who you spend it with that matters. And you'll be spending it alone."

Her breath hitched as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth. His hand reached for the handle to the door, and he pushed it open. A chilly breeze swept into the room along with a flurry of snowflakes.

"I believe the snow should stay outside," Tilly corrected with a small laugh.

Henry stepped outside and reached back for Tilly's hand. A shiver chased down her spine as her bare hand slid into his. He drew her close as snow

gently fell from the sky around them, dusting over her shoulders, over her hair, and dotting her eyelashes. She gazed up at Henry, her eyes searching for something. For an excuse to avoid what she knew would happen next. But she couldn't find one.

"Hold still." Henry reached out and brushed the pad of his thumb by the corner of her lips to wipe away some hot chocolate. Tilly pressed her face into his palm, begging for more. She didn't wish to stop what was happening between them. She didn't wish for him to return to London. She certainly didn't want to have him celebrate Christmas by himself. But she also was afraid of what that meant.

"Kiss me, Henry." Tilly shut her eyes, terrified. She was determined to keep their lives separate. But that was the thing. She was certain their lives were not meant to be separate. And that meant figuring out what it meant if they were to be together. And throwing off all the shame and guilt that would come with them being together.

"Can you say that again?" he asked.

She laughed, uncertain of his meaning. "I don't..."

"Say my name again, please Tilly. Say my name and I will kiss you until you forget it."

Everything within her vibrated. "Kiss me again, Henry. I've dreamt of it," she whispered. "Have you done the same? Tell me you've missed me since that night."

"I crave it," he said, his voice a low deep growl. Then his lips came down upon hers, possessive and hot and searching, and all she could think of was giving herself over to him, to loving the stranger she met in the woods that one night at a masquerade and had somehow found again.



Tilly stood beneath the snow looking as if she were an angel fallen from the sky. He had said as much in the woods in London that evening.

All his control snapped, and he bent down and pressed his lips upon her mouth, hot and searching. He wanted Tilly to be his. He wanted to be greedy for once in his life and not do as others expected of him.

She sighed against his mouth, urging him on. He could taste the chocolate on her lips, and he wished for more. Tilly, as if understanding, melted,

relaxing into his touch. He held the small of her back as he gently held her face in his palm and kissed her as the snow fell softly upon them.

“I like kissing you,” she whispered against his mouth. “And I shouldn’t.”

“If we think of what we should or shouldn’t be doing, we wouldn’t be here now, sweet.”

Tilly glanced up at Henry as big, fluffy snowflakes stuck to her long lashes. “I never thought I would be standing outside in the snow, kissing you.”

“I never thought I would find you again.”

He felt her shiver beneath his touch. He bent down for another kiss, pressing his lips against hers, this time slow and lingering as if giving them both permission to believe, even for a little while, time did not exist.

She began to hum, dropping her head onto his shoulder, and the two rocked together in the quiet hush of winter, on the cusp of Christmas and a new year. Everything could change if they only believed it.

“Bring me inside,” she said at last, running her hand through his hair.

Henry led her inside to sit on the sofa by the fire, then found a quilt tucked away in the corner by the bookshelves.

“Here we are,” he said, draping the quilt over her. He turned to leave, but she reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him backward.

“Stay. A little longer?”

As if she had to ask.

Tilly lifted the corner of the quilt up, and he climbed under to join her. She rested against him, laying her head on his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair, and in the silence that followed, both were happy just to be for a moment.

CHAPTER SEVEN



In the morning, the spell was broken.

Chaos descended Haddington as the rest of the party swept into the house bringing in merriment and Christmas cheer. Tilly was left with a horrible sick feeling in her stomach. She knew why. Or rather, she knew who was causing this feeling. And sure enough, Roger strolled through the door and glanced up at her with a wicked grin on his face.

“Oh, there you are, Miss Brennan,” he announced loudly from across the foyer.

Tilly only nodded and slipped away from the balcony farther out of view.

She would need to find her nerves to survive the next few days with these strangers. And she didn’t wish for Henry to leave. But he had made it clear he wasn’t going to stay last evening. She didn’t wish to be alone for Christmas. And that’s what she would be if he left. She would be surrounded by people, true, but no one she wished to spend time with. No one who she could enjoy the holiday with. She strongly wished for Henry and her family, and both were off-limits to her.

Mrs. Craven shuffled up to her in the hallway, out of breath and red in the face.

“Where have you been?” Mrs. Craven slammed the end of her cane against the floor. “I have been waiting for twenty minutes. You cannot slip by me.”

Tilly quickly wiped the sleep away from her eyes, exhausted, and annoyed that the peace she had felt with Henry cuddled beneath that blanket by the fire last evening was gone.

“I was in the morning room having tea.”

Which was half true.

Tilly had been in the morning room pacing, waiting for Henry to also join her before the others arrived. But he hadn't. Instead, the rest of the house party was slowly descending upon her, and now Mrs. Craven was suddenly convinced she must be Tilly's shadow.

Tilly only wished to return to bed if she were being truly honest. She wished to return with Henry and finish what they had begun last evening.

What a mess.

"I had to rely on that lady's maid this morning because I couldn't find you," Mrs. Craven snapped. "And she did my hair wrong. You know how particular I am about my cap. I look like a buffoon."

"You look lovely, Mrs. Craven," Tilly lied. "And the duke will find you exceptionally beautiful this morning."

"I know you're lying," Mrs. Craven said, "but if you insist on flattery, I will take it. A woman of my age doesn't receive much flattery. Well come along. No time to waste now that the other guests are arriving."

Tilly followed, examining the collections of portraits in the hallway of the grand home. The sun was bright, washing through the large bank of windows to her left, overlooking a large hedge maze covered in snow.

Then, she heard someone clear their throat behind her. She spun around, certain that she had heard someone.

"One moment, Mrs. Craven," Tilly called out, grinning as the hidden paneled door kicked out ever so slightly. "I have to return to my room. I forgot my shawl."

Mrs. Craven mumbled, waving her off before proceeding down the hallway out of view.

"Where are you?" Tilly whispered.

A door creaked open behind her, and a strong hand clasped around her wrist, then quickly pulled her into the dark before the door closed behind her.

"The other guests have arrived," she announced.

"I don't normally hide away in closets."

"Right." She couldn't see well in the dark but that hadn't stopped them before. Tilly traced his body with her hands, then found his face, then his mouth, and pressed hers against his, desperate. Everything was about to change, and she was greedy and didn't wish for anything to change now that she had found him.

"We only need time to think," Henry said, breaking away. "We can figure

this out. There has to be a solution.”

“No one can know.” Fear filled her limbs. “No one can know, Henry. Please, please...”

“Ssh, all right. No one will know, and I will leave as planned.”

But she didn't wish for that either. She didn't feel safe if he left her. She didn't trust Roger. She didn't trust Roger even if Henry remained, so perhaps it made no difference.

“I don't wish to leave you either.”

Hearing those words was like a salve to her nerves, as if he had read her mind.

“But we can't remain in this closet.”

She traced her hands over the curve of his shoulder. “No, I suppose not.”

She leaned in for one last kiss wishing it wasn't their last. “I've thought of nothing but you since last evening,” she said. “And when you leave, I wish for you to know that won't change. I don't know what to do, but I do know I don't want to lose you again, Henry.”

“You don't have to lose me.”

“But you don't understand, I do. It's dangerous for me and you to be together for lots of reasons. But mostly because I will lose everything if I am discovered. Mr. Haskett will see that my career ends and my family is sent back to Dublin. I will lose.” Her mind searched for the right words. She wished to tell him the truth. It was terrifying to do so. They'd only known each other for a handful of days, and though she knew that she trusted him more than anyone, she was afraid of handing over the truth. Men with power did tricky things.

