

A woman with red hair, wearing a red dress and black gloves, holds a large black lace fan. She stands next to a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a black coat with gold buttons and a white shirt. They are in a dark forest with green lights and pinecones.

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EMILY E.K. MURDOCH

ANGELIQUE ARMAE

*Unwrap the
pleasure*

HAVE YOURSELF A
MERRY LITTLE
SECRET

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IN A
HIGHLANDER'S
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ANNA MARKLAND, CELESTE BARCLAY, SKY PURINGTON
LILY BALDWIN, ASHE BARKER, EMMANUELLE DE MAUPASSANT



Dear Reader

Welcome to our Yuletide collection of gorgeous tales. Here, you'll find intrigue, secrets, romance—and lashings of scandalous behavior.

The characters in our stories battle many of the same challenges we do today—striving for independence and self-determination. Bound by the rules and restraints of their era, they crave something more: True love. Adventure. Grand passion.

You'll find at least one smolderingly steamy scene in every story, because we believe our desire for physical connection is as strong as our desire for love.

We hope this anthology inspires you and provides welcome escape and entertainment. While you're cheering for our heroes and heroines, we want you to cheer for yourself. Like the women and men in these tales, you're stronger than you may realize, more resourceful and more determined.

As for happy endings, we need to believe there is hope for everyone, and the chance to embrace a life of love and friendship.

With warmest wishes

COLLETTE CAMERON * TAMARA GILL * LINDA RAE SANDE
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HAVE YOURSELF A
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SECRET

From the seductive boudoirs and elite salons of London to the ancient castles of the snowy Scottish Highlands, our fearless heroines enter the Christmas season in pursuit of their heart's desire.

But, the course of true love never did run smooth... especially when SECRETS abound.

Happy Christmas!

We hope you enjoy unwrapping these gorgeous novellas.

Our authors, hailing from all over the world, are thrilled to have come together to create this sumptuous set of heartwarming historical romances.

Browse the teasers below, to help you choose where to begin.

Wedding Her Christmas Duke
by Collette Cameron

He's not who he says he is...but then again, neither is she...
Baxter is determined to make Justina his Christmas bride. But it'll take more than mistletoe and the magic of the holiday season to guide *these* polar opposites to their happily ever after...

The Knot of a Knight
by Linda Rae Sande

Sir Randolph's daytime occupation collides with his nocturnal avocation of service to the Crown when he discovers Lady X's hidden stash of bank notes.
They might be counterfeit—but are his feelings for her?

The Marquess is Mine
by Tamara Gill

She'll never let anyone break *her* heart. Not again, anyway...

Lady Sarah Farley has learned many of life's lessons the hard way. She now knows the *ton* will viciously turn on anyone, anytime. And love? That only brings devastation. But when a particularly handsome ghost from her past reemerges, she can't help but wonder if life is about to teach her poor wounded heart yet another painful, unwanted lesson.

Lord Giles Longe, Marques Gordan, never wanted to hurt Sarah. But he couldn't have married her back then. His father wouldn't have allowed it. Everything is different now, though. He *will* make amends. And if it's the last thing he ever does, he *will* make her remember the friendship—and pleasure—they once shared.

Is a Christmas ball at St. Albans Abbey the perfect setting for Sarah to regain her trust in love—and in Giles? Or is their second chance at happily ever after doomed to end as badly as their first?

A Yuletide Miracle **by Laurel O'Donnell**

As she grew up, Lady Thora of Grandmore was told the legendary tales of the Yule Cat. The creature was supposed to be a fantasy until it attacked her. Now, Thora will do whatever is necessary to make sure the dangerous beast doesn't hurt anyone ever again.

Sir Bastian is sworn to protect Grandmore Castle and all its occupants. He finds himself falling in love with Thora but for the sake of her safety, he must convince her the animal that attacked her was not the legendary cat. Can Bastian save the woman he loves from her fear or will he lose her forever on the Yule?

The Lady Who Stole Christmas **by Sydney Jane Baily**

A Yuletide gathering at Forde Hall is bursting with mince pies, mulled wine, merriment, ... and mischief! Prinny's trusted man, the Viscount Miles Denbigh, is tasked with discovering a wily thief who's plaguing the *ton*'s house parties, stealing their jewels.

Comely widow Lady Sarah Worthington has enjoyed Denbigh's company before. However, much as she likes the man, she hadn't expected to spend Twelvetide in his company, not when she has a secret mission — not when he suspects she's up to something. Just because he's right, doesn't mean she has to like it!

Join Miles and Sarah in a Christmastime game of cat and mouse.

Christmas with a Czar
by Emily E.K. Murdoch

It's Christmas at St. James' Court, and there's a pretender to the Russian throne attempting to gain royal approval. As such, Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich - or Maxim, to his admirers - is determined to hide the secret that will ruin him.

Meanwhile, Miss Anne Marsh is enduring her last Season before welcome retirement to anonymity.

Found in a compromising position in the Russian prince's rooms, a marriage of convenience is agreed, but Maxim is hiding far more than Anne could ever guess, and she has a few secrets of her own...

Could Christmas with a Czar be the beginning of a lifetime together?

A Scot Most Wanted
by Angelique Armae

To rescue her ruined sister, Catrina Lennox leaves London for the Scottish Highlands, only to suffer a great loss which eventually puts her in the path of Niall MacHendrie, Laird of Dundaire. A man who despite his own suffering

heart, risks all to give the beguiling Catrina not only the justice she so deserves, but also the scandalous passion she craves, making this a Christmas Catrina will never forget.

Secretly Marvellous
by Virginia Taylor

Lord Beldon Westerham, due to the recent loss of his father and brother, needs to marry to ensure a legitimate heir. To this end, he meets the Thornton sisters, and is fascinated by the younger, Lady Mary, who insists on a season in London before she marries him. He agrees and slowly falls in love with her.

Mary has adored him for years but if she marries him, he will despise her, for her secret will be revealed.

Should she risk all with one night of passion?

Yuletide Secrets

by S. Cinders

Ian Stanford's heart has been hardened by a painful secret in his past.

Answering the summons of an elderly friend, he finds himself at an impromptu house party at Christmas time. There he meets a golden-haired beauty who rouses his passions and makes him want to forget his choice to live without love.

Anne has lived a lonely life. After spurning all of the bucks in London, Anne chose to live a spinster's life. There she encounters the enigmatic Ian Stanford, who stirs something inside of her that she's never felt before. Will the secrets of the past mar their chance of happiness in the future?

One Scandalous Christmas

by J. Burrelli

After five seasons, Miss Katherine Thorpe is firmly on the shelf and she is happy to remain there, thank you very much. She offered her heart once and had it shattered for her troubles. However, an incorrigible Aunt, a meddling Father, have other plans for her.

Captain Robert Vaughn, has made his fortune at sea during the war with France. It is time to put down roots and find a wife. But his thoughts are consumed with the last woman he should want, Miss Katherine Thorpe! They parted on bad terms, but years later their mutual desire and anger spark brightly. But Christmas has a way of reuniting even the most unlikely of hearts.

The Rogue's Secret

by Stacy Reid and Giselle Marks

Bachelor, Lord Rupert Rogers, is searching for the treasure his great uncle suggests he has left him but finds an enemy and a bride he must convince with one kiss at a time they are perfect for each other...

The Secrets He Keeps

by Amy Sandas

Callista Hale is the formidable Madam of London's most elite brothel. To crush a rival gentlemen's club, she'll accept a wicked offer from the club's mysterious and sensual owner.

Erik Maxwell built a livelihood on his knowledge of women's desires. But

Madam Pendragon poses an unexpected challenge. Seduction is the key to ending her crusade against him, but it's not all he's got in mind for the fascinating female.

Wedding Her Christmas Duke

by Collette Cameron



“I canna just let ye go.”

Baxter pressed his mouth to the crown of her head.

*“I dinna ken what this is between us,
but I’ve never felt anythin’ like it, Justina.”*

Chapter One



*Bathurst Hotel and Spa
Bath, Somerset, England
November 15, 1810*

Justina Farthington laughed as she and her widowed aunt, Emily Grenville, tried in vain to dodge the large, soggy snowflakes sifting from the pewter gray sky with the rambunctious abandon of a litter of kittens playing in a sack of spilled flour. The pathway to the hotel wasn't long, but the snow made walking difficult.

"It's a good thing we didn't plan on reaching home today," Justina said, tilting her head to better study the ominous sky. A plump snowflake plopped onto her chin, and she laughed again. Grateful for her warm leather gloves, she swiped the moisture away. "We'd never have made it to Bristol in this weather."

"In all of my years, I have never known it to snow this heavily in Somerset in November," Aunt Emily declared, clutching Justina's hand for balance.

A good five inches of snow had already accumulated. Though it was scarcely an hour past one in the afternoon, steel gray blanketed the town so popular with the upper ten thousand, giving the appearance of early twilight. The pouting sky showed no signs of relenting in its unrepentant white onslaught upon the earth either.

Surely snow in Somerset wasn't so scarce.

"Yes, all *thirty* of them," Justina remarked dryly while concentrating on keeping snow from sneaking into her half-boots. "And because you're so well-traveled."

"Hush, Justina Madalene Honoria Farthington. *Really*. Reminding me of

my advanced age and that I'm on the shelf is beyond the pale," Emily huffed good-naturedly, even as a frown puckered her brow.

Oh, my heavens. Auntie used my full name. She is in a fine fettle, then.

"Lest you forget, I am widowed and a decade your senior. And, I'll remind you, dear niece, that I have seen much more of this often-unforgiving world than you."

"Of course," Justina murmured demurely.

Aunt Emily wasn't done, however.

"You know full well I accompanied my brother on his diplomatic jaunts for several years. It simply does not snow several inches before Christmastide in our part of the world."

A touch of genuine concern had leeches into her usually tranquil tones.

Was her aunt worried they'd be stranded here?

What did it matter?

Their finances, though not abundant, were sufficient to accommodate an extended stay. No one except two doddering servants, well past their prime, awaited them at home in Bristol. And the Sutcliffes' Christmastide house party didn't begin until the twenty-second of December—a full month away.

In point of fact, Justina and her aunt were invited to come a few days prior. Nonetheless, they could while away for a fortnight in Bath, and no one would be the wiser, much less worried or concerned.

A grin played around the edges of Justina's mouth.

Oh, how she looked forward to the Sutcliffes' house party.

Her dearest friends—young women she'd met at the finishing school her widowed aunt had insisted she attend—were also invited. Genuine excitement that today's gloomy weather and the disruption to their travel plans couldn't diminish bubbled along her veins.

Clutching Justina's hand tighter, Aunt Emily clicked her tongue, reminding Justina very much of their elderly neighbor, Gertrude Howerton.

Nearly blind and well on her way to becoming deaf as well, Gertrude was forever fussing over something, *tsking*, clucking, and murmuring, "Mercy," or "God save me," while forcefully pounding her cane on whatever unfortunate surface she happened to be upon, or prodding the legs of whoever happened to be in proximity of the flailing stick.

She was precisely the type of eccentric old bird Justina hoped she'd be in her dotage.

Though still a beautiful woman, Aunt Emily dressed and acted like a

seventy-year-old spinster. If a man so much as gave her a second glance, with her lips pursed, she turned her frostiest green-eyed star upon him. Usually, that was sufficient to send any would-be swains trotting hastily in the other direction.

She never—truly never—spoke of her marriage or dead husband, an officer in His Majesty’s Navy.

Once that first year together, struggling to find the right words in her stilted English,

Justina had dared ask Emily about her husband. Distress had ravaged her aunt’s pretty features before she’d managed, “It is not something I ever speak of.

Justina had never poked her nose into Aunt Emily’s personal business again. Somehow, she sensed it wasn’t just grief that tied her aunt’s tongue and caused the haunted shadows in her pretty eyes.

“It is most unfortunate that the Royal Arms Hotel suffered fire damage, and we are obliged to find lodgings elsewhere.” Aunt Emily signaled the drivers to wait. “Richard always insisted we stay at the Royal Arms.”

In truth, this was the third establishment the women had stopped at, seeking rooms for the night. Who would’ve guessed so many dratted people were traveling in November despite the awful roads?

With a wan smile, Aunt Emily allowed, “My brother was rather rigid and unyielding in his ways. A deeply devout man, Richard never stepped over the mark or outside Society’s strictures.”

Justina kept her response to herself. Whenever Aunt Emily mentioned Richard Farthington, Justina couldn’t prevent her heart from cramping. Not over his death, for she hadn’t known the man, but for all that had come afterward.

Could he really have been gone nearly a decade?

How well she remembered that day less than a month before her tenth birthday. The day after her beloved mother had died in their humble Viennese hovel and her cantankerous Austrian grandfather had presented Justina at Richard Farthington’s doorstep, proclaiming she was his illegitimate daughter.

“I’ve no use for a *uneheliches Kind*” —bastard child— “under my feet,” grandfather had pronounced coldly in his German spattered, halting English. “Farthington impregnated my daughter, and he can deal with *das Mädchen* now that my Elsa is gone, *ja?*”

He hadn't even looked back but had left Justina standing bereft and teary-eyed with an equally confused and grief-stricken Emily Grenville. She'd buried her brother, Richard, a mere two days prior after he'd succumbed to lung fever.

Except for each other, Justina and Aunt Emily were indeed two women alone in the world.

As always, when reminiscing about her previous life, melancholy infused Justina.

She cut a sideways glance at the woman who'd become mother, sister, and friend to her in the ensuing years. The woman who'd accepted a child she neither knew nor could vouch for her paternity and brought that same frightened and sad little girl to England to be raised as a gentle-woman. The only person, save Wenzel Trattner, Justina's grandfather, who knew the secret of her birth and guarded it like the most precious of gems.

Aunt Emily had, however, changed Justina's given name from Friederike, giving her a feminine version of Richard Farthington's middle name, Justin. For that, Justina was grateful. Simply put, Friederike was a mouthful, and she would have had to continually explain her name's origin had she kept it. Although, in retrospect, she might've enjoyed being called Freddie.

The great-granddaughter of a viscount, Emily Grenville, had taken a grief-stricken child beneath her wing that awful afternoon when the charcoal grey Vienna sky had also been cloaked with grumpy clouds.

A few years later, Justina had learned that Emily's branch of the family had long ago spurned contact with the distant relations they had peppered about England and beyond. No reason was given for the estrangement.

Shorter than Justina, at just two inches above five feet, and older than her by ten years, Emily was the opposite of Justina in almost every way, except for the green eyes they shared.

Justina's were a pale green while Emily's were darker jade. The eye color did not signify paternity, as they both well knew. But it did aid in strengthening the fabricated tale Aunt Emily had concocted that long-ago day. Thus far, no one had questioned the story. It contained just enough scandal to titillate and a thread of truth that could neither be proven nor disproven.

To the world, Justina was Richard Farthington's daughter. His Viennese wife, Justina's mother, had died in childbirth.

End of story.

Only it wasn't.

For one thing, Justina and Aunt Emily, save for their eyes, looked nothing alike.

Aunt Emily was golden-haired, possessed of a keen wit, and pragmatic to the point of causing Justina to grind her teeth on occasion. She possessed an oval face, winged eyebrows, and though not precisely beautiful in the traditional sense, she attracted men like plump blossoms did bees in the summertime. She'd received a half dozen marriage proposals since putting aside her mourning weeds.

All of which she'd declined with the alacrity of a starving urchin stealing a sweetmeat from a baker.

Emily Grenville was determined to never—*ever*—marry again. Something that Justina was just as determined to thwart. For, truth be told, if anyone deserved love, companionship, and children, it was her unselfish aunt.

Justina, on the other hand, possessed straight light brown hair, a diamond-shaped face with a chin she thought much too pointed, and eyebrows that refused to arch no matter how studiously she plucked the dashed things. Her curves, especially her breasts, were abundant compared to Emily's gentle swells.

Although Aunt Emily argued otherwise, Justina felt certain her aunt had rejected those marriage offers because she refused to sequester Justina at a country house and go on with her life.

When she'd taken on the responsibility of Justina's care, she'd scarcely been twenty years old herself. Fourteen years younger than Richard Farthington, after their parents had died, Emily had acted as her brother's hostess for five of those years.

Well, except for the two months she'd been married.

Two months—then tragically widowed.

What had scarred Aunt Emily so that she avoided any mention of her marriage or her husband, Lieutenant Clement Grenville?

Someday, Justina would know the truth.

In any event, Aunt Emily had been her brother's sole heir. Prudently managed—and Emily was nothing if not prudent—his bequeathment had proven sufficient to support the two women in relative comfort as long as they practiced economies. Theirs was not a luxurious lifestyle by any means, but they needn't be ashamed of their social standing either.

Farther down the lane, children squealed and ran about pelting each other with snowballs or pulling one another along on sleds. A wonder they even owned sleds, so infrequent was snow here.

A black dog yapped, its tail wagging furiously as it chased after the snowballs. Three industrious boys were intent on building a snowman while two little girls lay upon their backs making snow angels.

There'd be many cold noses, fingers, and toes, and no doubt hot chocolate or perhaps mulled wine to chase away the chill this afternoon. In truth, at the moment, a hot toddy sounded utterly divine.

An unwelcome memory pushed to the forefront of Justina's mind: a petite girl in a pale blue cloak laying on her back and making a snow angel.

As quickly as the recollection had intruded, it vanished.

She'd been that little girl. But as with the other memories of her former life, that vision swirled around the edges of her memory before floating away. Try as she might, she could no longer summon the image of her mother's face but remembered her kind blue eyes and her pretty voice as she sang to Justina.

She and her aunt tramped up the four steps to Bathurst Hotel and Spa and stomped their snow-caked half-boots upon the colorful braided rug outside the door.

Somewhere within, a dog woofed a canine greeting.

A small frown forming two lines on her forehead, Emily squinted at the newly painted sign and then slowly took in the welcoming porch.

"I think the hotel has recently been painted and refurbished." She pointed at the sign. "And renamed, as well. It was simply *The Bath House* the last time I was in Bath."

When?

A decade ago?

Or longer?

Justina took in the dark green script announcing the establishment's name as well as the well-appointed porch upon which sat several rocking chairs, a porch swing, and two benches. All contained cushions and thick throws for those guests bold enough to brave the outdoors in November.

Aunt Emily brushed the snow from the shoulders of her wren-brown redingote then raised her black-gloved fist to knock upon the door, painted the same vibrant green as the sign. However, before she rapped, the carved panel swung inward, revealing a footman attired in neat green and black

livery.

A black patch covered his left eye, and a wicked-looking scar creased his cheek and jaw.

A former soldier?

“I think the new owner has a penchant for green,” Justina whispered out the side of her mouth.

The footman’s lips twitched, and his good eye, a warm and friendly pale brown, twinkled in merriment. “Indeed, he does admire the shade a great deal. Wait until you see the dining room and the greenhouse. All manner of exotic birds are housed there, every one of them rescued in one manner or another.”

Ah, so the man has a tender heart.

Pride evident in his voice and bearing, the servant declared, “Mr. Bathhurst is quite the philanthropist.”

Bathhurst?

The man was vain enough to name the establishment after himself. Certainly not unusual, but it did give one pause.

As if reading Justina’s thoughts, Aunt Emily queried, “Bathhurst?” She tapped the small dimple in her chin. “The name is familiar, though I cannot think why. Perhaps he is an acquaintance of one of our ducal friends.”

Aunt Emily referred to several of Justina’s school friends, six of which were now married to dukes.

Extraordinary.

Duchesses, each and every one, and not all nobly born.

But none were bastards, either.