And what happened if it turned out she and Henry couldn't be together, and he became jealous? What happened if they couldn't be together, and he turned out bitter? She didn't wish to find out, but she also didn't wish to keep the truth from him. The truth was dangerous.

And what if after discovering the truth about Ethan, Henry didn't like her anymore? That would be understandable. She had a son born out of wedlock with a man who left her with child, alone to bear the consequences. She was considered a ruined woman. Why would he wish to be with her after learning the truth, tarnishing whatever perfect image of her he had in his mind?

“For now,” he said, “I will continue with my plans to leave. But we are not done, Tilly. I will see that the maid gives you my address, and we can write to one another. I have to leave London soon to manage the estate, but I

swear to you, I will write.”

That sounded nice. But letters over time would slowly stop coming and then what?

“I am a great actress, Henry. I know that. I know I can walk into that drawing room in a few minutes and command everyone’s attention, and I know I can draw them away from the truth. But what I can’t do is pretend as if this never happened when I am alone at night. I will never be able to forget what we shared. But I don’t have an answer on how we can continue.”

“Then for now,” he said “kiss me one last time, and I promise to write. And I will walk into that drawing room cold and indifferent and pretend as if I don’t think about you constantly. I am not a great actor. But people have claimed that I have no heart for most of my life and for that, I am thankful in this instant. I’ve spent thirty-one years pretending as if I do not love, and I know what to do. But I wish for you to know that I will hate every moment of it.”

Henry placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. The sweetness of it nearly melted her there in the dark of the small closet.

“I won’t leave if you wish it,” he said. “Tell me to stay.”

The damndest thing was that Tilly wished for him to stay. But it wouldn’t be safe to do so with Roger close on her heels. He would know. And she didn’t want any trouble coming Henry’s way. He and his family didn’t deserve the scandal that was sure to follow.

Instead of answering, she traced her fingers up the side of his jaw and ran her hand back into his thick black hair.

One day, they would have their moment. One day, it would be safe to love him. One day, she could have her happy ending instead of constantly feeling as if she were to be chased out of Town. Or something equally damning and life-ending.

One day.

But she didn’t trust her heart to make a decision today.

She leaned in and kissed him, long and slow, then pulled back to whisper against his ear. “Merry Christmas, Henry. I will be thinking of you.”

She slipped out of the closet, righting her dress and squaring her shoulders. Her heart hammered in her chest as the other guests’ chatter grew louder. All of London was in love with Matilda Brennan, she could pretend for a few days that she was enchanted by all these houseguests.

Tilly must.

“There you are,” Roger said, stalking out of the drawing room to find her. “It’s time to replace Mrs. Craven. She didn’t know where you were. Considering that is her one job...”

“I forgot my shawl.”

“Seems you still have.”

She smiled, even as panic gripped her throat. “I managed to get turned around trying to find my room. How was your journey, Roger?”

“Send someone for your shawl and come with me. We have a busy few days, and I expect you to entertain everyone here.”

“Of course.”

He stopped, hauling her close. She slammed her eyes shut, pain radiating up her arm from his grip. “You will do it with a smile and not a hint of sarcasm toward me. Understood?”

Tilly nodded her head, wrenched away from his grip, and raced toward the drawing room, a coward because she never looked back once.

“It’s a miracle London loves you,” Roger said, cutting off her approach. “You’ve not an ounce of brains in that head of yours.”

She froze in the doorway, the words sticking to her. They always did. Eventually, Henry would understand that it couldn’t be. And that would be for the best.



The fire crackled beside Henry. He stood by the mantel, studying the room with a scowl on his face. There was too much cedar and pine, and oranges and cloves, and dried pomegranates. The holiday cheer turned his stomach.

Or perhaps it was only that Tilly stood across from him, surrounded by the other guests as she sat at the card table and quietly laughed at a joke with the duke and duchess. Even in the candlelight, she lit up the entire room. It was not a surprise she was so regarded on Drury Lane.

He wished it were only the two of them once again. Like the first night they met.

Tilly glanced up and met his stare for a moment, nodding slightly in recognition.

It was unfair of him to be so greedy, and he knew that. But that didn’t dull the edge of jealousy that hit him in the gut as Lord Garvey and Mr. Silas

Drake flirted with her shamelessly.

And that, even if performing, she flirted back.

Love was a wicked thing. He didn't like who it made him become. He might have been insufferable being a lovesick fool, but playing the part of a jealous lover didn't, and wouldn't, suit.

No, this was not how he would live. Nor would it be how he spent the rest of this year.

"Drink, sir?" The footman stopped, holding up a polished tray full of port.

It wouldn't be strong enough, but it was a beginning. He grabbed a glass and gulped it down, glaring in the direction of Mr. Haskett as he sat beside Tilly.

"Come play, Davies," Stephen urged, calling from across the room.

He never had the stomach for cards. He left that to Rafe. But then again, he rarely drank, and in the past few months, he found it a little too easy to indulge. Up until recently, his life was planned and regimented.

And since meeting Tilly, none of that made sense.

Hell, he was smiling and laughing, and he had participated in a damn snowball fight. Willingly.

All of this was terrible.

And the worst of it was, he was so undeniably in love with Matilda Brennen that he didn't see an escape.

But how could you love someone whom everyone else also adored? How could you do so without letting that jealousy eat away at you over time? And what if she eventually saw that he was nothing special to regard?

And what if, after enough time, they discovered they were not compatible?

They could never be a secret. At least, they couldn't remain that way. He would never settle for her being his mistress. He cared for her too much.

He set the glass down on the mantel and leaned against it, feeling the weight of everything crashing down upon him.

Tilly was a chance for a future he was too afraid to imagine. But there was a risk there, too. And he had lived in such a calculated way, it was hard to know for sure how that would work.

"Devlin, do you always frown so much?" asked Lord Garvey. "Cheer up, you just inherited an earldom."

The room broke out in a quiet snicker. Whether in jest or not, he didn't appreciate that humor. It reminded him too much of school. Or university, or

hell, his colleagues now. Someone always had a quip when it came to Henry.

“Lord Devlin is only frowning because he is far superior to the rest of the company in this room,” Tilly said, never looking up as she skillfully dealt out cards.

“And he knows it,” joked Lord Garvey.

“Oh, come now, the duke might object.” Tilly paused before quickly averting her eyes back to the cards in her hand.

The duchess, who sat beside the duke, removed the cigar from her lips that she had lit and stuffed it into the duke’s large smile. “I doubt that, Miss Brennan.”

The duke gazed at his new bride, chuckling to himself before tossing down a winning hand. “Until recently, I was not known for my character. That much is true.”

“And isn’t that a waste,” Mr. Drake added, tossing his cards and then raising his hands up in defeat. “I can’t play with your lot. Soon you’ll own my new barouche and that’s too rich for me.”

“No, it’s only a bit of fun.” Tilly glanced at Henry again, her green eyes wide and begging.

Begging for what, he wish he knew. But for one brief moment, he saw her facade fade, and she was just as miserable as he was.

Since kissing her in the closet earlier that morning, Henry had spent the day trying to distance himself from everyone. He never liked parties, and he didn’t expect that to change now. But he didn’t like the shift in Tilly either. She seemed guarded and distant. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. Her voice was pitched slightly too high, and her laugh sounded different.

And since Mr. Haskett arrived, he had remained close to Tilly and was quick to offer her up for entertainment.

She had sung and played piano already, read for the group, provided colorful stories during dinner, and now was playing cards with everyone.

“Come play whist, my lord,” she said to him.

He hated when she called him that. He loathed it in fact.

“I don’t play cards,” he said, gripping his glass tighter. When would it be appropriate to retire for the evening? He regretted staying the day as it was. The duke had insisted he couldn’t talk about this private matter until he had had a night’s rest and a good meal in his stomach after being holed up in a small cottage because of the snowstorm.

Mr. Haskett stood in the doorway, talking to another guest before he

pointed his chin and laughed. “Miss Brennan, do you know how to shuffle? No wonder Mr. Drake nearly lost his carriage.”

Tilly only swallowed, her cheeks growing red.

Henry narrowed his eyes on the man. Her stage manager was a long way from London and seemed way too invested in her every move.

“Lord Devlin,” Mr. Haskett said, “come play, and I will see Miss Brennan doesn’t deal.”

“I have no interest in cards,” Henry snapped.

Tilly glanced up from her hand of cards, glaring at him.

“I heard you were leaving London. Is that true, Lord Devlin?” Mrs. Dryer asked. Major Peter Dryer sat beside his wife, quietly reading the newspaper, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the party.

Henry wasn’t keen on the shift of interest. Then again, he would gladly face questioning if it meant Mr. Haskett left Tilly alone before Henry did something about it. That would bring around no good end.

“It is. I must see to some important matters.”

“Concerning your brother?” Mrs. Dryer asked.

Henry’s jaw ticked. He watched as he set the glass down on the mantel, sure that if he didn’t, he would crush the glass. “What about Lieutenant Davies?”

“As you know he is without a ship at the moment...”

Henry nodded. Anger bubbled up inside of him. What was Rafe into now?

The Dowager Countess of Pemberton cleared her throat, fanning herself with a bright crimson fan. “It was shared in the gossip columns he has been frequenting several gaming hells while he awaits news—”

“He is to be promoted to captain. It’s all but done. I am very proud of my brother.”

Miss Lucy Skeffington, nodded, folding her book in her lap. “Is that so?”

“Of course.”

The other guests quieted, suddenly interested in the heated exchange.

“Those of us with siblings understand,” Tilly interjected. She tossed down her cards and jumped from the table, drawing Henry’s attention, and perhaps some of his ire away. Though he didn’t need her to rescue him. He could talk to people; it was only that he didn’t wish to be near them.

What a miserable business a house party was. Stephen really did owe him a large favor.

“I think we should sing hymns,” Lady Beatrice Trowbridge said. She adjusted her cap, as if proud she had spoken to such a large group.

Groans erupted from around the room.

“Very well, charades?”

“Miss Brennan, we have all recently survived a snowstorm. Can we do something that does not involve gambling away our futures?” Mr. Drake scratched at his bushy blond brow. “Besides, you are the actress in the room. That gives you an unfair advantage in charades.”

“Dancing,” Mr. Haskett said, clearing his throat.

Henry hated how the man filled up the doorway. It didn’t take much to gather Mr. Haskett wasn’t from Mayfair. He apparently ruled Drury Lane as if he were the upright man in some East End gang.

Tilly whirled around to face Mr. Haskett. “Dancing?” She quickly peeked at Henry, then blushed. “No, perhaps I can read again...”

“No, no,” Miss Skeffington said, clapping her hands together. “A dance or two would be lovely.”

Tilly nodded. “Very well, dancing. That would be grand. I will be at the piano.”

“No, no,” the duke interjected. “Allow me. You are a guest at this house party as well, Miss Brennan, please enjoy yourself.”

The duke pushed aside the table and sofa, clearing a path for dancing. Everyone lined up, everyone except Henry.

“You must dance, Lord Devlin,” the dowager duchess said. “We need an even number.”

“He doesn’t dance,” Tilly interjected.

Henry’s body stiffened at her outburst, suddenly overcome as her cheeks reached a deeper shade of pink and embarrassment washed over her.

“How do you know, Miss Brennan?” Mr. Haskett asked, strutting into the room, staring down Henry. “Haven’t you just met?”

“I don’t frequent house parties, either, Mr. Haskett,” Henry added. “One is allowed the freedom to guess now and again, aren’t they?”

“Don’t dance? Don’t attend house parties?” Mr. Haskett folded his arms and shifted his weight, somehow making himself appear larger than he already was. “Why not?”

“Too crowded.” Henry ignored the small giggle from Miss Skeffington, instead refusing to tear his gaze away from Mr. Haskett. It seemed as if the man was challenging him.

“But you are here, and we are all so infinitely grateful,” Lord Garvey yelled, throwing his hands up and cutting the heavy tension settling into the room. “Come, come. Let’s dance. I’ll ring for more port. I can’t stand an argument. I would have agreed to host my family otherwise.”

Laughter broke out, and in the merriment, Henry found himself stabbed with a pang of regret at being here rather than with his family for the holidays. He hadn’t seen his mother or his sister Mari since last summer. And Rafe, though they wrote often, it had been nearly two years.

Henry shuffled over to the others, aware of Mr. Haskett’s glare. He didn’t trust him, and he was mad that the man was even Tilly’s acquaintance. She deserved better. He treated her horribly. But they had agreed to be a secret, so Henry would do his best to remain distant and disinterested when it couldn’t have been further than the truth.

Except for dancing.

“Everyone line up,” the duchess called out, clapping her hands.

Stephen groaned behind Henry. The feeling was mutual.

The duke struck the first chord on the piano.

“Oh, I love this dance,” Miss Skeffington called out.

Henry hadn’t the faintest idea about the dance, but he knew he didn’t wish to make a fool of himself in front of Tilly. He mirrored his body to match the rest of the male partners and steadied his look across the room. Looking at Tilly now, while Mr. Haskett studied Henry, was only inviting trouble.

Lord Garvey beside him crossed to his partner, and they skipped around Henry. Never once had he ever wished to skip. He cursed on his breath and watched, knowing he would have to do the same with Lady Beatrice in a moment. She smiled meekly at him, tapping her toe to the upbeat piano song.

When it was his turn, he skipped forward, reaching out for Lady Beatrice and spinning her before skipping back to his spot in the line.

Tilly smiled at him, mouthing “cheer up.”

He frowned, annoyed that she had the constitution for such dancing and cheer. But that was quickly washed away as he realized he would be leading not Lady Beatrice, but Tilly down the line.

All evening tension had been simmering between them. He should have left this morning as planned, but he hadn’t fulfilled his promise to Stephen. And he didn’t wish to leave Tilly behind with Mr. Haskett, even under Mrs. Craven’s selectively watchful eye.

He braced himself for her touch, but it made no difference. Once Tilly's hand slipped into his, he felt himself soften toward her, and the walls fell.

"Lady Mischief," he said, teasing. "Don't worry, I'll lead."

"You are excellent at skipping," she said, her smile spreading wide. "It's a shame you don't like dancing."

They spun around the last couple, still holding each other's hands before returning to their positions in line.

"Only with you," he said, leaning in close to whisper.

The red blush on her cheeks bloomed, spreading down to the low cut of a beautiful dark-blue gown.

"Always with me," she replied, her eyes meeting his.

"Always."

He released her hand, instantly regretting having to do so. He fought the urge to glance at her again for the rest of the dance, then excused himself once the duke finished playing.

It was no use.

Henry couldn't pretend he had no heart when she had very clearly stolen his.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Tilly wiped at her nose and sniffed back her tears. She wished to be home. She wished to have Ethan tucked safely into the tightest hug.

But damn it all, what a horrible wicked man!

She raced down the hallway to her room, then slipped inside as she fumbled with the latch.

He pounded at her door.

“Go away, Roger.”

“Do not cause a scene,” he said, his voice a low menacing growl. “Open this door.”

Drat, the latch was stuck.

She threw her weight against it as he pushed it open. In the commotion, she heard a snap as he pushed the door into her back, and she stumbled to the floor. Tilly grasped her nose, gasping as she felt warm blood trickle through her fingers.

“Stand up,” he ordered.

Tilly scrambled backward, pushing to her feet and ducking around him to escape. “You can’t be in my room, Roger. You can’t...”

“You acted like a whore tonight. You try so hard to keep your reputation perfect when you and I both know the truth and now they do, too. They all know and so will London soon.”