Justina stepped inside, taking in the polished parquet flooring and a pair of matching tufted benches on either side of the foyer. These were seafoam green, rather than the emerald hue of the front door. A marble-topped rosewood table flanked each bench, and at the far end of the entrance, a pair of highbacked chairs—not green, but claret-colored—drew one’s attention to another table upon which appeared to be a chess set.

Clearly, the entry was intended to be used for more than guests entering and exiting the establishment. If felt homey and hospitable, the furnishings tasteful and understated, but of unmistakable quality.

A scraggly dog in mottled shades of black, brown, and gray and favoring his front left paw emerged from a room farther along the corridor and lifted its nose, sniffing the air. Evidently satisfied Justina and her aunt were not a

threat, he lumbered forward, his gait uneven.

He plopped on his haunches beside Justina, gazing at her expectantly, and she ran a hand over his soft head. He whimpered and rested his head against her leg, staring at her adoringly.

The flirt. Did the little beggar hope to get more pets?

“Do you have any rooms available?” Aunt Emily asked without preamble.

Her aunt’s inquiry snapped Justina back to the present, and she offered a hopeful smile. Good gracious, what were they to do if Bathhurst Hotel and Spa were full as well? Many of the hotels had closed for the off-season, and she’d considered them fortunate that this lodging house was open so near the main route to Bristol.

“Indeed, we do, ladies.” The footman nodded in the affirmative as another joined him.

This one boasted a distinct limp, and upon further covert inspection, Justina realized he was missing two fingers on his right hand.

Yes, most definitely a former soldier.

Her opinion of Mr. Bathhurst rose another notch.

Many employers wouldn’t hire those maimed by war, and yet not only did Mr. Bathhurst rescue birds, of all things, but he also gave positions to those most in need.

“We’ll see to your bags. You can check in there.” The second footman angled his head toward a gleaming mahogany counter, paralleling a staircase to the upper floors. “I am Coyle, and this is Perkins.” He indicated the first footman. “Oh, and the dog’s name is Duke. Mr. Bathhurst has a sardonic sense of humor.”

Indeed, he did, for Justina had never seen a less aristocratic appearing canine in her entire life.

Duke, indeed.

“Welcome, to Bathhurst Hotel and Spa,” a wiry little man, wearing spectacles boomed from beside the gleaming counter. “We just finished updating and refurbishing the hotel.”

Justina started at the commanding voice coming from such a diminutive man. He couldn’t have been above four feet in stature, and she realized he must be a dwarf. Behind his spectacled eyes, lively intelligence and humor shone. Liking him at once, she returned his congenial smile.

“I am Solomon Bixby, manager of this fine establishment,” he

announced, pride ringing in his unique voice. “You’ve arrived in time for afternoon tea in the drawing room, ladies. We’ve six other guests staying with us presently,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “We’ll see that the fires are stoked in your chambers, and they’ll be warm as bread fresh from the oven in no time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bixby. That sounds simply wonderful.” As she usually did, Emily took charge.

Of late, that habit had begun to grate on Justina a bit. She was far more capable than her overly-protective aunt allowed. Others had noticed Emily’s protectiveness too. Why, at the Twistleton’s musical last March, she’d overheard two nobles referring to Aunt Emily as a dragon.

Affront for the woman she’d called aunt for a decade encompassed Justina. Aunt Emily was nothing like an angry, violent, intimidating dragon. She was simply cautious and guarded. A young widow having a ward thrust upon her and having to navigate Society without raising suspicion wasn’t easy.

Keeping the secret they both well knew could destroy them wasn’t easy either.

Chapter Two



Bathhurst Hotel and Spa *An hour later*

Baxter Bathhurst threw open the back door, his preferred entrance, to the hotel. Stepping aside to allow Princess to bolt inside and find her injured brother, he balanced the box containing the honey he'd purchased this afternoon.

He raised his head slightly and sniffed appreciatively.

Mmm.

Roast beef for supper tonight, and—Baxter inhaled again, turning his mouth upward into a satisfied smile—apple pie if he weren't mistaken. "Nothin' like a slice of pie to warm a mon's body," he muttered to himself, allowing the Scot's brogue he usually kept in check to roll off his tongue.

It grated the English's pompous arses that he, the son of a simple Scottish innkeeper and tavern owner, should've inherited the elite San Sebastian dukedom. A smirk pulling his mouth to the side, Baxter shook his head, still reluctant to believe he was a sodding duke—had been for five bloody damn years now.

This was the world he preferred. The life he'd enjoyed for his first five-and-twenty years. The simple, fulfilling existence of a hotelier. Well, he owned six hotels now, in addition to several other businesses, but never mind that. He'd used his title and influence to help the less fortunate by hiring those others wouldn't.

The world was a cruel, cold, heartless place to anyone deemed *different*.

He didn't even permit his staff who were aware he was titled to address him as San Sebastian or Your Grace. *That* personage was reserved for London or, at the very least, assemblies and the like, which required him to

acknowledge his English birthright.

He grimaced upon recollecting he was expected in London in a fortnight, and he'd foolishly allowed the dukes of Heatherton, Pennington, and Bainbridge to coax him into attending the Duke and Duchess of Sutcliffes' Christmastide house party.

God curse my three-times great grandfather for not having more older sons.

God curse *me* for a fool.

Setting the box on the table provided for just such articles, Baxter nudged the door closed with his boot heel. As it clicked shut with a satisfying *snick*, he shucked his caped greatcoat. After hanging it on a hook, he removed his hat, scarf, and gloves. They landed in a heap next to the box of honey.

Finally, with a shake of his head to dislodge any lingering snowflakes, he picked up the honey and marched down the wooden corridor to the kitchen. Mrs. Felton would be beside herself when she saw the treasure he carried, and Baxter could count on fresh rolls liberally topped with butter and honey for several days to come.

As he entered the kitchen, Mrs. Felton glanced up from arranging biscuits and other dainties on a tray. "Just in time, Mr. Bathhurst. Coyle is taking another tray to our guests, momentarily. We've eight now, and the cold seems to have stimulated their appetites."

Brisk weather had a way of doing that.

He supposed humans weren't any different than other species that fattened up in preparation for a long, cold winter.

Baxter set the honey down on the table and gestured. "I persuaded that crusty old bugger, Warner, to part with a dozen jars of honey."

In truth, the old man had been in dire need of finances but was too proud to accept charity. Baxter had paid five times what the honey was worth and would've paid double that. He also meant to see Warner's roof was repaired and that he had sufficient wood to last him the winter. And that his bee hives provided honey for Baxter's five other hotels, three restaurants, and his signature mead.

"Oh, my!" Mrs. Felton's face lit up, and she promptly brushed her hands together to rid them of crumbs before wiping them on a damp cloth.

Enjoying her excitement, he chuckled.

"Such a treat," she said, making her way to the table, a smudge of flour on her dark brown cheek. Black eyes shining, she picked up a jar of the

amber liquid and winked. “I suppose you’ll want fresh oatmeal rolls to go with supper tonight?”

Baxter gave her a boyish grin. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Go on with you. Greet your guests and have a cup of strong tea,” she said in her lyrical voice as she motioned toward the door leading to the main house. “I’ll make enough rolls to keep you satisfied for a few days.”

“Thank ye.” The rolls reminded Baxter of his homeland.

He might be an English duke, but his heart would always belong to Scotland.

Hesitating for an instant, he pondered whether he ought to make himself presentable first. Glancing down, he noted the melting snow on his Hessians, but other than that, he looked presentable enough in his fine black wool jacket and trousers, he supposed.

After all, this wasn’t Almack’s Assembly Rooms or Countess Lieven’s drawing room.

He’d never been one to put on airs or wear fancy togs. What was good for the ordinary folks was suitable for him too. Having made his decision, Baxter gave Mrs. Felton a jaunty wave and wink before turning and following the meandering corridor toward the main part of the hotel.

As he walked, voices carried to him marked by an occasional laugh.

He slowly curved his mouth upward into a lazy smile.

Excellent.

If his guests were pleased, they’d spread the word, and in turn, more guests would visit the hotel. As with his other establishments, once Bathurst Hotel and Spa was running efficiently and profitably, he’d turn the management of the hotel and spa over to a trusted servant. In this case, Solomon Bixby, and then Baxter would move on to his next project, which he’d yet to identify.

Another hotel? A restaurant?

No, he wished to try his hand at something different this time.

But what?

Horse breeding? Shipping? Investments in new inventions?

Now there was an intriguing notion.

Humankind was capable of such extraordinary ingenuity.

A life of idleness and boredom, filling his days with walks and rides in Hyde Park, attending a mind-numbing series of balls, routs, and soirees, or gambling, drinking and wenching were not for him. Baxter made a

discontented noise in the back of his throat. Even if he was a bloody, damn duke.

Glancing at himself in a gilded mirror above a highly polished table, he stopped short. His thick dark blond hair needed brushing. Instead, he raked his fingers through the unruly tresses a few times, managing to tame the worst of his mane.

He stared back at the man in the reflection. The pale brown eyes—very near the color of the honey in the kitchen—gazed back at him: his mother’s eyes and hair rather than his sire’s black hair and piercing blue eyes.

As he’d never wanted for feminine company when he desired it, Baxter supposed he was attractive enough. However, now that he’d come into a title, he never knew whether a woman was genuinely interested in him or if the dukedom posed the attraction.

More on point, he didn’t know if becoming the next Duchess of San Sebastian motivated the eager women flocking to his side.

With a careless shrug, he continued on his way.

Unless he mastered mind-reading—which was as likely as sprouting wings or a second head—he could never be certain of any woman’s motives.

At the entrance to the drawing room, Baxter took a moment to assess his guests.

Mildred and Marian Popkin, an elderly pair of spinster sisters, perched like a pair of curious birds on the edge of a forest green settee. They batted their almost nonexistent eyelashes behind their matching spectacles at Mister Godfrey Howlette, a self-important dandy standing by the fireplace, posing for the benefit of the ladies.

Obnoxious coxcomb.

Baxter almost expected him to stretch out his neck and crow, so obvious was his posturing.

Paul and Hester Harmon occupied the armchairs nestled in the bay window. Newlyweds, they only had eyes for each other, though each did glance in Baxter’s direction and gave a brief nod in greeting.

Of middling years and boasting quite the most astonishing mutton-chops Baxter had ever seen, Major Carlton Spaulding of His Majesty’s Army conversed with the new arrivals, both of whom had their backs to the entry.

Miss Mildred spied Baxter first and fluttered her fan flirtatiously. It somewhat resembled an angry or startled fowl flapping his wings. “Mr. Bathhurst. Please do join us, and permit us—

“—to introduce Mrs. Grenville and her niece, Miss Farthington, to you,” her sister finished in a rush.

Every person in the room turned their attention to Baxter as he sauntered into the drawing room. When he bowed, his gaze meshed with the younger woman with eyes the color of the filmy ferns and horsetails growing in the damp woods near Strathyre.

Ah, green. My favorite color.

His signature color too. Which was why all of his establishments were decorated with a matching theme: shades of greens and burgundies.

He found himself staring at her, and pink tinted the young woman’s high cheekbones before midnight lashes lowered to fan her cheeks, and she turned her head away.

Coyle arrived with the promised tray, and Baxter gave a silent prayer of thanks for the interruption. Else he still be gawping like a farmhand seeing a proper lady for the for the first time.

He bowed, perhaps more extravagantly than needed. “Ladies and gentlemen, our fondest wish at Bathurst Hotel and Spa is to meet your every need. Should you require anything, we’ll do our utmost to provide it for you.”

He didn’t miss the sly, lecherous gaze Howlette slid the pretty woman from beneath his half-closed eyes.

Bastard.

Baxter forced his hands to relax at his sides rather than curl into fists. And punch the lecherous glint from the dandy’s face.

Clearing his throat, Baxter produced one of his most amiable smiles. “Anything within the strictures of propriety, that is, of course.”

An ugly flush washed Howlette’s face, and Baxter swore the green-eyed goddess hid a grin behind her fan. Humor assuredly sparkled in her eyes.

Major Spaulding abruptly coughed into his tea, which caused both of the Popkin sisters to fuss and declare they hoped he wasn’t coming down with the ague.

In short order, introductions were made, and Baxter had claimed a seat beside Miss Marian. No sense in being too obvious, even if Miss Farthington had captured his interest the moment their eyes had met. However, he couldn’t prevent his attention from straying to her several times.

Her hawk-eyed aunt caught his perusal and arched one winged eyebrow knowingly. Her keen gaze seemed to say, “*Caught you, cad.*”

“So, what brings you to Bath during the first snowstorm in a decade, Mrs.

Grenville?” Baxter asked.

A pretty blonde, either late in her third decade or early in her fourth, she regarded him for a long moment before answering smoothly.

“My niece and I are en route to our home. The roads were simply too unmanageable, and I feared for the safety of our drivers and the team. Generally, when in this area, we stay at the Royal Arms. However, as I’m sure you know, they suffered a fire recently. Therefore, we sought lodgings elsewhere. We’ll be on our way as soon as this unfavorable weather allows.”

“I’m certain your drivers will be satisfied with their accommodations in the stables,” Baxter said. His confidence was well-placed since he’d assured the servants’ quarters at Bathurst Hotel and Spa were clean and comfortable.

He didn’t fail to notice Mrs. Grenville hadn’t mentioned precisely where their home was. He couldn’t decide if he admired her for her protectiveness or if her ambiguity irked him. Nor could he help but wonder if her attitude would rapidly change if she knew he was, in fact, a duke.

Most people’s did, and it annoyed the hell out of him.

“Most fortunate for us,” Major Spaulding offered. Having recovered from his fit of coughing, he puffed out his barrel-like chest. “Do either of you play cards?” he asked hopefully.

The Major was a terrible cheat, and the Popkin sisters equally dreadful players.

Both sisters speared him an injured look. Their numbers had been balanced until the arrival of today’s guests, and even if Baxter took part in the evening’s entertainment, they were one male short. Which meant someone would always be the extra wheel.

“Indeed, Major,” Miss Farthington answered as she lifted her cup to those pink, bowed lips and blew gently on the piping hot tea she’d just poured herself. “I prefer whist or vingt-et-un, but my aunt is quite accomplished at piquet and is simply brilliant on the pianoforte.”

None of Baxter’s current guests had shown any interest in playing the instrument.

Howlette gazed around the room, a rather cunning glint in his eye. Pulling on the lapels of his bright blue jacket, he said, “I say, why don’t we have dancing after dinner tonight?”

Even the newlyweds perked up at that suggestion.

“What a splendid idea,” Mrs. Harmon said, catching her husband’s hand in hers.

“Oh, we quite adore dancing,” gushed Miss Marian. “Do we not, Sister?”

Her sister bobbed her head, the purple feather tucked into her steel gray coiffure gyrating at the movement. “Indeed, we do,” she agreed, peering at Mrs. Grenville expectantly.

The Popkin sisters' fans fluttered so vigorously, Baxter pondered if they might become airborne in their enthusiasm.

“Ah, but our new guests have only just arrived, and they might wish to retire early this evening.” Baxter offered Mrs. Grenville a reprieve from being forced to play for their entertainment. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but appreciate that if she took to the keys, the males and females were evenly matched for dancing.

And damn his eyes, if he didn't want to take Miss Justina Farthington into his arms and whirl her about the room. Hell, he'd like to do a lot more than that, and his immediate, compelling physical response to her puzzled him as much as it fascinated.

Glancing to the window, Baxter allowed the minutest upward tilt of his mouth.

Snow swirled furiously outside, blurring the view, and by the looks of the storm, his newest guests wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.

Why that delighted him, Baxter refused to examine.

Chapter Three

3



3



Bathhurst Hotel and Spa
November 22, 1810
Early Afternoon

Curled into an oversized chair covered in forest green and crimson brocade, Justina attempted to focus her attention on *Don Sebastian* by Anna Maria Porter, the book she'd selected from the surprisingly well-stocked library at Bathhurst Hotel and Spa. In truth, she was astonished to find the volume which had only released last year.

However, the story failed to hold her attention as she'd hoped, and as her mind often had the past days, her thoughts mulishly migrated to Baxter Bathhurst.

The dratted man had her at sixes and sevens, and she wasn't the sort of empty-headed ninny to have her head turned by a captivating smile or a disarming glint in an attractive man's eyes.

No, indeed.

Not until now.

Simply astonishing, and so out of character for her as well.

A very unladylike snort escaped her.

Typically, Justina strove to abide by Society's strictures and did her utmost not to draw undesirable attention much less say or do anything to cause a raised eyebrow, censorious look, or titillating whisper.

Except, she *had* joined several other ladies in Hyde Park early one morning last summer, and they'd dared to ride astride, some even brazenly wearing breeches.

Scandalous.

Yes, and ever so wonderful.

A secret smile bent her mouth at the memory.

Mayhap that yearning to be more daring and bolder that she kept rigorously subdued meant to rebel at its confinement.

Heaven help her. She mustn't allow it.

Wasn't her illegitimacy disgrace enough?

Wasn't her contrived relationship with Aunt Emily sufficient to ruin them both should the truth ever be learned?

Hadn't her adopted aunt sacrificed and risked everything for Justina?

By all that was holy, she would control the wicked streak in her—a tendency Justina must've inherited from her mother.

Or perchance her father, as well, since she had absolutely no idea who *he* was. She'd seen a miniature of Richard Farthington, and Justina didn't recognize him. If he'd fathered her, he'd cut her mother from his life long before that fateful day a decade ago.

With renewed determination, Justina firmed her lips, pressing them into a hard line as her fingers curled into the book's pages.

She *would* resist her wayward tendencies.

I must.

In truth, neither she nor Aunt Emily had expected they'd be delayed this long in Bath. Though the snow had finally stopped in the late afternoon two days ago, at least two-and-one-half feet of thick white covered the ground, rendering coach travel impossible until it melted.

Justina wasn't the least put out regarding their forced stay, and she was honest enough to admit that her enigmatic host was the cause.

Well, her befuddling reaction to Baxter Bathurst was the reason.

In the days since her arrival, she'd reluctantly realized she'd looked for him quite often—*oh, very well, constantly*—and as the guests and their host took all of their meals together, she'd seen him at least thrice daily. Then there were the after-supper interactions with him, the day he'd introduced her to his birds, and four times he'd appeared in the parlor during tea.

It was silly she well knew, but Justina wished the frequent encounters were because he sought her out.

Cabbage head.

Her heart gave that delicious fluttering movement it did whenever her musings drifted in his direction.

God help her, she had it bad. Very bad, indeed.

How could it have happened so quickly?

Staring blankly at the open pages, she shook her head.

Aunt Emily would be horrified had she any notion. Which of course, Justina would make absolutely sure she never had the slightest inkling.

“You’re a besotted idiot,” Justina chastised herself beneath her breath, even though she was alone in the greenhouse’s almost tropical setting. The other guests didn’t favor the birds as much as she and, even confined in their cages as the exotic birds were, the Popkin sisters were quite terrified of the winged menagerie.

That suited Justina perfectly fine.

This bit of heaven was hers, and hers alone, to enjoy since the day Baxter had introduced her to the greenhouse and its avian guests. Today was the first day Princess and Duke hadn’t followed her into her sanctuary. Instead, Duke’s paw now much recovered, they’d gone for a walk with Baxter.

Who, she asked herself, walked in the freezing cold with snow up to their knees?

Baxter Bathhurst, that was who.

There was so much about him that she wanted to know and didn’t dare ask.

Where did he hail from?

Did he have any sisters or brothers?

Were his parents alive? What were his favorite foods? What had motivated him to hire his unique collection of servants? And why rescue unusual birds?

Possibly it was boredom that had her so consumed with thoughts of her host. Even as she considered the possibility, Justina dismissed it for the fustian rot that it was.

Baxter—how utterly wicked of her to think of him this way—had permitted her to feed a parrot and a cockatoo a bite of apple that first morning. Now, she was allowed to feed all of the birds a treat or two anytime she wished.

Having never before been infatuated, Justina assumed the eagerness to see Baxter—to look upon him, into his warm, caramel brown eyes, and to hear his rumbling baritone—was infatuation. His tenor held an inflection, the merest melodious accent she couldn’t quite place but which teased Justina’s ears and made him all that much more mysterious and intriguing.

Tantalizing. Fascinating. Enthralling.

And so many more words ending in *ing*.

Although she'd been ten years of age when she'd arrived in England, and it had taken her two years to learn to speak the language fluently, she hadn't retained a German accent. At least not one that was detectable, and Aunt Emily had assured her it was so. Not that it mattered for Justina's Austrian heritage was well-known, and she wasn't ashamed of it.

From the corner of her eye, a movement caught her attention. She glanced out the window, her book forgotten at what she beheld.

Baxter shoveled snow from the curved walkway.

He'd returned from his outing then.

From beneath her lashes, Justina observed him—for to stare outright would be most ill-mannered—quite enjoying the way his jacket pulled taut across his broad back and shoulders as he worked. He was inarguably handsome, his strong jaw, slightly hooked nose, and weather-touched features perhaps too rugged for the *Beau Monde's* standard of attraction compared to the pale-faced, mincing fops in London.

He turned to begin clearing another row, and a shock of sandy-brown hair fell over his forehead. The errant locks made him look younger, more boyish and carefree. Not that he was old, by any means.

She'd wager he hadn't reached his thirties yet, but there was an air about him as if he were burdened or perhaps troubled.

Little puffs of air floating from his much too alluring and well-formed mouth as he repeatedly inserted the broad, flat shovel into the snow and then heaved the load to the side gave testament to the frigid temperature outdoors.

Inside the conservatory, heated pipes kept the space quite comfortable. Should Justina require it, a knitted emerald-colored afghan lay draped across the arm of a nearby sofa. Two more were stacked upon a nearby table.

Naturally, neither were necessary during the warmer months when, she imagined, the space might feel as tropical as it looked with all of the shrubs, plants, and citrus trees.

The occasional squawk of a bird rent the tranquility every now and again, but she'd become so accustomed to the birds' sounds, she scarcely noticed any longer. In point of fact, she rather liked the chirps and chatter, and a desire to explore the places where these birds had originated swept her.

Baxter tossed another shovel of heavy snow with the ease of one emptying a dustbin.

Wasn't he cold?

He swiped a forearm across his forehead.

Well, perhaps not, given the rigorousness of the activity. It somewhat surprised Justina that, as the owner of the hotel, he didn't think himself above physical labor. She had been introduced to gentlemen and peers that she was convinced didn't even prepare their own toothbrushes.

As if sensing her perusal, Baxter glanced up, and a slow, devilish grin tilted his firm mouth upward. He winked—*the wicked man actually winked!*—before returning to his task.

A tremor, much like the one that had skittered up Justina's spine when he'd taken her in his arms to dance the other night, caused her to shudder again.

She could still feel his iron-like arms embracing her, smell the masculine scent of his cologne—something woodsy-mossy with a hint of cloves and leather—and see the faintest dark stubble on his jaw. She closed her eyes, savoring the memory, the feel of his legs brushing hers as they waltzed, how they moved in such perfect timing, swaying and dipping—

No! Cease this instant!

Justina popped her eyelids open and clapped the book shut, setting it aside as she lowered her feet to the floor. After donning her slippers, she considered joining Aunt Emily in the spa, but then upon further consideration, decided against it.

She'd satisfied her curiosity about *taking the cure* the day after their arrival. Truth be told, the experience had left much to be desired. Guests were offered an earthy tasting, cloudy water. They relaxed upon chaise lounges, sipping the less than appetizing beverage. If one wished, a bath in the mineral water could also be arranged.

Justina wrinkled her nose.

No, thank you very much.

It was said the waters were a cure for a myriad of ailments, including leprosy and infertility. But as Justina boasted a strong constitution and had seldom been sick with so much as a head cold her entire life, she'd eschewed the experience.

She had no interest in visiting the acclaimed Bath Pump Room at a later date either.

Aunt Emily *had* indulged in taking the waters and a bath but had declared a rather annoying film had stuck to her skin afterward, and she feared she smelled like rotten eggs. That was the salt in the chloride, Baxter had explained. The minerals were the cause of the murky tint to the waters as

well.

How did a simple hotelier know such a specific detail?

Well, he did own a spa, and it did seem reasonable he'd educate himself about the history of the hot spring, Justina supposed.

A gorgeous blue macaw named Romero cocked his head and lifted a foot, his version of a wave. He then billed the latch to his cage, more of a good-sized rectangular pen.

Ah, he wanted out.

Baxter had shown her which of the birds were permitted to fly about the greenhouse as long as the doors were firmly shut. Astonishingly, some of the birds returned to their cages when they needed to relieve themselves, for which she was most grateful.

Once Justina had checked the outer door to assure it was shut tight, she made her way to the other, which opened into a small covered courtyard that led to the main house. Before she reached the doorway, however, Godfrey Howlette swaggered into the conservatory.

Had he been drinking this early in the day?

It wouldn't be the first time he'd imbibed before the midday meal. The man tottered about half-pished most of the time. What was more, he ogled her in a most disconcerting fashion as well. This, however, was the first occasion they'd been alone together, and at once unease prickled her skin and took to wing in her belly.

It was also the first time he'd actually ventured into the greenhouse while she'd been a guest at Bathurst Hotel and Spa.

Had he sought her out, knowing she'd be alone?

"Ah, there you are, Miss Farthington." His mouth pinching in distaste, he cast a fleeting glance at the birds. So his venturing here wasn't out of any admiration for the flora or fauna. "I wondered where you'd hidden yourself away these past few days."

Retreating to the center of the room to put more space between herself and Mr. Howlette, who had the disgusting habit of staring at her bosoms while running his tongue over his lower lip, she squared her shoulders.

"I assure you, I am not *hiding* away, Mr. Howlette." *Boorish buffoon.* "I am simply particular about whose company I keep."

In an instant, his affable expression transformed into annoyance.

"I do hope you aren't referring to me," he remarked casually as he closed the door behind him with a distinct and rather portentous *snick*. "I am the

nephew of an earl,” he informed her with an air of great self-importance, his nose elevated in a haughty manner.

La de da.

A thread of unease traipsed across Justina’s shoulders, and she speared a glance at the window where she’d seen Baxter shoveling snow earlier.

Drat and blast.

He was gone.

She’d hoped... Well, she didn’t know precisely what she’d expected.

Yes, she did.

She’d hoped he’d notice what was occurring in the greenhouse and save her from this wretched man.

“Mr. Howlette, unfortunately”—*fortunately for me*—“you’ve caught me just as I was leaving.” Romero’s exercise would have to wait, poor bird. “My aunt is expecting me.”

Howlette advanced toward her, his movements predatory and calculating, a smug smile quirking the edges of his too-full lips.

“Justina,” he drawled with an alarming gleam in his gaze. “May I call you Justina? It’s such a lovely name.” A shudder of revulsion rippled through her. “We are rather like a family here at Bathurst, are we not? Dining together, seeing one another all day, *sleeping* under the same roof.”

The way he said sleeping raised her hackles, and she’d wager her virtue that his lewd gaze sank to her bosoms before she counted to three.

One, two...

His lascivious focus slid to her breasts again.

“No, you may not. And no, we assuredly are not,” Justina snapped.

She made to move past him, but the boor stepped in front of her. She stepped to the left and, once again, he blocked her way, that oily smile yet skewing his mouth.

“What childish game do you play?” Thoroughly miffed with his machinations, she planted her hands on her hips. “As I already said, my aunt is expecting me. I am tardy in meeting her as it is.”

God forgive her for that little taradiddle.

Howlette’s smile grew slyer still. “I know for a fact that your aunt is having a lie-down. She has the headache and retired to her chamber nearly half an hour ago.”

And this unscrupulous rat took the opportunity to seek me out.

“Then all the more reason for me to go to her.”

What was the rotter about?

Was she going to have to be rude?

Howlette stepped nearer, so near Justina could smell the spirits he'd been imbibing, as well as sweat and a whiff of garlic. Nonetheless, she resisted the urge to back away.

This churl would not intimidate her.

She couldn't, however, prevent her nostrils from flaring or narrowing her eyes.

"From the moment I laid eyes upon you, Justina Farthington, I knew there was something special between us." He brazenly traced a finger along her jaw, his attention once more trained on her bodice. "I'm sure we can find a pleasurable way to relieve the godawful tedium of being housebound."

"You go beyond the mark, sir." She jerked her face away and beat a tactical retreat as she furtively sought a weapon of some sort. The fireplace was too far away to avail herself of the poker.

How much damage could an apple thrown at his head do?

Not enough.

He pursued her, advancing a menacing step for everyone one she took backward.

"If you do not let me pass, I shall scream."

Grabbing her upper arms, he hauled her to him, wrenching a gasp from her. He ground his hips into hers before smiling lecherously. "I *like* it when my women scream."

What the devil?

"I beg your pardon?"

He likes—

Thrusting a hand into her hair, Howlette jerked hard, and tears sprang to Justina's eyes even as she heard her hairpins pinging onto the stone floor.

Jerking her head from side to side, to avoid his slobbering mouth upon her face, she feared she might be sick or perhaps faint.

No, you shall not!

This wasn't the time for feminine hysterics or weaknesses.

Her mind whirled, even as she struggled to escape his punishing grasp. If she could manage a few inches between them, she'd knee him in his man parts. "Let go of—"

Howlette mashed his wet lips onto hers, and she nearly gagged. Her struggles became more violent as panic swirled in her middle.

Would anyone come looking for her?

Aunt Emily was probably sound asleep by now.

If she managed to scream, could anyone hear her?

Like a man possessed by a demonic force, he tore frantically at the neckline of her gown.

Oh, God.

Was she about to be ravished?

Several birds cried out in alarm.

Justina tried to clamp her mouth shut, but when Howlette groped her breast, painfully squeezing the nipple and laughing maniacally against her lips, she gasped. In an instant, he shoved his tongue into her mouth.

She did gag then and renewed her exertions.

Howlette wouldn't have his way with her without a colossal battle, by God. She'd tear his hair out, bite, scratch, kick...

The conservatory's outer door crashed open, and a primitive, enraged animalistic cry echoed through the space.

The birds erupted into a deafening chorus of frightened calls and squawks.

Before Justina could comprehend what was happening, Howlette had been yanked from her and spun around.

Unsteady and her arms flailing, she stumbled backward, almost falling. Then in a blink, comprehension dawned.

Baxter.

Oh, thank God, Thank God.

Scalding tears leaked from her eyes as she hugged her arms around her waist, rocking slightly. Her lungs burned, and her tight throat throbbed from the effort to hold back her sobs.

He'd come.

He'd really, truly come.

She'd wished him here, and here he was.

His mouth curled into a feral snarl, Baxter swept a furious gaze over Justina, taking in her bruised lips and her hair tumbling haphazardly about her shoulders before his enraged gaze sank to her chest.

In horror, she realized Howlette had ripped the fabric of her gown, and it hung loose, exposing her breasts. Mortified, she snatched the torn remnants together, a hatred like she'd never known billowing through her in undulating waves.

If she were a man, she'd call the damned scapegrace out.

If you were a man, you'd not be in this situation.

"Come now, Bathhurst," Howlette wheedled, prying at Baxter's fists clenching his coat lapels. "You're a hot-blooded man. You know how some women are." He gave a knowing wink. "The slut wanted it. She's been teasing me since she arrived. Wiggling her ass and thrusting her breasts—"

"Ye goddamned bloody scunner," Baxter roared, plowing his fist into Howlette's face, breaking his nose. Bone crunched, and blood spurted.

Scots. That's what the accent is.

Justina fought an absurd urge to burst into laughter at the ill-timed epiphany.

Howling, Howlette staggard and swayed.

"That was for touchin' her," Baxter growled savagely. "This one is for speakin' such filth about her."

The second blow drove Howlette to his knees. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he pitched, face-first, onto the floor.

Shoulders heaving and his breath coming in short heavy rasps, Baxter raised his kind brown eyes, now brimming with concern and compassion to Justina's shocked gaze.

"Justina?"

And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the whole world, he held out his arms.

Without being aware she'd even moved, she flew into his embrace.

Chapter Four

4



4



As Justina clung to Baxter, great tremors shaking her trim figure, he nuzzled her hair and spoke Gaelic in low, comforting tones. He ran his palms up and down her delicate spine and across her shoulders.

Baxter well knew he overstepped the bounds, taking it upon himself to soothe her, but he could no more prevent himself from doing so than he could from thrashing Howlette for taking liberties. From the moment he'd seen Justina in the drawing room, there'd been something about her that connected with him in an almost tangible way.

It made no sense, but who was he to question the mystery of it?

He drew her minutely closer, savoring the sensation. Her form fit his so perfectly, curve to curve and angle to angle, that it rather stunned him. He could hold her this way forever.

"I thought he—" she managed in a choked, stricken voice, her body quaking. "If you hadn't come—"

She shook her head against his chest, and the faint odor of orange blossoms and lemon verbena wafted upward. She smelled like spring and sunshine and meadows.

"Hush now," he soothed. "You're safe, lass. He'll be gone within the hour, I promise you, sweet."

Baxter reined his brogue under control once more, but the vestiges of his earlier wrath still thrummed hotly through his veins and pounded in his temples. He'd wanted to kill that sniveling bastard for laying a finger on Justina. Even now, as Howlette lay semi-conscious, Baxter barely suppressed the impulse to kick him in the ribs.

He wasn't confident Justina was able to return to the main hotel under her own strength, and he wasn't leaving Howlette without giving the cockscum a tongue lashing. He flexed his fingers, still wanting to pummel the blackguard to ten Sundays from now.

He glanced around for something to cover her torn gown and restore her modesty and spied one of the throws he'd commissioned Widow Honeybun to make for the hotel.

"Can you stand on your own?" he asked, mindful to keep his fulminating fury from seeping into his voice.

Justina nodded, and head tucked to her chin and clutching her ruined bodice, she stepped from his embrace.

At once, he felt the oddest sense of bereftness.

How much worse would it be when she left Bathurst Hotel and Spa? Before she left, he intended to ask if he could call upon her. The draw to her was that strong, that compelling, that...irresistible.

She swayed slightly, and he clasped her shoulders, steadying her.

"I'm going to collect the throw just there, so you can cover yourself, Justina."

Eyes downcast, her lashes a dark fan against her waxen cheeks, she nodded again but remained silent.

If anyone should come upon them, she'd be utterly ruined. No one must know of this, and as the Duke of San Sebastian, he meant to put the fear of God in Howlette. He'd annihilate the bugger if he breathed a single syllable about what had transpired between him and Justina in the conservatory. Blackguards like him liked to brag of their prowess and conquests.

In a trice, Baxter had retrieved the soft, knitted afghan and fashioned it into a makeshift shawl. He draped it across Justina's creamy shoulders, and she accepted the ends and gathered them together in front, effectively hiding her gown's dishevelment. Except for her hair, to anyone happening upon her, it appeared she'd become chilled and wrapped herself in the fine wool to stay warm.

"Justina, please sit for a moment while I deal with him." Baxter guided her to the chair the farthest from Howlette.

A gardenia, two large, ornate birdcages, as well as potted orange and lemon trees brought inside for the winter partially obstructed the view. That worked to his benefit quite nicely.

After seeing her comfortably seated, Baxter squatted before her.

"Justina, please stay here. I'll return shortly and scout a path to your chamber so that no one sees you. There are back corridors we can use to assure your privacy."

"Thank you, Baxter."

Her light green eyes, fringed by damp sooty lashes, held a hint of her usual spirit.

Unable to help himself, he touched her cheek with his fingertips, encountering skin as soft and smooth as a rose petal. "You're very welcome."

What did one say when a woman thanked one for saving her from being violated?

Certainly not, "My pleasure," or "Anytime, or "I hope to do so again."

Her cheeks turned a becoming pink, and she fixed her gaze on her lap.

"I'll be but a few minutes," he assured her.

In a half dozen lengthy strides, he returned to Howlette, now sitting up, his shoulders slumped while he held a bloodied handkerchief to his nose.

He glared at Baxter, pure hatred spewing from his bloodshot eyes, one already starting to blacken nicely. Wincing, the spoiled assling muttered, "So help me, you'll pay for this Bathurst. I'm practically aristocracy. You'll soon regret laying hands on your betters. *My* uncle is an earl. An *earl*, I tell you. I vow you'll regret the day you attacked me, *Scotsman*."

That he spat as if his mouth was full of offal.

"An earl?" Baxter arched a brow as he towered over Howlette. "Ye dinna say."

"Indeed," Howlette snuffled into the soiled cloth while trying to attempt an air of arrogance and failing miserably. "The Earl of Torrens." He narrowed his eyes to insolent slits. "He'll see you destroyed. No one will visit your rustic hotel when he's finished with you. I'll have you charged with assault causing bodily harm. You'll soon find yourself rotting away in prison."

Pompous windbag.

Baxter chuckled as he examined a torn fingernail.

Had that happened while shoveling snow or when he'd punched this poltroon?

Lowering himself to his haunches, he was gratified to see Howlette's eyes widen in renewed fright as he nervously scampered backward like a wounded crab.

Romero laughed and pointed a claw at him, screeching in a sing-song voice, "Idi-ot. Idi-ot."

He'd belonged to a traveling entertainer for twenty years. When the man died, no one knew what to do with the bird who spoke only when he damn well felt like it.

“Well then, do tell Torrens that the *Duke* of San Sebastian sends his greetings,” Baxter said, making certain to keep his voice low enough that Justina wouldn’t overhear. He didn’t want word of his title to become common knowledge here, just yet.

It was rather disconcerting and not just a little inconvenient how behavior toward him changed when people knew he was titled, and more so that he was a reluctant duke. He’d much prefer to be treated like any other ordinary man and judged on his character and actions rather than the lofty title bestowed upon him.

Howlette’s jaw unhinged, sagging to his chin in a most undignified manner.

“And do make sure you mention *you* were intent on defiling an innocent young woman,” Baxter drawled, driving home his point.

“D...D...Duke of San Sebastian?” Howlette croaked, his voice a sliver of a sound. “You? You’re a...*duke*?”

The wry smile Baxter curved his mouth into didn’t begin to express his satisfaction at the stupefaction of the maggot before him.

“Indeed, I am.” He leaned forward. “And a duke *always* outranks an earl. Therefore, I’ll say this very clearly so that there are absolutely no misunderstandings between us. You will depart Bathhurst Hotel and Spa within the quarter-hour. You will not speak of what occurred here to anyone. *Ever*. And you will, from this point forward, do your utmost to never encounter Miss Farthington or me again.”

Baxter rose to his full height, and though not overly tall at eleven inches over five feet, he was well-muscled, unlike the quaking fop before him. He speared Howlette with a murderous glare.

“If you *ever* so much as think of Miss Farthington, much less speak her name...I. Will. Destroy. *You*. You’ll have to leave England, for I’ll use every resource available to me as a duke to see you ostracized. Even your dear uncle won’t acknowledge you by the time I’m done with you.”