“I have only ever done what you asked of me.”

“No, not everything.” He hauled her back, gripping her hair in his hand and whipping her head around to face him.

She bit back a scream, pain shooting down her neck.

“Not everything, but let me make this incredibly clear. You are

disgusting. You haven't an ounce of talent, and I am tired of carrying you for the rest of London. No, I will let you fail now. I will enjoy every second of your downfall. Women like you do not deserve happiness."

He reached back and slapped her across her face. She stumbled away, then raced out of the room even though everything blurred before her, and she struggled to focus her vision. Dots flashed in front of her eyes as she raced forward, nearly tripping over her skirts.

She must find him. He would allow her to stay for a moment until she could gather herself.

Drawing up to Henry's door, she wiped at her face, as she gasped and struggled to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding against her chest, and her nose was still bleeding, and now the left side of her face throbbed. She knocked against the door, trying her best to be quiet, to not fall apart.

All she wished was to disappear.

Henry grumbled from inside.

She knocked once more. If he didn't answer the door quickly, another houseguest might discover her in the hallway.

Henry opened the door with his shirt unbuttoned, his tall body shadowing the doorway as she stared at him, struggling to stay calm.

Words froze on her tongue, and she waited for anything to happen before Henry reached for her and hauled her into his room, throwing his arm around her shoulder and drawing her close. Once inside, he stepped back and scanned her body, his eyes filling with rage.

"Please," she whispered, trembling. "I need only a moment. I don't wish to disturb you."

"You will never bother me, Tilly. I need to know one thing."

She nodded, tears brimming at her eyes as she gulped down another breath.

"Are you well enough for me to leave for a moment?"

"No, no, Henry. You can't. You mustn't."

His face softened for a moment. "I wish only to talk. Stay here."

Henry tore out of the room, eating up the hallway with an angry march. It took a moment for Tilly to catch up.

Henry strode by the largest library, then stopped, turning around to storm into the room. Roger spun from his spot beside the fireplace in time for Henry to march up and grab him by the shirt and shove him against the wall.

"You don't get to touch her like that," he snarled. "And you won't ever

again, understand?”

Roger laughed, glancing over Henry’s shoulder to study Tilly. “I was right. Leave you alone for two days and you’ve lifted your skirts for this man?”

Tilly closed her eyes, shame washing over her. She never should have fetched Henry; she should have never spent time with him. And yet not doing so wasn’t possible.

“You have no business with her anymore.” Henry shoved Roger back against the wall one more time, none too gently.

Roger laughed, urging Henry on.

“Soon, all of London will know what a whore you are, Tilly Brennan.”

Henry reached back and punched Roger.

“Bloody hell,” Roger grumbled, stumbling back a step.

“Shut your mouth, Haskett.”

Tilly rushed forward, grabbing Henry’s shirt to drag him back. There was no need for him to be involved in this trouble. It would do no good.

But it was no use. Roger ducked around her, shoving her away with his arm and grabbed Henry’s shirt. They both landed with a thud.

“What’s going on here?” the duke asked, rushing into the room and closing the door behind him. “I don’t want any trouble...”

He paused as soon as he saw her. “Miss Brennan!”

Roger and Henry continued to wrestle on the ground like a pair of snarling dogs until the duke broke them apart.

“Enough!”

The room fell silent.

“I don’t know what has happened, but we will all sort it out... like gentlemen,” the duke said, stabbing a finger into Roger’s chest. “And Miss Brennan, I will ring for a maid to bring you back to your rooms and help you.”

“No, I can see myself back, please.”

Henry threw out his hand, waving at the door, desperation burning in his dark eyes. “No, she can’t leave.”

It felt as if the air was caught in her lungs, and she was drowning. She didn’t wish to make a scene, and she certainly didn’t wish to upset Henry.

The duke approached Henry, studying him for a moment. “I will see that she is safe—”

“You can’t take her away...”

“I’m not,” the duke replied coolly. “Only, you and I have matters to discuss. I assure you, Miss Brennan will be taken care of, and we can see her after we are done talking.”

A maid entered, fetching Tilly.

“Annie, can you also ask Mr. Greenwald to meet me in my office with the document?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Tilly glanced over her shoulder as she stepped outside the room. Henry, bloody and panting for breath, pacing as if he were a caged lion. Desperate to touch her. And she understood.

She understood all of it, and she didn’t wish to be parted from him either.



Henry followed Mr. Haskett and the duke to the duke’s office, his body still vibrating with anger. Why did he ever think of leaving her alone with him?

Once inside, the duke closed the door and stood before Henry and Mr. Haskett, crossing his arms.

“I need to know what happened. And I need the truth. I don’t tolerate this kind of behavior from house guests, and a woman was injured.”

Mr. Haskett turned his head and spit on the carpet. The duke’s jaw ticked.

“I think I’m beginning to understand. Mr. Haskett, what happened?”

Henry worried his lip and rocked on the side of his boot soles, balancing, trying to tip his world back into focus. Only ten minutes prior, Tilly had stood before him, blood covering her face and sobbing. He never wished to see it again.

And the man responsible stood beside him. An arrogant arse. He was lucky to still be breathing.

“Devlin,” the duke urged.

Henry rolled his attention back toward the duke. “I answered my door to Miss Brennan who was sobbing, and her nose was bleeding, possibly broken.”

“How did that happen, Mr. Haskett?” the duke asked.

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” he replied with a nervous lick of his lips.

“You don’t. But if you wish to leave this house without being torn from

limb to limb by Devlin here, I suggest you start talking.”

“She is *my* actress, Duke.”

“It’s Your Grace if you value your neck. And last I checked, stage managers don’t own their actors. Explain how she ended up in her condition.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise,” Henry growled.

The man snickered. “Her condition, Your Grace? Listen, she was a little too friendly with the earl, and she and I were having a discussion.”

“Words don’t usually involve broken noses.”

“She bloody ran away and hid. The door whacked her face.”

“Saying I believe you, which I don’t, that doesn’t explain the handprint across her face.”

“Why are you assuming it’s mine?”

“Oh, bloody hell!” Henry clenched and unclenched his bruised hand. The cad had a thick skull in more ways than one. “Listen, Miss Brennan came to my room to seek assistance, so I located Mr. Haskett, and we threw a few punches because I will never tolerate violence against women.” He turned his head, pointing his words to the disgusting excuse of a man, “And I don’t care if you’re the bloody King of England, I won’t allow it.”

There was a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” the duke called, never turning his back away. “Oh good, thank you for coming, Mr. Greenwald.”

Henry felt something shift within him when Stephen stormed in, glaring at Mr. Haskett.

“I need some assistance here, Greenwald. Mr. Haskett will be leaving us. I will see that he’s escorted from the premises after we discuss a few matters.”

“You damn well will not be escorting me anywhere. I did nothing wrong.”

“Miss Brennan’s face suggests otherwise. And we haven’t talked about the embezzlement claims yet...”

At that, the color drained from Mr. Haskett’s face.

“You and I will talk later, but”—he turned to address Henry directly—“let me assure the earl here that you will be leaving Haddington Court and London almost as quickly as you arrive. And you won’t be seeking out any retribution against Miss Brennan. It’s my theater now.”

Stephen approached with papers for Mr. Haskett to sign.

“Sign this.”

“I won’t sign anything.”

The duke pointed toward the papers. “You will, so you can either do it yourself or I can help. This is a contract that transfers your share of the theater to me.”

Mr. Haskett scoffed. “You have no proof.”

At that, Stephen produced a box of papers. “We have plenty.”

“Your luggage has been packed, and Greenwald here will escort you back to London. If any of us hear a whisper of what happened here, I will hand over the documents I have from Lord Garvey that detail the extent of your embezzlement, and I will personally send the Bow Street Runners after you. I know several patrons of that theater who have been generous in the past and will not be pleased to learn of your activities.”