Baxter glanced toward Justina, still huddled on the chair, her face averted. Renewed rage sluiced through him as he turned his attention back to Howlette. “Understood?”

The little remaining color in Howlette’s pasty face drained away, and he gave a single stiff nod.

Baxter watched him struggle to his feet and leave the greenhouse, idly wondering what cock and bull excuse he’d give for his appearance should

anyone happen upon him.

Cupping his nape, he turned toward Justina. She'd risen and, though still slightly wan, looked to have composed herself as well as had managed to restore her hair to some semblance of order.

"You're Scots?"

Of all the things she could've said, that wasn't what he'd expected.

"Aye."

"How did you come to own a hotel in Bath?"

He scratched his brow, giving her a sideways glance. "It's a long story. Much too long to tell right now."

"I see." She gave a little nod and turned toward the door Howlette had disappeared through.

Baxter touched her elbow. "I'll tell you someday if you'd truly like to know, but for now, I think it imperative you go to your chamber and change your gown. I assure you, Howlette will keep his mouth shut."

She gave another nod before suddenly turning back to him. "Baxter...?"

Justina licked her lower lip, and he stifled a groan.

What a colossal arse he was, finding such a simple action alluring when she'd undergone the shock of her life.

"Yes, Justina?"

She hurried back to him, stood up on her toes, and brushed butterfly wing soft lips across his cheek.

Baxter remained stone still, afraid to so much as blink, lest his control snap.

He wanted her.

God, how he wanted her.

Wanted to know everything about this intriguing woman who managed to upend his world in such a short time. What was more, he wanted to protect her, and while he'd always treated women with respect, never had there been this gripping desire to safeguard one.

"Thank you. I'll never forget what you've done for me," Justina murmured, a delightful flush skating dual paths up her cheeks. Her attention slid to his mouth, and she bit her lower lip.

"Justina? I..."

Och, hell.

Then she was in his arms, where she ought to remain for the rest of their lives, and Baxter was brushing the unbearable sweetness of her lips with his.

She sighed and relaxed against him, her fragrance wafting around them, intoxicating and dizzying.

Eyes closed, he savored every second, trying to memorize the moment, the smells, the taste, the feelings.

Her lips moved beneath his, and heaviness settled in Baxter's loins.

Justina clung to him, her kisses unpracticed but fervent.

Bliss. Pure bliss.

"Kiss me. Kiss me." A parrot's harsh voice interrupted the magical moment. "Ki-iss."

The parrot started making loud smooching noises.

Bloody, damned bird.

Pulling away, Justina settled back onto the balls of her feet. Her soft green eyes wide in wonderment, she touched her fingertips to her crimson lips. Then, without a word, she turned on her heels and fled.

Chapter Five



Bathurst Hotel and Spa That evening

My God. Justina had almost been violated. Ruined. Compromised.

She pressed trembling hands to her fluttering tummy, renewed fear washing over her. She could scarcely conceive what had occurred. It was like something from a Gothic novel. Young women of good repute were not set upon by a gentleman in a hotel conservatory.

What was this world coming to when such things occurred?

When gentlemen preyed upon women?

When she'd witnessed Baxter charging into the greenhouse, his expression fierce and intent, a vengeful Highland warrior, her heart had leaped in relief and also in a jolt of apprehension. Never had she observed such primal or violent behavior.

Nonetheless, Howlette had deserved the pummeling he'd received, and she couldn't summon a speck of sympathy or compassion for the blackguard. God rot his soul. May he burn in the ninth circle of hell for eternity.

She troubled her lower lip as the thought that had plagued her since she'd returned to her chamber hours ago reared its ugly, pointed head again.

Would Howlette keep his word?

Would he truly never speak of the incident?

How would he explain his injuries, then?

Well, a tale contrived about drunkards attacking him at a tavern would suffice, she supposed. A man of Howlette's ilk would have no trouble manufacturing believable twaddle.

Baxter had assured her Howlette wouldn't breathe a word, but how could he be positive?

Inhaling a cleansing breath, Justina lifted a shoulder in an attempt to shake off her doleful ruminations. She released the air slowly through her nostrils, the deliberate act steadying her jangled nerves.

Quite simply, it was a matter of Godfrey Howlette's word against hers.

He could prove nothing. *Nothing*.

Yes, but since when did gossipmongers care about the truth?

Just the mere suggestion of impropriety was enough to send the chinwags' tongues into a wagging frenzy. And there were always ears too ready to listen to claptrap and hogwash.

As Justina glanced in the cheval mirror and tucked a stray strand of hair into place with a pin, she canted her head. She didn't look different in her mint green and rose petal pink gown, a green ribbon threaded through her dark curls.

Nevertheless, she was irreversibly changed.

Within a span of a few minutes, she'd experienced a taste of the worst and best life had to offer. Baxter's kiss.

Marvelous.

Sensational.

Wondrous.

A bevy of words yet none entirely accurate.

Baxter had kindled a conflagration in her and every pore, every nerve, every part of her being wanted more. More. God, yes, *more*.

Closing her eyes against the reflection gazing back at her, equal parts cynical and expectant, Justina groaned.

She'd kissed Baxter. Brazen as any dockside strumpet, she'd risen on her toes and pressed her lips against his firm, faintly rough cheek. A man she'd known but a week.

What could she have been thinking?

She'd wanted to show him her appreciation, but more than that, she'd wished to convey he meant something to her, and she mightn't ever have the opportunity to be alone with him again. Certainly, it was foolish and impulsive and unequivocally irrational.

But then *he'd* kissed her... Oh, that glorious, marvelous kiss.

A flush heated her from her waist to her hairline, and tingles sparked all over her body.

Good Lord.

She hadn't known what to expect for her first kiss, though naturally she'd

dreamed about it. Her daydreams didn't come close to the glorious reality.

Nor could she have imagined the bone-melting warmth or the unhinging of her knees or the small inferno he'd ignited in her middle and which still smoldered—secretly and naughtily—deep within her. And which flamed to life whenever she thought about Baxter.

Which, in all honesty, was nearly every second of every minute since she'd fled the greenhouse.

Being held in his iron-like arms, cradled against the granite wall of his chest, inhaling his unique scent and all the while, his mouth had explored hers. No one had ever mentioned anything about tongues tangling erotically during kissing.

What else had she been kept oblivious of?

Thank all the divine powers she hadn't come upon anyone as she'd rushed to her room using the servants' passageways. Justina would've been hard put to explain not only her disheveled state but her swollen lips and high color.

Aunt Emily mustn't ever know of either the kiss or that Justina had been set upon by Howlette. The poor dear might very well retire them both to the country. Although Justina wasn't entirely comfortable in crowds, neither did she wish to be relegated to the far corner of England to rusticate until her face wrinkled and her hair grayed.

In truth, the kiss she'd shared with Baxter had rattled her comportment every bit as much as Howlette's assault. The latter she never wished to experience again, but the former...

She opened her eyes once more, seeking the bedside clock.

In fifteen minutes, she'd join the guests in the drawing room for their usual pre-dinner libation.

How could she face Baxter?

With grace and aplomb, she commanded herself. In the manner Aunt Emily had taught her. A lady always presents herself with decorum and composure no matter what she may be thinking or feeling.

As Justina placed her hand on the door latch, another unwelcome thought intruded, and she instinctively put a hand to her hair.

Her hairpins.

Several had dislodged during Howlette's rough treatment. If someone came upon them scattered on the conservatory floor, they were sure to raise speculation. True, but no one would know the pins belonged to her, and there

weren't so very many pins—perhaps six or so.

Ten minutes later, she stood with a glass of untouched sherry in her hand, half-listening to Mildred Popkin prattle on about whether taking the waters had improved her arthritis and the godlike Prussian prince she'd met during her first season.

Sixty years ago.

Baxter and Aunt Emily had yet to make an appearance, and Justina briefly considered going in search of her aunt. She swiftly dismissed the notion. If Aunt Emily were indisposed with one of her megrims, she'd have let Justina know.

But where was Baxter?

Was he avoiding her after their kiss?

He'd never been tardy to the pre-dinner gathering before. A *beau monde* peer would be hard-pressed to outshine Baxter as a host. His attention to detail and to his guests' comfort was exceptional.

"Everyone deserves to be treated like royalty, if only for a short time," he'd declared that first night.

"Most peculiar, don't you think so, Miss Farthington?" Mildred said, her tone conspiratorial.

Hearing her name snapped Justina back to the present.

The Popkin sisters peered at her, both with expectant expressions on their wrinkled faces as they blinked their faded brown eyes at her in unison behind their spectacles.

"I beg your pardon?" Justina offered a bright smile as an apology for allowing her mind to wander.

"Mr. Howlette," Marian Popkin chimed in.

Howlette?

Panicked filled Justina.

Oh, God.

What did they know?

She only managed a bland look as her mind scrambled, imagining one horrific scenario after another.

"His rather abrupt departure," Mildred provided helpfully.

"Um, yes," Justina said. "Perchance, Mr. Howlette feared another snowstorm would make the roads impassable once more."

For she'd learned from the chatty maid, Ginny, who'd prepared her bath that the main roads were now fit for travel. This meant, in all likelihood,

Justina and Aunt Emily would depart on the morrow.

Her stomach sank to her toes, and the oddest hollow sensation plagued her middle.

It was too soon.

Justina wasn't ready to leave. There was this thing between her and Baxter to explore. If she left, she'd never know what it was or what it might become.

But how on earth could she persuade Aunt Emily to stay on for a few days?

Ginny entered the drawing room and made straight for Justina. She bobbed a shallow curtsy, one hazel eye peering at Justina and the other pointing inward, toward the girl's nose. "Miss Farthington, your aunt bid me tell you she's indisposed this evening, after all."

Concerned, Justina put her glass aside. "I shall go to her at once."

Heavens above.

What kind of a horrid person was she?

She'd not even inquired after Aunt Emily's headache.

"No, Miss." Shaking her head, the maid gave a lopsided smile. "She said you'd say that. You're to enjoy your evening, as she plans to depart tomorrow, the weather and her health permitting."

It was settled then.

Justina and her aunt were to leave. And Justina wanted to wail like an infant at the unfairness of it.

"Very well. Thank you, Ginny."

With another bob, the maid departed.

"So, you're leaving tomorrow, *too*?" His grizzly brows contorting, Major Spaulding glanced around the room. "I do believe we all intend to depart within the next day or two."

"Indeed," Paul Harmon provided with an adoring glance at his blushing bride. "We're anxious to set up house and start a family."

His wife's cheeks grew hopelessly redder.

The tiniest pinch of envy poked Justina at the palpable love the Harmons shared. Beyond a dance or a partner for piquet, no man had shown any marked interest in her. She'd often wondered, quite uncharitably given all that her adopted aunt had done for her, if Emily had warned them away somehow.

Or perhaps it was that she was Austrian. She was dowerless, and that

eliminated a great many beaux and suitors. In particular, those in need of a fortune for one reason or another.

“Ah, there’s our host now,” boomed the major, puffing out his chest as was his wont.

Justina couldn’t prevent her attention from seeking Baxter out. Tonight, he wore a stylish superfine woolen coat in the deepest blue. His black trousers enhanced his long legs, and not even Beau Brummel himself could find fault with the intricate folds of his cravat.

His warm honey gaze met hers from across the room, and a powerful current traveled between them until Marian Popkin tapped his arm, demanding his attention. “This has been a delightful respite, Mr. Bathhurst. You may rest assured. My sister and I shall encourage our friends to visit and take the cure. And we will be back in July.”

“Thank you, Miss Popkin,” he demurred, glancing over her silvery head to search out Justina.

She couldn’t prevent the pleased smile teasing the edges of her mouth.



Dinner passed in a haze as Justina attempted polite conversation with the major on her left and Mildred on her right. She scarcely tasted the meal since all of her concentration was focused on not staring at Baxter.

She thought perhaps there’d been white soup and fowl of some sort.

Duck? Partridge? Chicken?

There *had* been mashed peas. That Justina clearly remembered, for she detested peas.

And dessert had been...?

Something soft and sweet. Pudding perhaps.

Over and over and over, her attention shied toward Baxter. And, by heavens, several times, she’d found his hooded gaze trained upon her. It thrilled her in a most enticing way.

Never had a man affected her so. Mayhap the shock of being attacked had impacted her more than she’d realized, causing her current befuddlement.

At long last, dinner ended.

Deciding wisdom the best course of action, before she made a complete

cake of herself, she excused herself from the usual after-dinner activities. A small frown pulled Baxter's brows together, and his mouth curved downward the merest bit at her announcement.

Was he disappointed?

Justina fought the giddiness such a notion caused.

They'd shared a kiss. One kiss. A kiss she'd instigated. She was a fool to make more of it than that.

She paused outside Aunt Emily's chamber and knocked softly upon the door. "Aunt Emily?" No answer was forthcoming. Justina tried the handle. Finding it locked securely, she whispered, "Good night, Aunt Emily. Sleep well."

Tomorrow they'd leave this place, perhaps never to return, and Justina couldn't help but feel like her life had been irreversibly changed these past few days. Like a river burbling downhill and splitting in two directions. She'd been on one course, and now she was on another, only she had no idea what the outcome would be or where she'd end up.

Deep in thought, she continued on to her chamber.

After removing her gown and brushing her hair, Justina wrapped another of the exquisitely knitted throws about her shoulders and settled into a chair. Staring at the fire, she replayed her kiss with Baxter over and over in her head until sleep claimed her.

Awakening sometime later, Justina stretched and yawned.

A glance at the bedside clock revealed the time to be half-past eleven. After slipping her chemise off and donning her night rail, she blew out all but one candle.

Was Baxter abed?

Was he thinking about their kiss too?

Unable to sleep after her nap, Justina wandered to the window and pushed aside the draperies. Today's sun had melted much of the snow, but a goodly amount still covered the ground, especially in the shaded areas.

This was the rear of the hotel. It faced what she guessed might be a charming garden in the summer. Her focus fell upon a lone figure standing with his hands clasped behind his back and his head turned upward, staring at the star-strewn sky.

Baxter.

What was it about that man that called to her?

As if sensing her perusal, he slowly turned and stared up at her window.

She didn't move away or pretend maidenly shyness. He'd caught her staring at him again, yet somehow, she thought that rather pleased him.

A small cloud drifted over the moon, dousing the silvery light, and she squinted into the darkness.

He was gone.

She sighed and let the draperies slide shut once more.

Tomorrow they would leave.

Would it be too forward or fast to ask him if they might correspond?

She'd just pulled the bedcoverings back when a soft scratching sounded at her door, so faint that she thought she'd misheard.

It came again.

Had Aunt Emily's condition worsened?

On bare feet, she ventured near but instead of throwing the door open, acquiesced to caution. Being attacked did that to a person. "Who is it?"

"Baxter. I know it's late, but what I have to say cannot wait until tomorrow. Can I come in for a minute, please?"

Firmly shoving prudence and good sense aside, Justina turned the lock then pressed the handle and opened the door just enough for him to slip inside.

"Make haste," she whispered, trying not to notice he wore only his boots, trousers, and a fine lawn shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled to his elbows.

Baxter stepped near and drew a tendril of her hair over her shoulder. "I have to leave before dawn. There's an issue at one of my businesses." *He has other businesses?* "I only received word directly before we dined tonight."

Hence his tardiness.

"I would like permission to call on ye when I return. I ken it's sudden, and we dinna ken each other."

There was that melodious burr again.

Justina couldn't contain her smile. "Isn't that what calling on me is for? So that we can come to know each other better?"

"Aye, lass. It is." He wrapped those indecently muscled arms around her, edging her nearer and nearer until a scant couple of inches separated them. "Then I have yer permission?"

Justina smiled up at him. "You do, although Aunt Emily might not agree."

"Give me yer direction. Yer aunt can hardly boot me onto the street when

I sound the knocker.”

He didn't know Aunt Emily.

“I'll leave it with Mr. Bixby,” Justina said, astonished at the throaty quality of her voice.

“I canna just let ye go.” Having slipped into his brogue, Baxter pressed his mouth to the crown of her head. “I dinna ken what this is between us, but I've never felt anythin' like it, Justina.”

“Me either,” she whispered, trying and failing to ignore the springy hair visible where his shirt gaped open. Tilting her head upward, she met his blazing gaze and recognized her own need in his eyes.

“Kiss me, Baxter.”

Chapter Six

6

6

Baxter was only too happy to oblige. He'd been semi-erect since this afternoon. Now that he had Justina in his arms, his loins once more ached with the desire to take her. In her diaphanous nightgown, the filmy fabric barely concealing her womanly charms, she was Aphrodite and Freya and Venus all wrapped into one tantalizing, fascinating, remarkable woman.

And by damn, he wanted her.

God above, how he wanted her.

But he craved more than her lush body beneath his, on top of his, and in another half a dozen ways or more. There was a scintillating connection between him and Justina that went beyond physical attraction, and he was convinced she felt it too. Even if she didn't understand precisely what it was.

Justina Farthington was not a woman of loose virtue or lax moral character. He'd seen her struggling against Howlette for all she was worth to preserve her virtue. And yet here she was, in Baxter's embrace, eagerly returning his kisses, her enthusiasm making up for her inexperience.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind that she hadn't a lot of practice kissing, and that knowledge inflamed him further. With a low, possessive sound deep in his throat, he tightened his arms, urging Justina nearer still.

Her little sighs and moans told him she was as overcome with passion as he.

This woman was his.

His!

Baxter felt it in the very marrow of his bones.

His tongue swept hers as he trailed a hand over the plump perfection of one buttock before spanning his palm over the other delectable mound.

She arched into him, her soft belly pressing against the rigid, aching length in his trousers. He groaned, angling Justina so he could trail hot kisses over her ivory neck and to the hollow at the juncture of her throat that had

driven him crazy for days.

Inhaling, he tried to memorize her scent, to draw it inside him until it seared his very spirit. Oh, he'd bedded equally beautiful, voluptuous women before, but none had touched his soul, marking him as hers, as surely as if she'd branded him with her initials.

Justina's pebbled nipples thrust against the delicate fabric of her gown as she instinctively rubbed against him. His bollocks filled with blood, the swelling almost unbearable.

Excruciating bliss.

Agonizing ecstasy.

Christ on the blessed cross.

Baxter was nigh on to exploding in his trousers, and they hadn't progressed beyond kissing. What would it be like to take Justina fully? Have her naked and hungry and wet for him? Her breasts exposed and her legs parted, awaiting his entry? His possession?

With a half-moan, half groan, he gradually eased away from her, all the while playing his fingers lightly over her curves. He couldn't stop touching her, and it both thrilled and scared the hell out of him. No woman had ever affected him thus.

His carnal encounters had always been with willing, experienced females who craved a physical release. And even the most practiced of those women, some with skills that a demimonde would envy, hadn't ever driven him to the point of spilling his seed before he'd even freed his cock from its tight confines.

But this woman with her alabaster skin, pale green eyes, silky almond brown hair ribboned with golden and ashen streaks, and the two plump, kissable pillows of her mouth...

Breathing raggedly, he grudgingly lifted his lips from hers and gave her *one, two, three* tender, quick kisses. Did she have to taste so damned, irresistibly sweet? He was like a drunkard who couldn't drink enough ale or rum, always needing—craving—more. More. *More.*

"Baxter?" she said shakily, her voice sultry and thick with desire. "My bed...?"

By God, she was offering herself to him.

A prized, unexpected gift he must refuse.

Och, I must.

It might very well kill him.

He gritted his teeth and prayed to God, all the saints, and even a few other deities to give him the strength to do what he had to. Deny her tempting offer. When he took Justina Farthington to bed, it would be as his wife, and when he could take as much time as he wanted to introduce her to the pleasures of the flesh.

That brought a satisfied grin to his mouth.

He didn't give a bloody damn that they'd only known each other mere days.

This was more than lust or desire.

It was a connection of spirits—one soul recognizing its mate against all odds.

“I canna, lass.” Baxter couldn't say all of the other things, wildly stupid and impetuous things on the tip of his tongue.

Disappointment pooled in her gorgeous green eyes, still slightly glazed with passion. She bit her lower lip—red and plump and moist—and after a moment, averted her gaze while giving a stiff nod. “I...I understand.”

No, she didn't. Not in the least.

He almost laughed aloud but feared he'd further humiliate her.

He'd be bound, Justina erroneously believed he didn't want her.

God help him; nothing was farther from the truth. But if Baxter didn't stop now, he wouldn't be able to, and he did have to leave before dawn tomorrow. He'd not love Justina, make her his, and leave her for weeks, wondering if he was sincere in his protestations. Fretting she'd given her virtue to a charlatan. Worried she might be with child.

Even in this short time, she meant too much to him to do that to her.

“I shall call upon you, Justina, when I return from Lancashire. My intentions toward you are honorable. I vow it.”

He knew next to nothing about the woman gazing at him so intently and slightly vulnerable as well. Aye, she was gently-bred and as refined as any lady he'd encountered in a *haut ton* ballroom. Her comportment was without flaw, and she was witty and kind and intelligent.

But he didn't know anything about her family, her past, or even what activities she enjoyed other than reading and feeding his birds.

I can discover all of that later.

What mattered was that he not lose this opportunity to make his interest clearly known, for whatever this was between them was rare and precious and should never, ever be disregarded. The caution and reason he was

renowned for seemed to have flown to the farthest corners of the earth. And to his consternation and astonishment, he didn't give ten damns.

The Baxter Bathurst, Duke of San Sebastian, of a week ago would've had apoplexy at such a ludicrous notion.

With his forefinger, he lifted her chin inch by inch until her eyes, those mesmerizing pools of green, met his. Dark blue-green rimmed her irises, and the palest yellow-green circled her pupils.

A trace of indecision crinkled the corners of her eyes the merest bit.

"Believe me, please."

My God, he was practically begging her. *Him*, the Duke of San Sebastian, who'd never begged for anything.

Her eyes wide and her mouth slightly parted, Justina searched his face. Her expression cleared, her eyebrows relaxing, and serenity settled upon her delicate features.

"I do believe you, Baxter."

And she did.

He could see the trust in her guileless countenance, and that faith in him humbled Baxter.

"Let's see you to bed, then," he said. "I'm not sure how long I'll be away, but I cannot imagine it will be more than a week. Plus, travel time, of course."

A persistent grin tipped his mouth.

She nodded, and he couldn't help notice her elegant neck again. How could the sloping column of her neck be so arousing? Because it beckoned a man to look lower, to the round perfection of her shoulders and the seductive swell of breasts beneath the wholly inadequate fabric of her nightgown.

"That will give me time to tell Aunt Emily and for her to become accustomed to the idea." A winsome smile teased the corners of her mouth.

He cocked his head. "Do you think she'll be opposed to me courting you?"

Honestly, Baxter hadn't considered that.

They dinna ken ye're a duke.

And he wanted to keep it that way for a while longer. Naturally, Justina would have to know eventually, but not yet. Baxter had to be convinced she wished to be with him because of who *he* was and for no other reason.

To Justina and Emily Grenville, he was merely a hotel proprietor. Not a disrespectable vocation by any means, but to those who aspired for loftier

positions, anyone who worked for a living was inferior—smelled of the shop.

Truth be told, Mrs. Grenville wasn't even aware of his Scottish heritage. That, in and of itself, caused many of the *ton* to lift their haughty noses when he encountered them. As if he trod past with fresh horse manure clinging to his boots.

And yet, Justina had been fascinated by the knowledge that he was Scottish.

After guiding her to her bed and seeing her tucked beneath the plush coverlet, he sat beside her. He took her delicate hand in his. "I know this is happening fast, but I shan't rush you. I'll call upon you in Bristol, and we'll see where this attraction between us goes. If you are agreeable, that is."

She must be.

Justina's mouth went slack before joy ignited in her eyes, radiating outward and lighting her face. She squeezed his hand. "It is fast. But I, for one, believe in love at first sight or short acquaintance. I know it's not common, but I am convinced it is real, nonetheless."

Love?

Who said anything about love?

She must've sensed Baxter's hesitancy for in all honesty, he couldn't say he loved her. Not yet, in any event. She withdrew her hand, acute embarrassment evident in her strained features, the color tinging her cheeks, and her refusal to meet his gaze.

"I've spoken out of turn. Forgive me." She scooted farther beneath the bedcoverings, pulling them to beneath her chin. A fabric shield to ward off her discomfit. "I'm very tired, Baxter, and need my rest. We're leaving tomorrow as well."

Dammit.

She'd retreated into herself, donning a mask of neutrality and politesse.

"Justina, I meant no offense."

"None was taken," she said softly.

Little liar.

Unable to help himself, Baxter brushed his hand across her smooth forehead then fingered a lock of silky hair. The color was unusual, shifting and changing, depending on the light. In the muted glow of the candle, her hair shone like warm honey.

"Dinna forget to leave yer address with Bixby. I'd no' relish havin' to knock upon every door in Bristol to find ye."

She giggled, and the tension of a moment before dissipated. “You wouldn’t. Not really.”

“Ye dinna ken me, Justina. I would. When I put my mind to somethin’, I’m no’ easily dissuaded.”

The tiniest furrow crinkled her brow as if she wasn’t positive what to make of his declaration.

For a gem such as she, Baxter would bang upon every door in England *and* Scotland.

Baxter kissed her again, a tender sweep of his lips across hers.

It was as much a vow, a promise he’d seek her out after he’d attended to his duties, as much as a token of affection. Too many people depended on him for their well-being for him to ignore the problem. His overseer wouldn’t have contacted Baxter if the situation hadn’t been urgent.

Yet this reluctance to leave Justina Farthington, a woman he’d known but a week made him wish, for once, he could cast his responsibilities aside. But even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew he would not. It wasn’t his nature, and so he quirked his mouth into a tender smile.

“Good night, *leannan*.”

“*Leannan*?” She tried the unfamiliar word. “That’s Scots? What does it mean?”

“I’ll tell you the next time I see you.”

After another lingering taste of her delectable lips, he blew out the candle and left her chamber. His cock protested by throbbing painfully, but Baxter couldn’t check his broad smile as he sought his own room.

He hadn’t seriously considered marrying so soon.

In truth, he’d spent a great deal of time avoiding the Marriage Mart. How fortunate could a man be that the perfect woman literally showed up on his doorstep? And most conveniently was stranded there during a snowstorm?

If Baxter believed in Divine Providence—which, of course, he didn’t—he just might be persuaded he’d somehow earned God’s favor.

A wry chuckle escaped him at his fanciful musings.

What was it his mother used to say?

Och, aye. The Lord helps those who help themselves.

An hour later, as Baxter lay naked in his oversized bed, his hands clasped beneath his head, he stared up at the dark green canopy. The fire’s capering flames cast irregular, elongated shadows onto the half-open bed curtains.

When should he tell Justina he held a title?

Very little chance existed that she'd learn that truth on her own. Therefore, he'd take his time and woo her. Not *too* much time, however.

Ah, Christ.

He exhaled a frustrated breath.

Why had he given his word he'd attend the Sutcliffes' Christmastide house party?

Because Pennington, Bainbridge, and Pembroke were pains in the arse who wouldn't take no for an answer. They believed Baxter worked too much and that he needed to take a holiday.

What sane man, in God's name, would choose to holiday in Essex in December?

Blast and damn.

Between the machinery issues at the textile factory and the holiday festivities, he'd have little time to court Justina.

Unless he could convince the Sutcliffes to invite her too?

No, he mightn't know her well, but she didn't strike him as the type who was entirely at ease in crowds. Besides, she might be uncomfortable around so many peers.

What the hell was he to do?

Chapter Seven



Bristol, England
December 15, 1810

Brushing a hand across her forehead, Justina sighed for the umpteenth time. Eyebrows furrowed and her bottom lip clamped between her teeth, she considered the gowns laying upon her bed's light blue coverlet, trying to decide which she'd take to the Sutcliffes' house party.

None were new, but both she and Aunt Emily were gifted with a needle and thread and gowns from two Seasons ago had been reworked quite satisfactorily. A scrap of lace here, a ribbon or braid there, or a new ruffle, and the garments were hardly recognizable. That was one practical means implemented to stretch coin.

Well, that was stretching the truth, but the frocks were near enough in style to the current fashion to pass *haut ton* inspection at first glance. And since Justina rarely drew a second glance, except from her friends, she wasn't concerned about her revamped wardrobe. That business of requiring new garments from the skin out each Season was positively wasteful.

Head tilted, she considered two additional morning gowns.

The mint green or the rose?

Both perhaps?

Justina wasn't above wearing a gown more than once at a house party. After all, budget and wardrobe restraints already required her to do so with other attire.

She slanted a glance at the nearly full trunk. It already contained three morning gowns, a riding habit, two walking ensembles, six afternoon gowns, and another half dozen evening gowns. Justina had also managed to fit a ballgown, a fichu, her unmentionables, a nightgown and robe, two each of

spencers, pelisses, and shawls, and, lastly, a heavy cloak in case it snowed again.

Then there were gloves, shoes, stockings, her sewing kit, and various other necessary fallalls and fripperies. She almost envied servants their simple uniforms. *Almost.*

She'd wear her redingote and one of the three bonnets she intended to take with her in the coach.

Puffing out an unladylike sigh that ballooned her cheeks in a childish manner, Justina shook her head. Really. This would be so much easier, not to mention less costly, if women weren't required to change their gowns multiple times a day.

As neither she nor Aunt Emily employed a lady's maid, they acted as one another's Abigail, as well as packed and unpacked their own trunks. Theodosia, Duchess of Sutcliffe, would assign them a maid to share for the duration of the house party, but it wasn't the least necessary.

For months, Justina had anticipated the Christmastide gathering, but now a shadow marred her earlier joy.

Baxter hadn't come knocking on her door.

He hadn't written either—not a single letter in over three weeks.

That isn't so very long, she tried to console herself.

True, but if Baxter had written promptly upon returning to Bath—

But—*drat the man*—he hadn't.

Deciding there was room for both gowns, she picked up the green muslin.

Nose scrunched, Justina mentally calculated, *again*, how long it took to travel to Lancashire and back while allowing a week for him to attend to whatever urgent business had required his attention.

Bristol was but thirteen miles from Bath. A trip he could easily make on horseback in an hour and a half, depending on how much he walked or galloped his mount. How naive she'd been to think that some force beyond her or him had inexorably brought them together.

Lifting her dance slippers to place them inside the trunk, a frown puckered her forehead.

Blast and damn.

A worn spot marred the sole of the right slipper. Running a fingertip across the leather, she pondered whether it would wear through during the house party. She checked the inside of the slipper, as well, grateful no holes were visible.

Giving a little shrug, she accepted the indisputable truth. It was too late to have the slipper repaired or order a new pair. She'd have to save them strictly for dancing and avoid walking about unnecessarily. Perhaps she'd even sit out several dances.

Pshaw.

Her hostess wouldn't permit it. Theodosia was renowned for making her guests feel at ease. No attendee to any of her events ever felt neglected or loitered by a wall.

In all likelihood, Justina fretted about nothing. No one would be looking at the soles of her feet, for heaven's sake.

After tucking the slippers into a corner of the trunk and adding nankeen half-boots and two other pairs of slippers, she permitted her contemplations to gravitate to Baxter once more.

As if she had any choice.

Like wild ponies, the dashed stubborn things galloped in that direction more often than not, despite her resolution they do otherwise.

As Baxter had requested, Justina had left her address with Mr. Bixby, slipping it to him quietly before Aunt Emily had settled their bill.

"Mr. Bathhurst asked for my direction," she'd explained, trying and failing not to blush.

The dear man's eyes had twinkled behind his lenses, a kindly smile bending Mr. Bixby's mouth as he'd slipped the folded paper into a drawer.

"Rest assured, I'll see that he receives it promptly upon his return, Miss Farthington."

Justina had been a fool—*fool*—to believe Baxter.

I shall call upon you, Justina, when I return from Lancashire.

My intentions toward you are honorable. I vow it.

He'd seemed so sincere and earnest.

Believe me, please, he'd said.

And she had.

Ninny. Pea goose. Twiddlepoop.

Thank God, Justina hadn't given herself to him as she'd almost impetuously done. Would've done had he not drawn away. Never could she have imagined desire would carry her to the cusp of ruination and that she didn't give two farthings that it had. Even now, painfully aware that Baxter Bathhurst, the most handsome man—*the only man*—to upset her equilibrium didn't want her, caused heat to sluice through her.

It was humiliation washing over her—mortification at being dismissed and forgotten so easily.

Bah, what poppycock and tripe.

Justina snorted, refusing to lie to herself.

It wasn't embarrassment presently hardening her nipples or causing her blood to warm as it hummed through her veins. No indeed. It was the sweet, sensual memories of what Baxter had done to her. She'd wanted him to continue—to make her a woman in every way.

To make her *his* woman.

Why had he stopped?

Four words, an unwelcome mantra echoing in her mind, taunting and tormenting. Reminding her of her shortfalls.

That he was an experienced man of the world, Justina had no doubt. Perchance he'd found her lacking or repugnant in some manner. All that twaddle about calling upon her had been just that.

Rubbish. Balderdash and claptrap.

Had he only said he'd come to Bristol and knock upon every door so that he could make his escape that night without hurting her feelings?

Chagrin pricked Justina, sharp little jabs of self-castigation and recrimination further bruising her already battered pride. She grabbed the rose gown and carefully folded it before laying it in her trunk. At precisely nine of the clock tomorrow morning, she and Aunt Emily would depart for Colchester, a three-day journey.

Despite her vow, she'd not look for Baxter anymore, Justina's traitorous gaze wandered to the mantle clock and then veered to her bedroom window, which faced the street. A lone boy, head down and shoulders hunched against the drizzle, walked briskly along the lane.

No carriage drew to a stop outside.

No damp horseman trotted his mount to a halt.

There is still time, a little voice inside her head whispered.

He isn't coming, her logical self argued.

Stop looking for him. Cease torturing yourself.

Baxter had said he'd be done in Lancashire within a week. Even allowing time for travel, he should've been here by now. If he'd meant to keep his word.

Tears stung at the corners of her eyes, and she scrunched them closed, refusing to give in to self-pity. She was not a watering pot.

No more crying.

One doesn't fall in love in seven days.

But that week at Bathhurst Hotel and Spa had been glorious. Baxter had been glorious.

Bah.

That nonsense was the fanciful stuff of childish fairytales and silly novels for even sillier women. Gullible women who believed in love at first sight. Women who were guaranteed a broken heart.

She groaned and pressed her knuckles to her eyes.

Lord, she'd actually told Baxter that *she* believed in love at first sight.

And he'd promptly become acutely uncomfortable.

That should've clued her to his true feelings.

I don't love him, Justina stubbornly admonished herself. It was nothing more than girlish infatuation and an understandable physical response to a charming man well-versed in seduction.

Good God.

She dropped her balled hands to her sides, horror encompassing her.

Was wantonness another legacy from her disgraced mother?

Cringing at the thought, at what had become of Elsa Trattner as a result of her poor decisions, Justina reminded herself she ought to be grateful. Why, she might've found herself with child, just like her mother, and then what would she have done?

Aunt Emily didn't deserve that burden either.

No, Baxter's perfidy had cleared the stars from Justina's eyes and the cobwebs from her thinking. Too bad it hadn't curbed her physical yearnings.

That would come. In time, Justina vowed. She knew that to be the lie that it was.

Recalling the pitying glance Aunt Emily had given her during their midday meal today, which Justina had barely touched, she groaned aloud again.

"Foolish dolt," she mumbled to the open trunk.

Anxious that Aunt Emily would object, Justina had permitted nearly a full week to pass before she'd mustered the gumption to tell her aunt that Baxter would be calling upon her.

To her astonishment, Aunt Emily had only softly said, "I expected as much."

"How could you have known?" Justina had asked in astonishment.

She didn't dare share how he'd come to her room and what had transpired afterward, so she'd fibbed and said he'd asked her in the greenhouse the day Emily was indisposed.

"My dear," her aunt had said, laying aside her sewing, Justina's remade ballgown for the upcoming Christmastide house party. "You couldn't keep your eyes off one another."

Had everyone noticed?

Is that why Mr. Bixby's eyes had twinkled knowingly when Justina had slipped him the note with her address?

Chagrin singed her pride.

Aunt Emily had given Justina a long, probing look, faint tension evident in the lines bracketing her mouth.

"I would urge you to go slowly, Justina. Take your time and truly become acquainted with Mr. Bathurst. You might think you suit now, but only time spent together will reveal the truth of that." She'd blushed prettily, her lovely porcelain skin turning quite pink. "Desire dies in the face of the unexpected and unforeseen."

At the time, Justina had thought the remark quite odd and, as usual, longed to ask precisely what Aunt Emily meant. But a forlorn, stricken look had entered Emily's gaze, and Justina simply couldn't stand to cause her beloved aunt any more pain. So, she'd kept her question to herself. However, that didn't mean curiosity didn't burn within her.

Justina would've been wise to listen to her aunt's solemn advice. For she spoke from experience, but the giddiness that had previously spiraled through her was disinclined to wait.

More fool she.

Melancholy creasing the corners of her mouth and eyes, Aunt Emily had looked out the window, rain lashing the panes with angry, tear-shaped droplets. After a moment, she returned her regard to Justina once more. "I rushed into a marriage after a brief acquaintance. I was utterly convinced I was in love, and similarly positive that Clement loved me."

What had caused her to believe otherwise?

"What happened?" Justina asked softly, almost afraid to voice the question lest her aunt retreat into her usual silence on the matter.

Aunt Emily had only shaken her head and said, "That's a tale for another time, my dear."

Pushing all thoughts of Baxter Bathurst aside, Justina finished her

packing and then went in search of her aunt. It was time to tell Aunt Emily that Justina had been mistaken about Baxter. He wouldn't be calling. She intended to put him from her heart and mind and to thoroughly enjoy her time at the Sutcliffes.

She might even flirt with the unmarried male guests.

Flirt?

Justina didn't flirt.

Well, wasn't there a first time for everything?

I shall never visit Bath again.

The unbidden thought intruded upon her reverie.

Codswallop.

If Aunt Emily could recover from what appeared to be a tragic, albeit short marriage, Justina most assuredly could square her shoulder, hold her chin up, and paste a smile upon her face for their dinner with Gertrude this evening.

For goodness sake. Justina had barely known Baxter, and seven days' acquaintance was assuredly inadequate to form a proper opinion about anyone let alone an attachment. Yes, indeed, she'd learned a valuable lesson and thanked Providence she had not sacrificed her virginity for an unworthy scapegrace.

She'd not even leave word with their manservant, Fletcher Tambling, or his wife, Eunice, informing Baxter that she was away until the new year. No indeed. A man who couldn't be bothered to keep his word wasn't a man she was interested in furthering an acquaintance with.

You are a liar, Justina Farthington.