Mr. Haskett cursed under his breath, glaring at Henry. “She’s nothing but another Irish whore—”

Henry’s vision faded to black, and he was sure he was about to knock Mr. Haskett out before he realized Stephen was holding him back.

The duke headed to the door and called out softly into the hallway. Two tall footmen entered. “They will see you loaded into the carriage, and Greenwald will be riding along with you. If anything happens to Greenwald, you better consider throwing yourself into the Thames because I won’t stop until I see justice served.”

After they left, Henry stood there with his hands stuffed into his pockets. He gathered he wasn’t much older than the duke, yet it felt as if he had been called into the school master’s office once again.

“Embezzlement?”

“The arse is one of the most crooked men in London. And I have proof.”

“Very well.”

“Devlin?”

Henry shrugged. He hated the name. It didn’t fit him, but he didn’t have the option to grow into it now. He was the Earl Devlin, and he had just dragged himself into a scandal with Tilly because he couldn’t control his temper.

It had never happened before.

But he had never been in love with Tilly before.

“He may have broken her damn nose. I apologize for losing my head. It is

completely out of character for me. I am sorry for the imposition.”

“Stop.” The duke walked over to his sideboard and poured two glasses of scotch. He handed one to Henry. “Well done.” He waited a minute, looking out into the room before he leaned back against his desk and crossed his ankles. “My father treated my mother that way, and on the bad nights, me as well. I vowed never to tolerate it as I grew older.”

Henry silently sipped the scotch. The liquid burned the cut by his lip. “I need to marry her now,” he whispered finally.

The duke set his glass down on his desk. “Yes. That is what is required of us, those of us with honor anyhow. I don’t know you very well, but Stephen promised me you are an excellent barrister. And I could use some advice.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Even dukes find trouble, especially those of us who had a bit of a wild streak before the old man died.”

“It’s a complicated matter. One that might require another visit now that I will help coordinate your wedding.”

The office door opened, and Tilly was led back inside. Her face had been roughly washed up, but there was still blood dried by her nose. Everything within him ached to hold her, to ensure nothing like that would happen again, but there would be time for that.

“Mr. Haskett is presently being escorted back to London where he will be assisted in leaving the city. I now own the theater. And I will be facilitating your wedding to Lord Devlin, Miss Brennan.”

Tilly’s eyes widened in shock. “No, can’t we somehow keep it quiet? I can’t marry the earl.”

Henry’s heart sank. He downed the rest of his scotch and set it on the desk, straightening. “I realize this is not ideal, but it is the best way I can protect you.”

“No, you don’t understand. Even if we marry, Roger has a secret that can destroy me and my entire family. And I will not see you involved. I never wished... I only needed a moment’s escape. I didn’t mean for everyone to become involved. But now that he has been embarrassed, Roger will see that I won’t act in London again.”

“We can help,” the duke said. “If you can trust us, tell us the secret, we will ensure that no harm comes of it.”

Tilly braced her hands on her stomach, shaking her head. “I can’t... I mean, I have never once confessed it. It’s much too risky. Roger only knows

because he overheard me speaking with my sister, and he has been blackmailing me for months now.”

Henry approached Tilly, grabbing her hands in his. He bent down and whispered, “Tell us, Tilly. Let me keep you safe.”

She glanced up, tears in her eyes. “You will hate me.”

He shook his head. “Not possible.”

“I vow never to speak of it to a soul, Miss Brennan,” the duke said from behind him.

“I have a son.”

Henry’s body stiffened. He had expected nearly everything except that.

“I fell in love with an older man in Dublin. He was an actor, but once I was with child, he left me. I’ve raised my son here in London under the guise of my youngest brother, but he is mine. And Roger threatened to leak that to the gossip rags, knowing I would have to flee the city. He knew how precious my reputation was to me.”

“A son,” the duke repeated. “I can help. First, let’s see you two married, and we will keep the marriage a secret until Mr. Haskett is out of London...”

The duke continued, but Henry was too distracted watching shame wash over Tilly’s face. She couldn’t look him in the eye, and he didn’t like that one bit.

“What’s his name?” His voice was rough from yelling at Mr. Haskett.

“Hmm?” Then she finally looked up, the corners of her mouth turning up slightly, righting the world. There, that was what he had been looking for. Her smile. Her hands held in his. Her beautiful eyes, clear. “Ethan.”

Ethan.

“How old is he?”

“He’s five.”

Five years, well before London. Not that it mattered. It didn’t to him. “I don’t hate you. I don’t believe that to ever be possible.”

“We hardly know one another.”

“I look forward to correcting that.”

“Henry, this is ridiculous. We cannot marry. You are Earl Devlin now. You wish to marry a London actress?”

“I want to marry Matilda Brennan. You could be a fisherwoman for all I care.”

She laughed, wiping at her tears.

The duke approached and clapped his hand on Henry's shoulder. “See that

Miss Brennan is looked after tonight. I will arrange for a small wedding by Christmas. Rest assured that your secret is safe with me. Good evening.”

Tilly and Henry left the duke alone in his office.

And Henry left betrothed, with a stepson he had yet to meet.



Tilly didn't dare glance back as she walked to her rooms with Henry on her heels. She couldn't stomach what would come once they found peace behind closed doors.

Embarrassment and shame twisted inside of her chest as she dragged in another breath.

She had needed help, and Henry had answered without wanting anything in return. But now they would both pay for her decision and would be married by Christmas. He didn't wish for her to be his bride. He couldn't.

And now he knew of Ethan and her past.

“I am sorry,” she said, clearing her throat as he shut the door behind them. Tilly circled the middle of her room and threw her arms out to her side, hanging her head. “I am not sure where to start...”

Henry reluctantly released the doorknob and dropped his hand to his side. His knuckles were bruised, and there was a cut by his mouth.

Tilly had done this to him, wrecked him. And now she had crashed into his life and tore that apart as well. Eventually, he would resent her and boredom would set in, and she would wither away while he installed mistresses around London.

“Look at me, sweet.”

Even his voice was rough. It cracked at the same time she felt her heart rip in two. She loved him, but now it was too late. They would never truly know what could have been because of this evening.

“Tilly.” Henry approached, stopping short at her feet.

She refused to look up, knowing full well she would tumble into those dark eyes of his and forget for a moment the evening they had just shared. “You must hate me. I understand. I hate myself.”

Henry bumped his fist gently under her chin, drawing her gaze up to meet his. “I love you. And I will spend the rest of my life proving it to you because I see in your gorgeous eyes that you don't believe me. And that's well

enough. But you should know I am nothing, if not consistent, at being excellent at everything I do. That now includes being your husband.”

“I didn’t wish for this to happen. I wasn’t thinking. I knew I had to run away and my mind—”

“Ssh.” He slipped his other hand behind her neck, cradling her as if she were some delicate doll about to shatter. She certainly felt that way.

“You don’t love me. You don’t know me.”

“I fell in love with you the same way we met, all at once. Yes, it is madness, and I can’t explain it. And you will soon learn that it is one of my least favorite things in this world. But I also know I can’t explain what is between you and me, sweet. And I don’t wish to name it. Only to tell you that I love you.”

“I am a ruined woman. I am an actress, Henry! You can’t marry me. I have ruined you. Something is sure to reach the gossip rags of London about this evening...”

“Mr. Greenwald is excellent at his job. The duke meant every word he said about running Roger out of London.”

“My brothers and sisters... Ethan.” She clamped her eyes shut and sobbed. “Roger is the most undesirable human, and he has controlled me these past few months after overhearing me speak to my older sister, Imogen, about my son.”

Henry’s arms wrapped around her, drawing her in for an embrace. But instead of fighting against it, she melted into his body willingly.

“I think I love you, too, Henry. And now we are both in a mess.”

“Not a mess, love, no. I didn’t truly wish to spend Christmas alone anyhow.”

She chuckled, sniffing back her tears. “We become engaged, and now you have a sense of humor.”

He drew back enough for her to notice a small grin on his lips. “I didn’t before?”

“You?” She wiped her tears and looked up at him, his face puffy and bruised. “I know you must care about me because you don’t seem to care for anyone else.”

“What are you saying, Miss Brennan?”

She clucked, fluttering her fingers over the poor state of his handsome face. “You are a grump.”

He laughed, drawing her head close to place a kiss on her cheek. They

remained in each other's arms, silent.

“Come sit on the bed. Those cuts should be washed.”

He struck a match, illuminating the room.

She was shaking, and he noticed, slowly drawing her hand up to his mouth and he kissing it.

“Marry me,” he said earnestly before kissing her.

CHAPTER NINE



S now fell softly outside the window, dusting over the collection of statues in the garden outside of the chapel window.

Christmas.

Henry shifted on his feet, glancing nervously at the stone floors. When he had proposed, he hadn't expected everything to happen so soon, but here he stood, about to be married to Matilda Brennan, at the duke's private chapel. The duke and duchess sat before him as witnesses, and the vicar stood behind.

It would be a small wedding, efficient and concise. Tilly said she hadn't minded, and perhaps she didn't, but Henry wished only to give her what she wanted. He would make that his life's mission.

He rubbed his hands together, fighting off the chill. Tilly had preferred the chapel when the duke offered up his house for their wedding. He had proposed they could head to Gretna Green, but the duke insisted with the weather, it was best to have the ceremony at Haddington.

Considering Mr. Haskett was presumably in London, but not out of their lives completely, it was for the best.

The doors opened and Tilly entered, dressed in a beautiful burgundy gown. Her hair was decorated with a small crown of orange blossoms from the conservatory.

"Hello," she mouthed to him.

He might have answered if it wasn't for how tongue-tied he was seeing her walking toward him.

Henry would soon be married, and with a son of his own.

Everyone had been wrong.

His heart wasn't ice after all.



Tilly had acted the part of a bride many times, but never did she imagine she would become a bride in earnest. Women like her did not marry. Never mind an earl.

Yet, Henry was waiting, his dark eyes pinned to her as if the world depended upon her next breath.

They had fallen in love that night, swept up in some invisible force between them. Romantic, sure. But she knew the stories. She made her way through this world acting out matters of the heart. But this was all surreal, almost too good to be happening. And maybe a little too quick.

Her heart pounded against her chest as she walked down the short aisle of the chapel. A soft snow fell outside, the softest hush of Christmas magic washing over their wedding.

She stopped when she reached Henry, willing herself not to throw her hands around his neck and kiss him well and good. But that would be far too shocking, even for her.

And all the while, as the vicar discussed the sanctity of marriage, and they exchanged their vows, Tilly was stuck with only one thought: she hadn't allowed fear to win. Roger had been a menace in her life, threatening to ruin her hard work and rip her family apart. Meeting Henry had been her greatest gift. He had dared her to love him when she had shut her heart away to protect herself and everything she loved. And he had done so not out of selfishness, but because he had faith that she was strong enough for such a challenge.

Once the brief ceremony was finished, they all quietly slipped back into Haddington, never mentioning to the other guests what had happened. Too much still threatened Tilly and her family, so it had been decided to keep the small affair a secret and then enjoy Christmas day with the rest of the guests. There were many details left to figure out between the pair, and by keeping their marriage a secret, they could avoid having a scandal tarnish either of their reputations.

In time, once everything was sorted, their marriage would be announced, and Mr. Greenwald would see to releasing any of the necessary details.

It was all well in good in theory, but beyond coy flirting, she wasn't allowed to be with her new husband. Living as a secret might keep everyone safe until everything was resolved, but it hurt Tilly, and she couldn't wait until the day she could publicly be Lady Devlin.

When evening descended upon Haddington and the port and merriment was flowing, the duke called his guests out onto the back veranda to watch the fireworks display.

Tilly, dressed in a wool cape, leaned against one of the massive stone columns of the house, fascinated as bursts of color lit up the sky. And in the middle of the commotion, Henry's hand reached for hers and gave it a small squeeze.

They quickly slipped back into the house and retreated to her room. Tilly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, happy to finally be alone.

"I can't stay long," he said in between kisses. "But I needed to see you before I leave for London in the morning. A letter arrived, and I need to help my brother Rafe out of a bad situation."

She cupped his face in her hands, sighing. "One day, I look forward to when I can spend as much time as I'd like with you, without fear of being discovered."

"You will never lose me, sweetheart." He bent down and kissed her forehead. "As for time, I hazard we have a few hours at least before I have to sneak out for the evening. I plan on spending what I can of our wedding night together."

"Wedding night..." she mused, turning the words over in her mouth. "We're married, Henry."

"Lady Devlin." His voice rumbled over each syllable, and it was as if he had struck a match. Her body warmed, and she pressed closer to him.

She grabbed his vest and slipped her hand beneath to feel his chest under the linen of his shirt. "Lord Devlin."

"I hate it when you call me that."

"You once called me Lady Mischief. Perhaps you are Lord Mischief now."

"I am not well-known for finding mischief."

"Until me that is." She playfully blew out her cheeks. "Husband, then?"

He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her, turning to gently place her on the bed.

"Most definitely husband." She giggled as he kissed the crown of her

throat. Henry's teeth nipped at the corner of her jaw, and suddenly nothing was funny, and she had entirely too many clothes on.

Henry pulled away and rose, pacing around her room for a moment before he grabbed the pitcher of water on the nightstand and poured himself a drink. He held his hand out while taking a long gulp, then set down the glass.

"I don't mean to alarm you, Tilly, but I don't..." He raked his hands through his hair. "I have never... that is... I have never been with a woman."

In the dim candlelight, she was certain a flush rose to his cheeks.

Tilly sat up, a slow smile spreading to her mouth as she slipped off the bed. "I understand." She grabbed Henry's hand and dropped a kiss into his palm before stepping back. Her heart hammered in her chest as she began undressing.

Henry froze, watching her slowly remove each layer until she stood before him naked, so vulnerable. "Look at you...", he whispered.

Tilly smiled, nerves and excitement rushing through her. She was nervous as well. It had been some time, and the circumstances had been much different.

"Matilda, you're beautiful."

Tilly padded over to him, met his eyes, and whispered in his ear, "Don't worry, I will take the lead. Isn't that what you said the other day?"

"Yes, well..."

He reached down and tipped her chin upward, pressing his lips against hers in a slow, drugging kiss. Tilly craved to feel his body against hers. Desire curled deep in her belly for more.

"May I help you undress?" she asked, slowly unbuttoning his shirt.

"Yes." His mouth moved against her forehead in the softest touch.

Slowly, Tilly undressed Henry, meeting his heated stare time and again until he stood before her naked as well.

Her fingers softly traced over his olive skin and the long, lean muscle of his forearms, his chest, and then the thin trail of hair down his abdomen. His body was powerful, graceful, completely unexpected, and she wished to learn all of it, to feel all of it.

Tilly grabbed his hand and led him to bed, sinking down on the mattress. Tilly peeked up at Henry before taking his erection in her hand, hard yet the skin so soft.

He groaned, tossing his head back toward the ceiling. "Wait, no."

It had been some time since she shared a bed with a man. And that had

brought about Ethan. And it had been different, greedy even. Her body had been used, even though she had participated willingly, and it hadn't been a shared experience before. Still, she wished for Henry to enjoy this.

"I don't understand..."

He sat down on the bed beside her, taking her hands in his, and kissed her knuckles before leaning over to cup her face in his palm. "I wish for this to be pleasurable for both of us. Sit back. If you'd like."