Chapter Eight



*Bathurst Hotel and Spa
Bath, England
December 16, 1810*

Baxter arrived home in the early morning hours, having pushed on to Bath despite his bone-deep weariness and Knight's fatigue as well. The loyal horse would've continued on until dawn had Baxter required it of the eight-year-old bay gelding.

Yawning widely, Baxter climbed from his rumpled bed before the clock had chimed seven. As exhausted as he'd been, his slumber had proved restless, and he'd awoken frequently, his mind turning over and over to Justina.

She'd been in his thoughts continuously.

How he'd missed her.

That impish twinkle in her eye and the curve of those perfect lips.

Over three long weeks had passed since he'd vowed to her that he'd call as soon as he returned to Bath. And by Odin's toes, he was a man of his word. In hindsight, he should've asked her for her address before he left her chamber that night. Then he could've written to her and explained his delay in Lancashire.

As it was, she might very well believe he didn't intend to keep his word, and he couldn't blame her. He only had three days to call upon Justina and convince her of his sincerity before he must leave for Essex and that goddamned Christmas house party.

Baxter would cry off if he hadn't given his word he'd attend and if he didn't need to discuss a business venture with the Dukes of Pembroke and Sheffield as well as James Brentwood. The Dukes of Kincade and Asherford

had also indicated an interest, as had his countrymen, the Dukes of Waycross and Heatherston.

Baxter couldn't deny it was most convenient that the men would also be in attendance. Such an opportunity could not be dismissed. It saved him from running about all over England and Scotland to meet with them.

He chuckled, imagining all of the dukes in one place. Seductive scoundrels, the lot. Well, they had been until several of the former rakes had recently wed. Still, a dozen dukes, all assembled for a Christmastide house party. Surely, that must be some sort of record.

The Scots didn't celebrate Christmas, so Baxter had absolutely no idea what to expect. And he'd been assured the only unmarried ladies attending were dear friends of the hostess and not a one was on the prowl for a husband.

The latter, he found nearly impossible to believe.

Making short work of dressing, he grimaced as he tugged on a pair of polished boots awaiting him. Covered in travel grime, the pair he'd worn for the journey home lay where he'd tossed them the night before.

As he didn't retain a valet, Coyle or Perkins would have them gleaming by this evening, but he couldn't prevent a small stab of guilt at the unpleasant task before them.

As eager as he was to see Justina again, Baxter wouldn't appear at her door looking like he'd come straight from his travels. She deserved more respect than that, though he'd venture to guess she wouldn't mind in the least if he did.

No, Miss Justina Farthington wasn't full of bumptiousness, nor did she affect airs. Not once had he heard her blather on about insipid topics such as the weather or fashion, drop the names of people of position she might've met at one time or another, nor did she gossip incessantly as the Popkin sisters were wont to do.

Justina was even-tempered, keen-witted, and delightfully unpretentious. But of utmost importance, she liked Baxter for himself. It had been five years since a woman—a woman of marriageable age, he swiftly amended—hadn't gazed upon him with a calculating glint in her gimlet eye and a determined set to her mouth.

Just the mention of his ducal title in conjunction with his single status had women frothing at the mouth like rabid hounds. Egads, it was almost enough to make a grown man turn tail and run.

Straight back to Scotland.

In the dead of winter.

Never an enviable prospect.

As Baxter swiftly brushed his sandy blond hair into some semblance of order, a frown tugged his mouth downward at the corners. He supposed he'd have to meet with Bixby and make sure all was well with the hotel before heading to Bristol.

That was the responsible thing to do, and the additional delay oughtn't to annoy as much as it did. Why, since Justina Farthington had burst into his life, did duties and responsibilities—both things he'd previously thrived upon—seem too damn inconvenient?

As it had turned out, his plant manager, Irving Grassley, had grossly understated the issues at Baxter's Lancashire plant. By the time Grassley had notified Baxter, someone had been sabotaging the equipment on an almost daily basis for a fortnight.

If that weren't inconvenient enough, not only had half of the workers become severely ill with what turned out to be influenza, but the others were also afraid to work for fear of contracting what they termed, "The curse."

A rather superstitious lot, according to Grassley, the laborers blamed the sickness which swept the factory on the newly hired, one-eyed engineer, his face and body severely scarred by an explosion years ago.

Baxter had retained Jerome Carnes himself, also Scottish, and a bloody genius when it came to engines and machines. Soft-spoken and painfully conscious of his alarming appearance, Carnes avoided contact with other people to spare them the shock. Unfortunately, his avoidance only served to strengthen the groundless rumors that Jerome also dabbled in the dark arts, Grassley had reported.

In short, the buildings had sat silent for over a week, despite Grassley's efforts to encourage the unaffected workers to fulfill their duties. Then a few of the more radical young pups had decided to take matters into their own hands and had set fire to Carnes's living quarters, hoping to drive him away. The flames had spread to other buildings, putting six families from their homes, including sixteen children.

Thank God the worst injuries were smoke inhalation and a few minor burns. One man had sustained more severe burns when he dashed inside his home for the third time to save the last of his six children: seven-month-old twin lasses.

Baxter had been so enraged upon learning of the recklessness of the four imbecilic youths who'd set the fires, his first instinct had been to throttle them within an inch of their lives. The reckless fools had been summarily dismissed without reference, though Baxter hadn't brought them up on charges as they'd deserved.

They'd been ordered to leave the community and never return. As it turned out, those rotters were also responsible for the equipment malfunction. That, too, had been an attempt to frame Jerome and see him dismissed simply because the man was scarred, and they were superstitious idiots.

After the displaced families and Jerome Carnes had been relocated to other accommodations, Baxter had assembled those workers well enough to attend a meeting. He'd very concisely and firmly stated his full confidence in Jerome and told the others if they were unhappy with his choice of an engineer, they could take their leave, and he'd provide them with a reference.

Any future murmurings against Carnes would result in termination, and anyone engaging in further acts of violence would be turned over to the magistrate. Hence, what Baxter had believed would be a relatively quick trip had turned into an exhausting three-week-long trial.

As he descended the steps in search of Bixby, his dogs prancing at his heels, he grinned. Today he'd see that green-eyed enchantress that had plagued his waking hours as well as his dreams each night. He couldn't recall the last time such anticipation had assailed him.

"Bixby!" He strode through the expansive entry, excitement and expectation quickening his pulse and step. He glanced at the mahogany longcase clock, imported from Dundee, and calculated how long his discussion with his manager might take as he debated whether to skip breaking his fast.

Damn, was he actually considering not eating to expedite his departure and his reunion with Justina?

A derisive smile quirked Baxter's mouth.

That was a first.

He'd become a besotted numpty. Skipping meals. Riding his faithful horse until they were both ready to drop. Wishing to rush his duties, all to see a woman he'd known seven short days. One magical, marvelous week had been long enough to realize she was a treasure he couldn't allow to escape.

"Welcome home, Mr. Bathhurst." Beaming a sincere welcome, Bixby pushed his spectacles up his nose as he stood proudly behind the counter on

the stool Baxter had ordered built for him. "I trust all is well in Lancashire? We expected your return far sooner."

"Aye, unfortunately, ignorance and fear breed mischief, and circumstances in Lancashire proved a great deal more complicated than I'd anticipated." Hands on his hips, Baxter grinned and surveyed the spotless entry. Duke and Princess had deserted him, going in search of their morning meal.

"Things are well here?"

Bixby dipped his head. "Yes, sir. We currently have seven guests, and I received word yesterday that another four will arrive this afternoon. We have reservations for an additional eleven. During your absence, seven and thirty have come and gone."

Not too bad during the winter months.

Not too bad at all.

Bixby straightened to his full height and tugged on his lapels, a shadow of unease pleating his broad forehead and crinkling the corners of his usual jovial features.

"Has something occurred?" Baxter asked, unease prickling along his spine.

"Edie eloped with Becker eight days ago."

Not at all surprised, Baxter chuckled and scratched his eyebrow. The maid and groom had been sweet on one another for months. Honestly, he'd expected an announcement sooner. "Why couldn't they simply have told you or me? I'd have let them retain their positions. I have no objections to married couples working in the same establishment."

It worked out well at his other ventures.

"So I tried to persuade them." Bixby darted a wary look toward the entry. "The real issue is Edie's father. Emmet Swern promised her to another, and he says you are to blame for her elopement. He's been by every morning for the past week, demanding to speak with you."

"Me?" Baxter arched a brow. "What have I to do with the matter?"

One of the local blacksmiths, Swern had a fondness for the bottle that adversely affected the quality of his work. What was more, he was obstinate and meanspirited. More than once, Edie had arrived at work with a bruise upon her cheek or her lip split.

When Bixby failed to answer, Baxter leveled him a stern look.

"Bixby? Why is he demanding to speak with me?"

Bixby cleared his throat, appearing distinctly uncomfortable. Normally unflappable under the most trying of circumstances, a distinct reddish hue crept from his neck and upward over his cheeks before disappearing into his hairline.

“Well, sir,” he hedged, fiddling with something behind the counter and not quite meeting Baxter’s avid gaze.

“Yes?” Baxter bit out, far sharper than he’d intended. He nearly ground his teeth to powder at the servant’s continued silence but checked his impatience. It wasn’t Bixby’s fault a siren with petal-soft skin and velvet green eyes called to him.

After a swift glance about the entry and his voice lowered to a discreet level, Bixby said, “It seems Edie was, ah,”—the man’s face turned impossibly redder—“in the family way, and Mr. Swern believes you are the father.”

Baxter went utterly still, absorbing the startling information before finally saying, “Is the man daft?” Nae, but foxed to his fleshy jowls? Aye, Swern was off his head. “Why would she abscond with Becker if I fathered her child?”

His elfin ears turning crimson, Bixby swallowed audibly. “As to that sir, Mr. Swern claims you forced yourself on his daughter. He is demanding compensation, or he’ll make his accusation public.”

Shite.

Emmet Swern was a sodding idiot. If he’d spoken to Bixby about his ridiculous demands, Baxter could damn well guarantee half of Bath knew of the accusation by now.

Baxter, too, glanced at the hotel’s entry.

Hell and damn.

He’d have to delay his departure until he put the blacksmith in his place and disabused him of his ludicrous misconception. That neatly answered the question about whether to stay for breakfast. Baxter supposed it was just as well. He could hardly arrive at Justina’s with his stomach growling from hunger.

“I believe Miss Farthington left something for me?”

“Ah, yes.” Obviously relieved at the change of subject, Bixby reached into a rectangular cubby, withdrawing several slips of paper. He swiftly thumbed through them. A frown drew his brows together. “Where did I put that?”

He opened a drawer and rummaged around inside. “Hmm,” he mumbled to himself. “That’s odd. I swear I placed it with the other messages for you.”

“Is something amiss?” Baxter kept his voice calm, but visions of banging on door after door after door in Bristol invaded his mind.

He swallowed a vile oath.

“No, sir. I’m sure it’s here.” Bixby never misplaced anything. He didn’t even permit the maids to dust his desk. “Ah, here it is.”

His relief evident, he procured a neatly folded rectangle and waved it back and forth. “I hired a new maid to take Edie’s place. She must’ve taken it upon herself to dust or organize my desk.” *A capital crime, indeed.* “I shall speak to her again.”

Something near giddiness whipped through Baxter. “I’ll be departing for Bristol after I break my fast and speak with Swern. When he arrives, have Coyle show him to my office, but do not leave the blackguard alone in there. Given a chance, he’ll rob us blind.”

His thoughts already on Justina, Baxter turned in the direction of the dining room, hungrier than he’d realized until just now. If he weren’t mistaken, he smelled tattie scones and sausage. Mrs. Felton was a priceless treasure. She always seemed to sense when he craved a taste of Scotland.

Heavy, uneven footfall sounded on the porch before the hotel’s front door burst open. Emmet Swern plowed in, face flushed and fairly growling, “Your finally back, you bloody, ruttin’ bastard.”

Baxter barely had time to turn around before Swern was upon him, fury spewing from his eyes, the reek of strong drink radiating from every oversized pore.

Distracted with musings of Justina, Baxter blinked in surprise then ducked too late to avoid the meaty fist that landed squarely upon his jaw.

Jesus and Joseph.

He flew backward, landing hard on his arse.

Outrage replaced his warmer emotions as he winced against the ache in his jaw. No doubt about it. The blow would leave a large bruise.

“I say,” Bixby exclaimed, coming around the counter, prepared to defend Baxter, though he was a full two feet shorter than Swern.

Coyle and Perkins pounded in from the corridor, expressions fierce as each bolted to Baxter’s side and took up defensive stances.

Growling, low in their throats, Duke and Princess pelted into the entry. Teeth bared, they hovered near the doorway, their black eyes fixed upon

Swern.

“Sit,” Baxter said.

The dogs obediently sank to their haunches, but their wary gazes flickered between him and Swern.

Touching his jaw, moving it gingerly from side to side to test if it was cracked, Baxter found his feet. Not broken but assuredly bruised. Swern was built like a bull and possessed the same obstinate, unpredictable temperament.

“If you leave now, Swern, I shan’t have you brought up on charges,” Baxter said slowly and deliberately, taking the man’s measure.

“Charges?” Swern sneered, wiping his nose on the back of his soiled sleeve. “You got me Edie wif child.” He sniffed loudly, clenching his ham fists again. “I demand recom...recom...” he stumbled over the unfamiliar word. “Recom-pen-see. She was to marry another.”

Likely a decrepit or debaucher that Swern owed a favor too. Or money. Mayhap both.

Nostrils twitching, for the blacksmith also stank of stale sweat and unwashed body, Baxter eyed the other man. He’d never liked him. Loud, arrogant, and opinionated, the sot bullied his wife, children, and neighbors. Half of his customers too, which was why he found himself with so few of them.

God’s teeth, no wonder the couple had eloped.

“I never touched your daughter, Swern.” Baxter never dallied with his female employees. To do so was an abuse of power and utterly contemptible. “If she was in the family way, then I’ll wager Becker fathered the child. It was plain to see they were in love.”

“Bullshit,” Swern swore savagely, spittle clinging to the right corner of his mouth.

“I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head, Swern,” Baxter warned.

“I’ve lived in these parts the better part of four decades, Bathhurst. You’ve only been here for three years. Who do you think the locals will believe?”

Sanctimonious bastard.

Swern puffed out his chest and jammed his hands into the pockets of his trousers, confident he had Baxter backed into a corner. “I’ll keep me mouth shut fer five hundred pounds.”

“That’s robbery,” Bixby gasped, looking from Baxter to Swern and then to Baxter once more. “And extortion.” He peered up at Baxter. “Should I send for the magistrate?”

“No need.” Baxter straightened his mussed waistcoat, then turned his steeliest stare upon Swern. “*If* I ever fathered a child, I would take full responsibility for it and ensure it never wanted for anything. But as I already said, I never laid a finger on Edie, and I’ll wager she never suggested I did, either.”

A guilty flush stole up Swern’s already ruddy cheeks. He puffed them out, his mud-brown eyes narrowing menacingly.

The bugger likely wanted the coin for more whisky. And Swern would blackmail Baxter for the rest of his life if he paid a single crown now to bridle his loose tongue.

“Well, she’s not here to say one way or t’other, is she?” Swern snarled. “So I suggest you pay up. Rumors are ugly things, Bathhurst.” A smug smile contorted his mouth and fleshy, unshaven cheeks. He pulled on his ear as if imparting some great revelation. “They’ve been known to ruin a person’s life. How many guests do you think would stay at your hotel when word gets out that you violate your female servants? Would any lady feel safe staying here?”

“Given your penchant for drink and your tarnished reputation, you really aren’t very bright, threatening me.” Baxter jerked his chin toward the door. “Leave now, and I’ll forget this unpleasantness ever happened.”

Swern swallowed, a glint of uncertainty flickering his scheming gaze. “It’s yer word against mine,” he said, all belligerent bravado.

Bollocks to that.

Baxter had had enough.

Every minute he wasted talking to this drunkard was one which kept him from Justina and explaining his tardiness to her. He stalked closer to Swern, every step predatory as he struggled to keep his wrath in check until he stood directly in front of Edie’s hostile father. Baxter had the height advantage, but the squat blacksmith with cudgels for arms outweighed him by at least four stone.

Leaning down, Baxter enunciated each clipped word in perfect aristocratic English. “No, you opportunistic cretin. It is the word of a pished blacksmith against the Duke of San Sebastian.”

Chapter Nine



*Ridgewood Court
Colchester, Essex, England
December 22, 1810*

Ensnconced in Ridgewood Court's expensively but tastefully decorated drawing room, Justina couldn't stop smiling between sips of simply divine India tea. Her dearest friends Ophelia Breckensole, Gabriella, Duchess of Pennington, Jessica, Duchess of Bainbridge, Nicolette, Duchess of Pembroke, and Rayne Wellbrook surrounded her.

She'd sampled several exquisite dainties and biscuits, too, but resisted further indulgence. The excess of delicious foods and treats throughout the house party would have her gaining half a stone if she weren't diligent.

"I vow," Jessica said, patting her tummy as she sent her sister a fond look, "Thea's goal is to fatten all of us up."

As always, Theadosia had outdone herself. She positively adored entertaining.

Bows of greenery and holly, festooned with red, silver, and gold ribbons, adorned every room. Several kissing boughs and mistletoe twigs, those also beribboned, dangled from doorways inviting clandestine kisses. Clove oranges sat in crystal bowls, adding more delicious aromas to the already fragrant house.

The remaining guests would arrive this afternoon, and everyone but the late arrivals had gathered for tea this afternoon. Everyone would gather for dinner, however.

Across the room, several gentlemen, most of whom she knew quite well but a few she hadn't previously met, spoke animatedly about the horse race tomorrow. Quite magnanimously, they'd offered to allow any ladies who

were up for the challenge to join them. The American heiress, Sophronie Slater, had boldly dared to wager she'd win the race.

Justina considered the vivacious strawberry blonde whom she quite admired. Sophronie just might do it. Surreptitiously so that Aunt Emily wouldn't catch wind of her brazenness, Justina had bet a whole pound yesterday that Sophronie would win. Such extravagance was unlike her, but everyone was betting against Sophronie.

Tobias Forsythe, Duke of Heatherston, had good-naturedly agreed to record the bets while Aunt Emily slid him disapproving sideways glances. She didn't hold with women racing about the countryside, riding astride in breeches as Sophronie was wont to do. Aunt Emily also frowned upon the current fashion of women gambling—any gambling for that matter.

Wasteful, frivolous behavior, she'd decreed.

As they'd never had the coin to spare for such frivolity, Justina felt very recalcitrant indeed. And not just a little guilty for keeping a secret from her beloved aunt.

Rayne caught Justina's eye and subtly rolled her eyes in Ophelia's direction. Their friend, teacup to her lips, avidly peeked at Stanford Bancroft, Duke of Ashford, from beneath her lashes. A slight crease drew her brows together, and it was impossible to determine whether his grace intrigued or peeved her.

Across the room, the Scottish Duke of Waycross scowled darkly at Sophronie while Aunt Emily studiously disregarded Heatherston, another Scotsman, sitting to her right. Most men, when given Aunt Emily's cold shoulder, hied on their way, and yet Heatherston glibly remained.

Either the man was obtuse, or he didn't mind.

Or perhaps, he was just stubborn and refused to let Aunt Emily have her way.

Had Aunt Emily met her match, at last?

Justina arched a speculative eyebrow.

Hmm, the next fortnight might prove very interesting, indeed.

Last year, Everleigh, Rayne's step-aunt and Griffin, Duke of Sheffield, had fallen madly in love during the Sutcliffes' holiday house party.