Tilly reclined back on the soft mattress, and Henry sank to the floor, slowly parting her knees. He kissed her quim before parting her folds with his fingers and slowly began to kiss her, pleasuring her with his tongue.

She raked her hand through his black hair, pulling, feeling as if she too were coming apart. Never, she had never had a man be so intimate with her in this way. Pleasure flooded her body, a quick burst of fire before her limbs were heavy and sated.

"I might not have had practice, but I am a quick study," he said between kisses. "I saw that once in an erotic text, and I always wanted to try it."

His grin made her flush. Goodness.

"Would you like to stop there tonight?" he asked, brushing the hair back from her neck.

He kissed her again, slowly taking her apart until she whispered, "No."

"Tell me, then, what would you like?"

Tilly reclined into the pillows, stretching out her long legs. "You, Henry."

He bent and kissed her navel, trailed kisses up her sternum and along her jaw to her ear. "I love you, sweet. Tell me to stop if you'd like."

She shook her head and rested it against his shoulder as Henry moved over her, his cock hard and pressing against her entrance. "No, I don't wish for that, it's only... the last time." She cursed herself for allowing fear to edge into this moment. She wished to be present, fully present, and enjoy her new husband. And all she could think of was the last time she had freely given her body over to a man.

"Right..." He rested his weight on his elbows, holding his body above hers but allowing her to roll away if she wished. She didn't. But that consideration was perhaps all she needed as he gently kissed her mouth, spinning her apart with each touch.

Pleasure.

She had never known. She had never considered this was what could be shared with one's bed partner.

Tilly shifted her hips, opening up to Henry. Her teeth scraped against his shoulder as his erection slowly slipped inside.

“That feels...”

She nodded, almost as wordless. Henry thrust against, warmth spreading through her limbs, hungry for her. Whatever this was, Tilly wished only for him. Henry groaned with another thrust. She pulled back as his shoulder muscles tensed.

“Touch yourself,” he whispered. “Make yourself soar for me.”

She closed her eyes and slid her hand between them as he slowly stroked her. And just as suddenly, the feeling from earlier shook her body. Her muscles tensed until warmth spread through her body and her limbs shook. She opened her eyes, frustrated that Henry had stopped.

“I think that may be my favorite part,” he growled. She grinned up at him, drawing his head to her chest as he continued, “To hear you, to taste you...”

With a shuddering breath, Henry withdrew, spending his seed onto the sheets beside her. Tilly reached for him, and he rolled over, grabbing Tilly and hauling her close. He peered down with a smile.

She smiled back.

And that was enough for the moment. It was all she ever needed, and she had found that with Henry. The masked stranger.

“Do you really have to leave tonight?”

“We might still have time...”

“No,” she laughed, playfully swatting him away. “Well, yes... but I only meant must we leave one another again?”

“It would be safer if you didn’t return to London for a while. And I fear Cliffstone Manor needs some major structural work completed before I can bring you to the Isle of Wight. Though I wish... I wish for you to be with me.”

She stopped tracing circles on his chest with her fingertips.

“Henry, you may have fallen in love with me, but I have a large family who are very much a part of my life. You will welcome them all, not just Ethan?”

“I wasn’t expecting any of this, sweet. But I love you, and I am looking forward to meeting your family. Whatever they need, I will do my best to look after them.”

She couldn’t imagine a better Christmas. Still, she didn’t wish to be parted from Henry, though she was eager to return to Ethan and the others.

“My parents are still in Ireland. My father’s health is poor. I live with my twin sisters Fiona and Brigid, Maeve, and younger brother Daniel. My older brother, Patrick, is married, as well as my sister Imogen.”

“Well, then we will find schools for them and provide your sisters with a Season in London when they are of age.”

“That is all I had hoped for, but what now? If I am not to stay in London, where I am to go? What am I to do with Ethan and my brothers and sisters?”

“Could you stay with your older sister, Imogene?”

“She has three children. I wouldn’t want to impose on her.”

“Or perhaps, well I know of a place in Wales, about an hour from where I grew up, that would be quiet and safe. And then when I can, I will send for you.”

“You promise?”

“Tilly, I must help my brother, but I promise I will do everything within my power to see you with me at Cliffstone by spring. And until then, I will write every day.”

“And I’ll miss you.”

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I will miss you more.”

CHAPTER TEN



Henry yanked the collar upward on his coat and bent into the frigid wind wiping around the corner toward him. He left his wife for this.

Alone in her bed, tucked safely away at Haddington, miles away from London. She would return to London in a week's time to pack up her brother, sisters, and Ethan before journeying to Wales.

No matter, she was too far away from Henry. Now, and once settled in Wales, still too far away until he could oversee the necessary repairs to Cliffstone.

He dragged in a sharp inhale, steeling himself as he opened the door to the gaol where Rafe was being held. He equally wanted to pummel his younger brother and shake him awake. Rafe was wasting his potential. A young lieutenant in the Navy who had bravely fought the French for years, now languishing on land as he awaited his next ship assignment.

In spite of his brother's recent behavior, Rafe was an exceptional sailor and his superiors had noticed. So had Henry. Their father would have wanted Rafe to succeed, and Henry was failing at helping him. He had spoken to those who could promote Rafe in recent months to become captain. And the outcome had been favorable.

But his brother...

Rafe was a complete arse because he was determined to throw his years of hard work away on drinking, women, and gambling.

Henry squared his shoulders as he waited to be led back to Rafe's cell. Their father would have known what to do. He always did.

The stench of piss burned his nostrils as he was led back down a long,

dark corridor of cells full of men either hunched in corners sleeping or fighting.

“You have five minutes,” the constable warned before stopping short. Rafe was asleep on the straw covered floor, his jacket stuffed under his head.

Navy men could sleep anywhere, it was a habit Henry was usually jealous of. But not today.

He reached his boot in through the bars and kicked his brother’s foot. “Rafe, wake up.”

His brother didn’t stir.

Very well. Henry tugged on his coat and cleared his throat. “Rafe Davies!”

Rafe rolled over, squinting his blue eyes as he examined Henry in the hallway. “Why are you here?”

“The better question, Brother, is why are you here?”

Rafe groaned, sitting up and brushing off his clothes. He raked a hand through his curly black hair and looked about the cell, as if Henry had interrupted something more important. “I was awake, just napping.”

“You’re drunk.” Henry crossed his arms in front of him, leaning against the wall.

“Probably for a while now, given where I am.”

“What have you been doing?”

Rafe ran a hand through his hair, sighing heavily. “Nothing I haven’t done before... gambling, drinking... women.”

Henry nodded slowly, shaking his head in disapproval. “You know this behavior is not what father would have wanted for you. You have been given an incredible opportunity here to succeed, but you seem determined to throw it all away on foolishness. Do you realize what kind of consequences this will have on your career? You are facing prison time and possibly a dishonorable discharge from the Navy.”

Rafe hung his head, shrugging.

“Admiral Ackerman is speaking to a few people, and I believe I will be able to have you released tonight. But if you think I will leave you here in London to do this all again...”

Henry stopped himself. He pinched his brow and sighed. He didn’t wish to be here, didn’t wish to have to clean up after his brother’s poor choices. He wished to be with his new bride.

“Come with me to Cliffstone Manor. I’ll be leaving after the new year,

and I have a lot to manage. I will take care of the ledgers, and you can help with tenants and the property.”

“No.”

Henry drew back, offended. “Why not?”

“You couldn’t pay me enough to drag me away to fix wells or birth goats or whatever the hell they do in the country. I belong on a ship.” He blinked, looking for a moment as if he would be sick. “I think I do. I did at one point.”

“I will settle your debts. Consider that payment enough. I will return tonight, and you can stay with me until we leave next week.”

Rafe patted at his jacket, frowning. “I need a cigar.”