Who knew?

Perhaps another young lady would find herself wedding her Christmas duke this year. There certainly were enough of their ducal selves in attendance that any young woman might find herself quite dizzy.

Fortunately, Justina's unwed friends were sensible girls, and they'd all spent enough time around peers that they didn't fawn all over themselves or make calf-eyes at eligible gentlemen. For the benefit of their guests, and to cause less confusion with so many *his graces* and *her graces* in attendance, Theodosia had decreed that the duchesses would answer to their first names and the dukes to their titles.

Society might frown upon such intimacies, but most of these people were good friends, and other than number each duchess and duke, there was little help for it.

Another reason to avoid marrying a man with a title, Justina concluded with no small amount of satisfaction. She would happily settle for an honest, kind man of common birth.

A sandy-haired, honey-eyed Scottish hotelier?

Do be quiet, she chastised her troublesome inner voice.

That ship had sailed.

No, that ship had been scuttled and had sunk to the ocean's deepest depths with no survivors.

Yes, Justina affirmed to herself, she intended to marry a man who wouldn't care about her humble birth or her illegitimacy. A man who preferred living outside of London but didn't mind a visit or two to Towne each year. After all, she'd want to visit her dearest friends on occasion.

In truth, Justina hadn't quite decided whether to reveal the murky details of her past to her future husband.

Heavens.

Look at her. Contemplating marriage—something Justina hadn't seriously done before. But as there were no besotted beaux or enamored swains waiting in line to claim her hand, the decision could wait.

Mayhap would always wait.

A sliver of doubt wedged itself near her heart.

There it was again. That annoying but undeniable truth.

There was no guarantee that she'd wed. In fact, the scales were weighted against the probability. After all, she hadn't a dowry. Aunt Emily had done well by Justina, but a dowry just wasn't manageable. Truth be told, spinsterhood wasn't that farfetched, nor was the notion abhorrent before this unexpected stop in Bath.

A hard, swift pang stabbed Justina's heart, leaving her breathless for a long, painful moment. She'd thought Baxter might be the man for her. Their

attraction had been so swift and potent.

Plainly, not as potent for him.

Fine, she'd not have what she desired this Christmas, but sheer mulishness kept a cheerful smile upon her face.

Baxter Bathhurst would not taint her enjoyment, the insensitive, dishonest cad.

But he already has.

“Will you ride tomorrow, Justina?” Sophronie asked, her blue eyes alight with excitement. The girl adored horses and was quite the most accomplished horsewoman of Justina's acquaintance.

Justina shook her head. “No, I've not spent enough time in the saddle of late to consider myself worthy.” In point of fact, Aunt Emily didn't keep a saddle horse, and the only times Justina went riding is when they visited a friend. She sat a saddle well but was by no means accomplished.

“Rayne, will you?” Sophronie urged, hope making her eyes bright.

Rayne also shook her head, contrition in her unusual amber-brown gaze. “Regretfully, no. I've promised to help plan the parlor games.”

Disappointment settled onto Sophronie's features, but she rallied a moment later and smiled her understanding. Poor dear. She might be the only woman daring enough to race with the men.

“Parlor games?” murmured the Duke of Heatherston, his Scottish brogue deep and melodic and perhaps tinged with a thread of hilarity. Or horror.

Justina wasn't sure which.

“Och, however shall I contain my glee?” he drawled, quirking a reddish eyebrow, a distinctly amused glint in his deep blue eyes. “What shall it be? Blind Man's Bluff? Hot cockles? The Aviary?”

Justina bit back a laugh.

Aunt Emily gave him an acrid glance meant to take him down a peg, which only produced an indolent grin. “Shan't *you* be racing neck for nothing, belly to the ground, with the others, Your Grace?” she said far too sweetly.

Justina barely kept her jaw from sagging at the fascinating exchange.

“Rest assured, everyone,” Theodosia announced, having overheard the conversation and rushing in to diffuse any awkwardness. “There are plenty of activities for everyone's enjoyment.”

True to form, the duchess would ensure her guests' pleasure—whether they liked it or not.

“More tea, Justina?” Nicolette asked, her gaze sweeping the room. Newlywed, there was no need to ask whom she searched for. As if sensing her perusal, Mathias, Duke of Westfall, shifted his regard from the Duke of Kincade and winked at his wife.

A pretty blush tinting her cheeks, Nicolette gave him a beatific smile.

“*Ahem*. Yes, more tea would be wonderful,” Justina said, hiding her smile.

Seeing Nicolette and their other married friends blissfully happy was a bittersweet sensation. As thrilled as Justina was for them—she truly wasn’t so shallow as to be jealous—it served to remind her of what she stupidly believed she might have had with Baxter.

Even now, thoroughly disenchanted, her thoughts turned to him. She couldn’t help but wonder if he’d arrived on her doorstep in Bristol after she’d departed for Colchester.

Had he been disappointed when she’d not been at home?

Had he inquired when she would return?

Was there a plausible excuse for his delay?

Wishful thinking, Justina.

Indeed. That was all any of it had ever been.

Aunt Emily was forever saying if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Wishes, dreams, fanciful expectations... All led to disappointment and discontent.

“Ah, there you are, San Sebastian. I’d begun to wonder if you were going to make it after all,” the Duke of Sheffield said. “I understand you’ve had troubles in Lancashire.”

Lancashire?

Her back to the entry, Justina scrunched her eyebrows together, resisting the urge to gawk over her shoulder. She supposed it wasn’t so odd that Sheffield’s friend had business in Lancashire. The city was, after all, a hub for industry. If she recalled correctly, Sophronie’s father was also Sheffield’s business partner.

“Word certainly travels fast.” A droll chuckle accompanied the remark. “You are correct. There were issues with my textile factory that required my attention. However, everything has been set to rights now.”

Justina froze, her nape hairs rising, and her skin puckering like a plucked goose.

No. It cannot be.

She *knew* that voice.

She knew that delicious chuckle, as well.

Oh, God, please don't let it be him.

Christmas will be ruined. Ruined!

She almost shook her head to dislodge the ringing in her ears, and heartily wished she'd not indulged in so many biscuits as her stomach felt rather wretched.

Aunt Emily gasped and coughed.

Or had she choked on a sip of tea?

Justina's gaze shot to her aunt.

Features strained, her aunt stared open-mouthed toward the other side of the room. Her delicate China teacup slipped from her fingertips, shattering on the floor and drawing everyone's attention.

That was all the confirmation Justina needed.

Bloody, bloody, maggoty hell.

Justina permitted her eyelids to drift closed for a heartbeat.

How could he have known where she was?

They hadn't left word with the Tamblings.

The truth struck her as painfully as a punch to her ribs.

Baxter hadn't followed her here.

He was an invited guest too.

Sutcliffe's comment should've alerted her, but in truth, she'd been so rattled upon hearing Baxter's voice, she could scarcely cobble a coherent thought together.

He doesn't know I'm here.

"Oh, dear. Do forgive me, Theadosia," Aunt Emily managed after marshaling her composure in a rather admirable fashion.

"I dropped a cup myself last week," Theadosia graciously assured her as she moved to the bellpull to summon a servant to see to the mess.

A hole.

Justina prayed the floor would open up—just a small opening—so she might slip inside before Baxter noticed her.

Baxter Bathurst was not only Scottish, but the rascalion was also the Duke of San Sebastian. He'd conveniently forgotten to mention *that* critical detail. Not once had he hinted that he held a title, *the rotter*. No wonder he'd failed to keep his promise. He'd been hiding a rather large secret.

He was a duke.

Just what this assemblage needed—another bloody duke!

Chagrin and anger and hurt all vied for dominance, swirling inside her, a maelstrom of emotions. Taking a deep breath, Justina strove for equanimity as she set her teacup upon the table with a steadiness that surprised but pleased her.

Tucking her fingers beneath her skirts, she curled them into claws.

Justina wanted to hit him.

Slap his handsome, arrogant face for making a fool of her—for so cruelly toying with her affections.

My God!

She'd kissed him. Allowed him unspeakable liberties.

Wonderful liberties.

Her blood burned hot at the intrusive memory, and shame wasn't entirely to blame.

"Justina, dearest?" Distantly, as if through a cloying haze, she heard Aunt Emily say her name.

How fast could Justina pack?

Could their carriage be readied in ten minutes? Five?

Forget packing.

The clothes on her back would suffice quite nicely. She'd send for her things later.

Once she'd escaped and her every breath wasn't labored and her every heartbeat a lancing pain.

"Mrs. Grenville. What an unexpectant but pleasant surprise," Baxter said, that mesmerizing touch of brogue washing over Justina like sweet, warm chocolate.

Could one drown in chocolate?

Throat tight and lightheaded, she very much felt like she was drowning. Placing a palm on her ribcage, she felt the irregular cadence of her breathing.

In and out. In and out. That's it.

"And Miss Justina Farthington."

Was it her imagination or had a possessive, caressing inflection entered the timbre of his voice?

Caressing?

Oh, my God, Justina. Collect your scattered wits and be gone.

"You are acquainted with his grace, Justina?" Ophelia asked the obvious

question, two neat lines puzzling her forehead. The inquisitive glance she leveled Justina fairly shouted, “*You’ve been keeping secrets, Justina Farthington.*”

Justina sent Nicolette and Rayne a desperate look.

Utter befuddlement was stamped upon their features. Of course, they’d help her in a blink if only they knew how.

Baxter, *damn his gorgeous eyes*, stood beside her now, and she couldn’t help but notice the drawing room’s excruciatingly lengthy and painful silence or that all eyes keenly watched their exchange.

“Only *very slightly*,” Justina said, lifting her chin. “So slightly, in fact, to not count or be remarked upon at all.”

So there. Make of that what you will, Your Grace.

“That is not my recollection,” he replied silkily. “I remember it quite clearly, and it was most memorable.”

Her friends’ gazes bored into her as heat flamed across her cheeks.

Oooh, now Justina *really* did want to hit him.

To clobber him soundly—box his ears.

To wipe that self-assured expression from his handsome face and the humorous glint from his knowing eyes.

Summoning every ounce of gumption she possessed, Justina slowly rose and met his probing gaze and those warm, tempting caramel-brown eyes.

One can definitely drown in caramel and not mind it in the least.

The inane thought only further fueled her wrath.

She shouldn’t be noticing his eyes or his voice or the angles of his face. Nor the way his superfine black coat fit his ridiculously broad shoulders and chest to perfection.

And all the while, his gaze remained open and inviting.

She had no doubt, fury and betrayal sparked in her eyes. Dipping into a curtsy that would’ve had the patronesses at Almacks applauding, she murmured, unable to keep the note of contempt from her tone, “*Your Grace.*”

Scapegrace was more like it.

Codpated cabbage head.

Liar.

A monologue of much worse expletives marched along inside her head. She’d save those invectives for the privacy of her bedchamber where she might pummel a pillow to perdition as well.

Betrayed. Wholly and utterly betrayed. Eviscerated. The pain and

humiliation nearly doubled her over.

And yet, Justina must hold her head up, keep her spine straight and pretend as if everything in the universe was right. That her whole world hadn't just tipped off of its bloody damn axis. That the man standing so close to her that his essence drifted to her nostrils hadn't shredded her stupid, gullible heart.

God, the sweets Justina had so enjoyed earlier roiled in her belly, and nausea crept up the back of her throat. Swallowing hard, she willed the contents of her stomach to remain where they were.

Theodosia might be the epitome of graciousness, but even she would be hard put to remain so should Justina cast up her accounts on the expensive Aubusson carpet.

"Please, excuse me." Mustering all of her composure, and with the aplomb of a queen, Justina swept past Baxter without another glance and made for the door.

"Justina?" Aunt Emily and her friends chorused behind her, their voices a mixture of concern, distress, astonishment, and perhaps a tinge of curiosity too.

"Whatever is going on?" one of the men queried.

Perhaps one of those two fellows she'd never met before, the Earl of Keyworth or Kingston Barclay, the presumptive heir to another bloody dukedom.

Just as Justina grasped her ivory and ocean-blue skirts to pelt to her chamber like a wounded fox chased by zealous hounds, Baxter said, "I must speak with her."

Perfect. Reveal to all and sundry that there was something—had been—something between her and Baxter.

"I think not!" Aunt Emily clipped out, each syllable razor-edged, and her tone frostier than the Austrian Alps in January.

Indeed, he would not, Justina vowed, her teeth clamped to keep from spinning on her satin-slipped heels and telling him to go the devil.

"In fact, I absolutely forbid it," her aunt declared, which—*blast it to Hades*—would only serve to pique the interest of every person present all the more.

Justina's friends wouldn't rest until they had extracted every minuscule detail from her. And she simply could not share something so intimate.

Perchance she'd skip calling for a coach altogether.

Yes, she'd fetch a horse from the stables.

Wasn't there an inn three or four miles away? Anything to avoid Baxter and the guaranteed inquisition she'd face from her friends if she didn't escape at once.

Something very near a growl of frustration reverberated in her throat.

No, she couldn't leave Aunt Emily to face everyone alone, more was the pity.

Her gown held indecently high, Justina took the stairs two at a time. She simply could not spend another second in the same room with him and maintain her composure.

Once in her chamber, she locked the door before flopping onto her back onto the bed.

Oh, the cad.

The charlatan.

It had all been a lie.

The kiss. The caresses. The whispers. The vows.

Lies. Lies. All lies.

Turning onto her side, Justina pulled a pillow to her chest and tucked her knees up. Burying her face in the fine cloth, smelling slightly of honeysuckle, she let the tears come.

When, exactly, had she given her heart to a duke?

Chapter Ten

10



10



Baxter swallowed the oath tapping at the back of his teeth.

He could hardly dash after Justina without giving rise to unwanted speculation. He didn't know most of the guests beyond a mere acquaintance, and by damn, he wasn't going to have anyone slinging mud upon her reputation. Although, these people appeared more concerned for her welfare than bent on conjectures about what had just occurred.

The dinner gong pealed, and the Duchess of Sutcliffe motioned for her guests to precede her. After giving her adoring spouse a speaking glance and receiving a nod in response, she sailed directly toward Baxter.

Mouth pulled tight, Mrs. Grenville stabbed him with an icy glare. "I should check on my niece," she informed her hostess.

"I think, perhaps, Emily, Justina wants time alone. I shall have a tray and a bath sent up. A hot toddy as well." The duchess curved her mouth into a sympathetic smile.

Mrs. Grenville shot him another speculative glance then tilted her head in agreement. "Perhaps you are right. I'll speak with her before I retire."

Kingston Barclay approached, standing a respectable distance away so as to not intrude upon the conversation. "I would be honored to escort you into dinner, Mrs. Grenville."

With another starchy glance at Baxter, she accepted Barclay's arm. Since neither held a title, they were amongst the last to go through to dinner.

Her grace threaded her hand through Baxter's elbow and quite deliberately lingered until they were the last to depart the drawing room.

"Tell me, San Sebastian, how is it that one of my dearest friends has never mentioned you? But given her reaction of a few moments ago, I would venture you are more than slightly acquainted with Justina and her aunt."

More so Justina.

Emily Grenville he'd scarcely had a conversation with.

When he'd arrived at their house a week ago and learned they'd left that very morning, he felt as if a draft horse had kicked him. He'd wanted to pummel Swern for delaying him. And when the closed-mouth servants refused to even hint at where Justina had gone so he might write to her, dual yokes of frustration and despair had settled upon him.

He'd nearly sent word to Sutcliffes that he wouldn't be able to make their gathering after all. But he'd managed to wheedle out of Fletcher Tambling—with the aid of several coins—that Justina wouldn't return home until the first of the year.

Baxter wasn't sure whether he should alert her to the servant's susceptibility to bribery, but on the journey here had decided against it. Tambling had kept his mistress's destination confidential and likely surmised, rightly so, that Baxter would return again and again. By telling him when Justina was expected home, the wily servant had put off having to deal with Baxter until that time.

"I'm waiting, Your Grace." The duchess wasn't having any of his delays, nor would she permit anything to upset her house party.

"I mean no disrespect, Your Grace, but I shan't discuss Justina with you." Baxter quirked his mouth into a sideways smile that a few ladies had claimed was charming. "Particularly not before I've had a chance to converse with her."

"Hmm." Her gaze shrewd and assessing, the duchess said, "My husband assures me you are one of the most decent men he has had the pleasure of not only doing business with, but with whom he is acquainted. If Victor trusts you, then so do I."

"But?" He could see the challenge in her intelligent gaze.

"But, should you hurt Justina, or in any other way disrupt my holiday plans, you'll find I can be quite impossible."

He grinned. "Duly warned, Your Grace."

"Come along, then." She angled her head regally toward the doorway. "My guests are waiting."

The beautiful duchess promptly left his side when they entered the dining room and fairly floated to her end of the table. Once more, she met her husband's gaze, and sparks fairly flew between them.

And they weren't the only couple enjoying such intimate exchanges.

Rarely did the aristocracy marry for love, but from his brief observation this evening, each of the married dukes and duchesses present appeared to be

the proverbial head over heels in love.

Rather than invoke Baxter's usual cynicism, the knowledge encouraged him.

God, when Justina had looked at him with such accusation and betrayal, he'd wanted to sweep her into his arms right then and there and beg her forgiveness and explain everything.

However, he had a distinct impression that she was livid that he was a duke.

Was there ever such a woman?

Tomorrow was far too long to wait to speak with her—to set things right between them. To apologize. If he had to pick the lock to her room, he'd do so.

Baxter found himself seated between Nicolette, Duchess of Westfall, and Ophelia Breckensole. Both women peppered him with questions about Justina, which he diverted by continually changing the subject or by asking them an unrelated question.

"You sir, are deliberately steering the conversation away from Justina," Miss Breckensole accused with a merry twinkle in her eye. "Rest assured. Your evasiveness will do you no good, Your Grace. I shall have the whole of it from Justina sooner or later."

He'd only smiled and speared a piece of asparagus.

Never had a meal passed so damned painfully slowly, nor the brandy and cigars afterward—each minute inching by. Nonetheless, Baxter couldn't help but be impressed at the assembled men. Most were dukes save James Brentwood, Landry, Earl of Keyworth, and Kington Barclay. However, none of the aristocrats affected the arrogant air and haughty superiority he'd come to expect from English peers.

It also pleased him rather more than it ought to have that other Scots were present as well. True, they were Scottish dukes, but it made him feel less of an oddity.

The men chatted like old friends, jesting and mocking, and despite the earlier scene with Justina, he found himself relaxing and enjoying their company.

Afterward, he tried not to gnash his teeth, roll his eyes, or sigh too often as various guests took turns at the pianoforte, some singing along and others strolling the room's perimeter.

What wouldn't he give to hear the pipes and enjoy an exuberant jig?

A dram of whisky wouldn't go amiss either.

Waycross caught his eye, and he swore the other man read his thoughts. "I prefer the pipes, myself," he said, casting a furtive glance toward their hosts, who were singing a duet. "I may have brought mine and some Scotch too. I dinna ken how to celebrate Christmas, but Hogmanay...? Aye, I ken what that is all about."

Mayhap during their stay, the Scots could teach the English a thing or two about Hogmanay and how the Scots celebrated the new year.

The clock chimed half-past ten.

Emily Grenville had departed forty minutes ago, insisting she needed to check in on her niece before she retired. Despite the young dragon's determination to keep him from Justina, Baxter meant to speak with her. Even if it meant climbing a lattice to her balcony.

He checked the grin the image evoked.