His brother only needed to sober up, and in time, he would see how close he was to throwing an excellent opportunity away.

“What day is it?”

“It’s Boxing Day.”

Rafe finally stood, wavering on his feet. “Not what I had in mind for the holidays. Where have you been?”

It was shocking really, the way everything within Henry suddenly ached to tell his brother all. He wished to share his joy with someone. He wished to announce he had a heart after all, and despite giving up the law to focus on his new title, he was happy.

Instead, he swallowed his pride down and cleared his throat. “A house party.”

“That’s very social of you.”

“I am full of surprises, Rafe, if only you wished to know me.”

His younger brother nodded, returning to his search for a cigar. “Those blackguards stole my cigars and wallet. That’s very disappointing.”

“Can I count on you, Rafe? Will you come with me, even for a few months, and help sort out the estate?”

“That depends. Will you have scones?”

“I will see what I can do.”

Rafe stuck his hand out through the bars. “Then set me free, and I promise to be a good boy.”

“Are you certain?”

His brother leveled him with a disgusted stare, then laughed. “A rake never lies.”

Black and white. That was how Henry had lived his life up until now. Not in the messy in between. But suddenly, he found himself there. He didn’t

know the right thing to do all the time, and there was a certain level of fear that came with that. But he was willing to push on because his family counted on him.

And Tilly loved him.

“Then I’ll take my chances, Rafe.”

EPILOGUE



The past few days in London were a blur.

Henry had finished packing his apartment, sorted out the trouble with Rafe, and very nearly sobered him up. He had received word from Stephen that Roger was on his way to Plymouth to live with his mother.

In a week's time, Henry had secured a wife, grew his family exponentially, and handled the first wave of trouble as the new Earl Devlin.

He would miss his life as a barrister, but there was no way he could responsibly juggle the duties of both positions. Anything worth doing was worth doing right, after all. And he would stand by that.

"Are you going to join us?" Tilly called from the doorway.

Henry paused, his hands clasped firmly behind his back. The winter air nipped at his cheeks.

"You're pacing, dear."

His frown melted. It always did around her.

"You'll let out the warmth," he replied before cursing himself at how foolish that was to say when he never wished for her to move. There, with the warm light of their London home glowing behind her, she was heavenly. Her red hair burned bright against the backdrop of a dark December evening.

New Year's Eve, to be precise.

In the morning, he would be leaving. As would the rest of the... well, she wasn't a Brennan any longer.

He laughed to himself. No, she was his wife, and he had married into a large family. He had his hands full enough with Rafe, but no doubt his mother would adore having a loud bunch around once more.

"Come in, will you?" She placed her arms akimbo, her eyes drawn in

challenge.

Henry nodded, glancing up the stairs. Behind Tilly, the sound of a piano and singing and laughter and fighting slipped out around her. And his heart felt funny. He didn't prefer it being ice, but he also didn't know what to do with so much merriment.

He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling like the sky was falling around him as he marched up the stone steps to the front door. By some miracle, he stopped himself from drawing her into his arms and kissing her well and good, as he had dreamed of doing since he had left her at Haddington Court.

"I shouldn't stay long," he whispered, his eyes focused on her mouth.

"One day," she said.

He nodded. "One day, sweet."

"Are you ready?"

Henry shook his head. "No." In fact, he was terrified.

"I warned them to be nice. They will love you." She hooked her arm through his and rested her hand on his elbow, gazing up at him with a dreamy smile. "More handsome than I remember."

"You don't need to flatter me. I will be meeting your family... my family, no matter what."

"I won't take it back," she teased, scrunching her nose. "Let's stay out here for one moment longer."

Behind her, a dog began barking from inside, and a child began laughing maniacally.

"Oh drat, sounds like Ethan dressed up Pickles again from the costume box."

"Pickles? There's a dog?"

"Oh, yes. The cutest little pug that has the most monstrous snore. And three birds all named Jane because Daniel couldn't pick a name, and a rabbit named Mr. Phineas. Then there are the cats, Muffin and Porkchop."

He scratched his jaw, laughing at himself once more. He had never had a pet as a young boy. And suddenly he was strapped with a small menagerie.

"You've opened your heart to me, Henry." She pulled him through the front door and closed it behind him.

The smell of mulled wine and roast filled the air. Evergreens still decorated the windows and above them hung a mistletoe bough.

"I promise, it'll be worth it."

"You don't have to promise anything." He sighed, still with the weight of

the world upon him to make right of a family legacy left in shambles but suddenly feeling at home. “I believe you. Where you are, I am. No matter what.”

The piano struck up, a favorite of Henry’s, though he was loath to admit it.

Tilly helped him from his coat and hung it on a hook, grabbing his hand to direct him down the hall.

In a few short hours, he would begin a new year with as much possibility as there was uncertainty. But he felt... hopeful.

“Come on,” she laughed, tugging again when he wouldn’t budge.

“I can’t on principle.”

She gazed back, her brow arched. Tilly was wearing a simple purple dress with her hair swept up and a crooked paper crown nearly two sizes too small.

He pointed to the mistletoe bough above them and shrugged.

“Fair point,” she counted.

Tilly walked up to Henry and placed her hands on his cheeks, smiling. “I know we’re all leaving in the morning, but welcome home, Husband. And kiss me.”

THE END

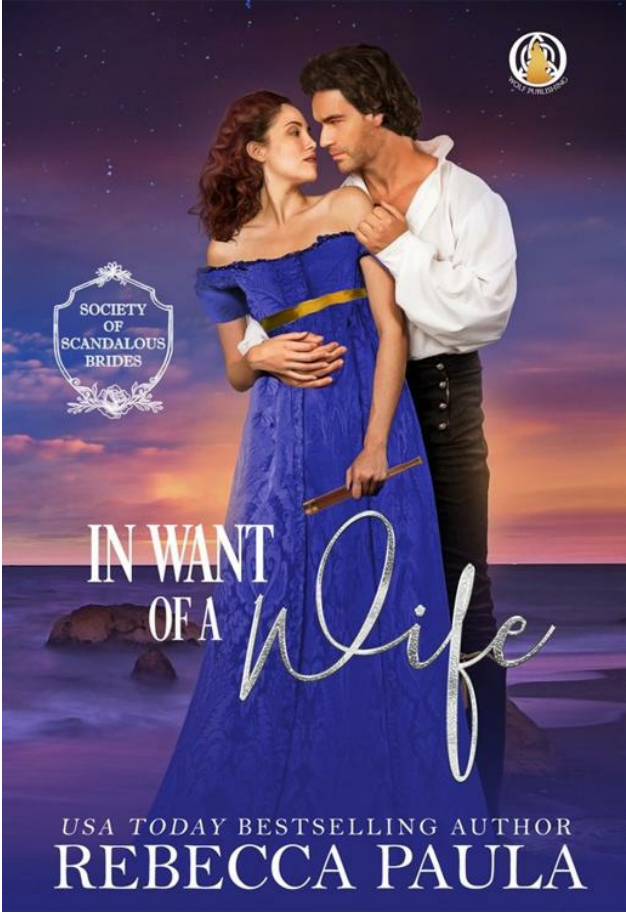
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USA Today bestselling author Rebecca Paula writes steamy, emotional historical romances featuring strong heroines and brooding heroes with a penchant for talking dirty. Her stories are full of witty banter, scorching chemistry, and wouldn't be complete without a touch of angst.

Rebecca is a former journalist and news editor who once lived in a Dutch castle haunted by a ghost named Sophie. Luckily, she never met said ghost. She fell in love with writing at 10 years old and secretly wrote romance for years before publishing her first book in 2014. Rebecca lives in New Hampshire with her husband and two young daughters.

When she's not writing, Rebecca can be found sipping tea and dreaming up her next brooding hero or tackling a DIY project in her 127-year-old farmhouse.

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