He forced himself to wait until a few more guests bid goodnight before he begged exhaustion. He took his leave, mindful of a few raised eyebrows and swiftly exchanged glances from those remaining, not the least of which was his hostess's.

Hours ago, after using the excuse of needing the necessary, he'd casually inquired after Justina's health to a passing maid. The talkative servant also happened to be quite informative.

The slightly buck-toothed girl had grinned, shoving several strands of light brown hair beneath her cap.

"She didn't eat much of her dinner, Your Grace. But after a bath and a hot toddy, Miss Farthington is right as rain. I made certain myself that her balcony doors were shut tight, her grate was full of coal, and I laid an extra blanket on the bed so she wouldn't catch a chill. When I left her, she was drying her hair before the fire. Her room is only three doors down from yours."

He'd rewarded the loquacious slightly obtuse servant with a crown. She should never have revealed the location of Justina's room to him.

"Anything else you need, Your Grace," she'd beamed. "You just ask Hannah." She jabbed a thumb at her less than ample chest. "I'll be happy to assist you."

It wasn't until he was half-way back to the drawing room that he realized the girl hadn't once batted her eyelashes at him or thrust out her bosoms. Likely, the Duchess of Sutcliffe took particular care to assure her staff had no

aspirations of bedding her house guests.

He'd wager her grace had no idea just how helpful Hannah was, however.

Another hour and a half passed before the manor settled into the serenity of a slumbering house. He'd be daft to think everyone had already fallen asleep, but given it was already nearly midnight, Baxter didn't wish to delay any longer. He'd shucked his boots and jacket upon entering his room and had nursed a glass of brandy while staring at the capering fire.

Justina might already be asleep, and he didn't want to frighten her.

Hell, who was he trying to fool?

His motivation was purely selfish.

He needed to see her.

Needed to explain and set things right between them.

Feeling very much like a thief in his stocking feet, he rapped upon her door. "Justina. It's Baxter. I need to speak to you."

His mind flashed back to The Bathurst Hotel when he'd done this very thing. That night she'd opened the door, and he'd tasted her berry pink lips.

Tonight, only silence greeted his attempt.

He rapped again, casting a guarded glance up and down the corridor.

The last thing he needed was to be caught.

Still nothing.

He rested his forehead against the door and sighed.

"I'm sorry, *leannan*. I should've told you I was a duke," he murmured to the stout wood panel. "I vow, I'll make it up to you."

To his astonishment, the door opened six inches, as if Justina had been standing on the other side, listening.

Soulful green eyes gazed up at him, and his stomach clenched.

He'd done that to her.

"I couldna stay away," he said, slipping into Scots. "I had to make it right between us."

"I only opened the door to tell you to leave me alone, Your Grace. There can never be anything between us. You should've told me straightaway you were a duke, and I would never have allowed you to kiss me." She glanced away, color skating up her silky cheeks. "Good night."

"Wait, Justina." Baxter jammed his foot in the door, wincing as the wood pinched his toes. "I can explain."

She shook her head, her expression desolate. "Can you *not* be a duke?"

"What?" The question took him aback. "Of course not. But I care for you."

Deeply.”

By God. He might very well love her. *Did* love her.

The truth of that epiphany struck him with such force, his breath and pulse stalled before resuming at an alarming pace. He loved Justina Farthington with her gorgeous eyes the color of Scotland. Each time he gazed into them was a homecoming.

“Then this is goodbye, Baxter.” A nascent smile, sad and fragile, curved her mouth. “I mean to convince my aunt to leave on the morrow, and I doubt we’ll ever see each other again.”

Chapter Eleven

11



11



Early the next morning, her head aching from lack of sleep and the tears she'd wept after a stricken Baxter had backed away, permitting her to close and lock her bedchamber door, Justina went in search of her aunt.

She knocked thrice upon Aunt Emily's door and, after a long moment that stretched out into the corridor, received a groggy, "Who is it?" in response.

"It's me, Aunt Emily. I need to speak to you before the others arise."

After a bit of shuffling around inside, her aunt opened the door. "Come in, my dear."

"Forgive me for waking you."

Emily looked Justina over from head to toe. "You've looked better, I must say. Did you sleep at all?"

No.

"As I'm sure you can imagine, I found slumber elusive," she admitted dully.

After yanking the bellpull, her aunt urged Justina into an armchair, then threw open the draperies. "I cannot stand drawn curtains when the sun is coming up. Light is healing, especially morning light."

Justina managed a wan smile.

"Now what has you dragging me out of bed at..." Emily glanced at the bedside clock, her eyes going wide. "Merciful heavens," she exclaimed. "At half-past six?"

Justina folded her hands and met her aunt's eyes directly. "Can we go home this morning?"

"I take it you haven't looked outside?"

Justina shook her head.

"Darling, it snowed heavily overnight. Even if I thought we should depart, we cannot."

Despair gripped Justina, and then her aunt's words caught her attention.

“You don’t think we should leave? Why not? Baxter lied to me, Aunt Emily. He’s a *duke*, and you and I both know there cannot be anything between us.”

Her aunt angled her head. “I’ll admit I was quite miffed with him last night, but upon further reflection, I believe you should give him the chance to explain himself.”

Justina’s mouth sagged and she blinked several time in confusion. “You...” She shook her head again. “I don’t understand.”

A brisk knock echoed at the door.

“Come in,” Aunt Emily called, securing the belt of her night robe at her trim waist.

“You rang, Mrs. Grenville?” A pretty maid with big blue eyes asked.

“Hot chocolate for my niece and I, please. And croissants and hot cross buns if they are available. The duchess always has the most delicious croissants.”

“Of course.” The maid bobbed a curtsy and left.

“Now, where were we?” Aunt Emily sat in the other armchair. “Ah, yes, his grace.” She chuckled as she put a forefinger to her chin. “I knew there was something about him I should recall. Remember when we first arrived at Bathhurst Hotel and Spa, and I said Bathhurst sounded familiar?”

Nodding, Justina strove to understand what her aunt was going on about.

Aunt Emily laughed again. “I remembered last night, and I must bear part of the blame for this situation. He attended the Duke of Westfall’s ball last spring.”

He had?

“I didn’t meet him, of course, for I surely would’ve have remembered him.” Her aunt cocked her head, her eyes slightly squinted. “I believe I overheard that unpleasant Lady Crustworth complaining to her crony, Lady Darumple, that a Scot should never be permitted to inherit an English title.”

“Be that as it may, Aunt Emily, that doesn’t change the fact that he wasn’t honest with me, he did not call as he’d promised to, and then there’s me.” She waved a hand toward her midriff. “I’m illegitimate. A nobody. Not duchess material.”

“Justina Madalene Honoria Farthington. I take great exception to that statement.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Emily. I meant no offense.”

Her aunt drew herself up, hurt etched upon her pretty face and shadowing

her forest-green eyes. “I have taken extraordinary care to raise you in the manner of a most proper, gently-bred young woman. You *are too* duchess material. More so than most of the blue-blooded aristocrats I’ve met.”

Turning her attention toward the window, Justina sighed.

It was snowing again.

Of course, it was.

Was God determined she should always be stranded in the same house as Baxter?

“Justina, may I ask you something personal?”

She veered her focus to her aunt once more. “Of course.”

There’d never been secrets between them. Well, except for the reason behind Aunt Emily’s silence regarding her marriage.

“Do you love San Sebastian?” The words were soft and empathetic, and yes, probably very hard for her wary aunt to ask.

“I do. I truly do.” Swallowing, Justina battled the sudden swell of tears behind her eyelids. “So much so that I don’t know how I can face the future without him.”

Her aunt came to her then, and crouched before her, taking her hands in hers. “Darling, then tell him so. That man is in love with you. I’d wager everything I own upon it.”

Justina studied her face, unable to deny the sincerity stamped upon Aunt Emily’s features. “How can you, who won’t even talk about what happened in your marriage, advise me on love?”

Hurt flashed across her aunt's face before she schooled her features once more. After taking a deep breath, she met Justina’s gaze and clasped her hands tighter.

“I was in love. Very much so. Clement vowed he loved me too. We were married after a whirlwind courtship, and we were blissfully happy for two months.”

Justina longed to ask what happened, but forced herself to wait patiently. She instinctively knew there was no rushing the telling of this tale.

Going pale, Aunt Emily looked away and bit her lower lip. After a long pause, she continued, her words strained.

“But, you see, my dear, he was already married. His wife was in England with their three children. He received his new orders and began packing at once to leave. I assumed he’d send me home to England to await him. When I asked him what arrangements I should make, he finally told me the truth.”

She managed a rueful, heartbreaking smile. “Oh, he swore he loved me, that his wife was a cold, unfeeling woman, but he had his children to consider, you see.”

“Oh, Aunt Emily.” The heartless, rotten bounder. To hurt her sweet aunt in such a heartless fashion. No wonder Emily had no interest in marrying again.

“He was killed shortly thereafter.” A sad nascent pulled her aunt’s mouth upward. “I never even told my brother the truth. I was too ashamed, and Richard was a stickler for propriety. I honestly feared he’d turn me out.”

With a bent knuckle, she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

That made Justina rather grateful Richard Farthington was not her sire. Or if he was, as her grandfather had sworn he was, that Justina had never known him.

“But you dear, what you have with San Sebastian. It’s beautiful.” Emily gave a tiny, self-conscious laugh. “I confess, I was envious. I didn’t want to lose you, to be alone.”

“I would never leave you!” Justina exclaimed, throwing her arms around her aunt’s shoulders. “After all that you’ve done for me? How could you even think it?”

Aunt Emily gave her a tight hug in return and then a little shove. “Go, darling. Tell him how you feel.”

“I don’t know which room is his.” Giddiness tumbled around Justina’s middle.

Could she really do it?

Proclaim herself?

Could she trust this feeling that had taken control of her life?

“Three doors down from yours.”

Was her model-of-decorum aunt honestly telling her to visit a gentleman’s bedchamber?

“I do believe I shall,” Justina said, her courage growing with each word.

What had she to lose but the man she loved?

After kissing her aunt on the cheek, Justina hurried from the room, wishing she’d worn a different gown other than her slate gray and navy-blue traveling ensemble. She retraced her steps, this time her heart light and full of hope.

She would listen to what Baxter had to say. Hear what he’d wanted to tell her last night. She’d not throw away a chance for happiness because of her

wounded pride.

A few moments later, she stood outside his chamber.

Ponies and puppies and all manner of creatures frolicked about her middle.

Drawing in a steadying breath, she knocked upon his door, one soft rap.

“Baxter?” She knocked again, a mite harder this time. “Are you awake?”

He threw the door open at once. After poking his damp head out and searching up and down the corridor, he swiftly drew her inside.

“Is something amiss, Justina?”

He wore only a towel about his waist, as if he’d come straight from the bath.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms, to tell him she was sorry she’d been so mulish and hardheaded. To kiss the vast, tempting expanse of his sculpted flesh. To do much, much more, in truth.

Instead, she gawked rather indelicately.

But, God above, he was gorgeous.

It truly was a crime that the Almighty had fashioned such a perfect specimen of manhood, and all of that male beauty was hidden beneath clothing most of the time. And though she ought to have blushed as any properly bred young woman would’ve done, she couldn’t feign false modesty.

“Ah, no. Not precisely. Aunt Emily said I should speak with you.”

A sandy-brown brow arched in bemusement. “Your *aunt* advised you to seek me out?”

“Indeed.” Justina forced her attention from his exquisite physique, her focus landing upon the bathtub and the tendrils of steam floating upward.

“Oh, you’re bathing.” She angled toward the door. “I’ll come back later.”

“No, please stay.” Baxter turned her to face him. “What is it you wish to say?”

Her traitorous gaze crept to the damp mat on his chest, the shade slightly darker than his hair. The hair trailed downward, in a tempting, teasing vee until it disappeared into his towel.

Was there ever such a perfect muscled, sculpted masculine work of art?

Even the pinkish scars lashing his right shoulder and slicing across his ribcage didn’t detract from his male perfection.

Her mouth had gone unaccountably dry. Justina swallowed, hauling her attention back to his face with considerable effort.

A smoldering glint of appreciation shone in his eyes. *Lion eyes*. It suddenly dawned on her. That was what they were.

A sliver of uncertainty pierced her. “What did you want to say to me last night?”

“I’m sorrier than I can say, Justina, that I didn’t tell you I was a duke.” Baxter cupped her shoulders, staring intently into her eyes as if willing her to believe him. “Honestly, I’ve never liked the title, and in the five years since I inherited the dukedom, I’ve had women throwing themselves at me, wanting to be my duchess. I’ve chosen to not use the title except when in London or at gatherings where people already know who I am.”

“It wasn’t because I’m not nobly born?” She had to ask him, and at that moment she acknowledged she must tell him the shameful rest as well.

There would be no more secrets between them.

He drew her to him, caressing her back and dropping tender kisses upon her head. “Nae, lass.”

His burr wrapped itself around her, seductive and tantalizing, and she loved that he felt comfortable enough with her to speak Scots.

“I care nothin’ about yer birth. It’s ye I love. Ye with yer impossibly green eyes that remind me of my beloved Scotland. With yer hair, the rich color of molasses and yer red lips sweeter than any honey I’ve ever tasted.”

“You love me?” Awed, she traced her fingertips across his freshly shaven jaw. “Truly, Baxter?”

“Aye. My heart is full of ye, Justina. Since the moment I laid eyes on ye, my soul kent we were meant to be together. With ye, I am whole. Complete in a way I dinna feel when we are apart.”

“Why didn’t you come to Bristol?” Her voice broke. “I waited and waited.”

Her heart breaking more with each passing day.

She searched his dear face, adoring the slight wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the sharp slice of his nose, his granite jaw. There was nothing soft about this man except for the expression in his eyes.

“Things were a tangle in Lancashire.” He tipped his mouth into a wry smile. “I had mechanical issues, rebellious workers, and sickness had gripped half of them as well. I should’ve asked for yer direction that night I came to yer bedchamber.”

As he spoke, he caressed her, teasing butterfly sweeps of his fingertips that stoked the fire already smoldering in her blood.

“I went to see ye within hours after returnin’ home, but yer servants wouldna tell me where ye’d gone.”

“I was angry and didn’t tell them where we were off to, only when we’d return. Though I didn’t believe you’d actually come.”

“I told ye once before, Justina Farthington. When I set my mind to somethin’, I willna be dissuaded.” He pressed his firm lips to her forehead, the gesture so sweet it brought tears to her eyes. “Marry me, Justina. By special license or we can elope to Scotland. Say ye’ll be my wife, my partner, and my helpmate.”

He hadn’t said duchess.

Because it didn’t matter?

Or because it did?

Justina leaned away, bracing herself for what she must tell him. “Baxter, there is something you need to know about me.”

“What is it?” He grinned, the smile holding the promises of a lifetime with him. “That ye’ve stolen my heart? Me, who didna believe I would ever fall in love? That ye like feedin’ the birds I rescued? That ye’re almost as fond of honey as I am?”

“No to all of those. Although, I do want to hear how you came to have so many birds, someday.” No sense in prevaricating about her history, however. “Baxter, I am a bastard. I may not even really be Emily’s niece.”

In short order, Justina told him an abbreviated account of her birth and coming to England.

For a pregnant moment afterward, he was totally silent, his expression unreadable. Then he shook his head and quirked his mouth into a sideways smile.

“I dinna think I’ve ever met a woman as unselfish as yer aunt,” he said. “If ye like, she will always have a home with us, although she’s still quite young. She may very well marry again.”

Justina shook her head. “I honestly don’t think so. She was terribly hurt by her first husband.”

Perchance she’d tell Baxter that story someday. But not today and not without Aunt Emily’s permission.

He hadn’t directly addressed her bastardry either.

“Baxter, I am the illegitimate daughter of an Austrian commoner. *You* are a duke. People will talk, and that’s without knowing my tainted background.”

His beautiful mouth bent into a bone-melting smile. “*I* dinna care, and

that's all that matters."

Tears prickled behind her eyelids, and she fell impossibly deeper in love with him.

"Ye didna answer me, Justina." Baxter began removing the pins from her hair, and once it was free of its moorings, ran his fingers through the length. "I've longed to do this since that first day I saw ye sittin' in Bathhurst Hotel and Spa's drawin' room.

She threaded her fingers through his thick mane, the hair silkier than she'd ever have guessed. "As have I," she admitted, thrilling at the low growl in his throat.

"Will ye marry me, love? I do love ye, Justina. I think I have from the moment ye said ye believed in love at first sight. Only I was blind to the truth right before me."

"I love you too, Baxter. I knew I did when you throttled Howlette on my behalf." Then brazenly, she stood on her toes and drew his mouth down to hers, whispering, "Take me to bed."

"Ye dinna want to wait until we exchange our vows?"

She gave him a coy smile. "Do you?"

Chapter Twelve

12



12



Baxter scooped Justina into his arms and strode to his mussed bed. He set her on the rumpled sheets, tangled from a night of his tossing and turning as thoughts of her tortured him. Bending over her, he cupped her ivory cheek in one hand.

He'd never seen a woman with lovelier skin, peaches and cream. "Are ye absolutely certain, Justina?"

She gifted him a beatific smile, and for the remainder of his days, until he was a doddering, ancient fool, he'd recall how that smile lit the room, love and adoration blooming across her face.

"I have never been more certain of anything in my life, Baxter."

His cock had been hard as forged steel since she'd entered his chamber, practically eating him with her hungry gaze. But at her sincere declaration, he grew harder still. "Then let me love ye, my darlin'."

"Yes, please," she said, her voice husky.

Baxter sat beside her, and drew her into his arms, ravenous for a taste of her mouth. Settling his lips upon hers, he relished her sigh of delight. He teased her mouth open, and Justina welcomed him inside the velvety depths.

Her tongue parried with his for several long, sensuous moments.

"Let's get ye out of these clothes, shall we? I want to see all of ye."

He'd envisioned her naked hundreds of times.

By candle or firelight.

In the daytime.

As dawn crested the horizon or as twilight descended.

She flicked a wary glance to the windows, the draperies parted, allowing the first rays of sunshine to filter into the room. "Um, shouldn't we close the draperies?"

Baxter chuckled and shook his head as he removed her shoes and then her stockings, kissing and nipping his way up each hopelessly satiny thigh.

Little sensuous gasps, sighs, and moans accompanied the journey.

“Never. I want to see ye in the daylight, to memorize each luscious curve and swell of yer beautiful body.” His gaze drifted to her breasts, and he reached out, cupping them with both hands. His palms didn’t begin to contain their bounty. “God, how I want ye. To taste every inch of ye. To take yer glorious breasts into my mouth and to suckle ye.”

His mouth watered in anticipation as he squeezed the abundant mounds gently, then moved to lightly pinch her hardened peaks.

She hissed between her teeth. “That feels good.”

“It feels even better, darlin’.”

As Baxter methodically divested Justina of her clothes, worshipping her like a pagan goddess with kisses and nibbles and licks, he inhaled her heady, womanly essence, becoming drunk on the aroma. When at last Justina lay bare before him, he stood and stepped away so he could admire all of her.

She didn’t blush or try to cover herself. Instead, she lay proudly, all of her considerable charms revealed for Baxter’s eyes alone. Abundant breasts taunted him above her sloping torso. Full, rounded hips gave way to long, shapely thighs and calves.

Her skin glowed golden in the mellow light, and his fingers itched to explore every captivating inch of her until she moaned his name and writhed beneath his touch.

His attention returned to the apex of her womanhood, where she’d soon cradle him. Where they’d join and experience bliss together. His bollocks filled with blood, swelling, swelling, *swelling* until he gritted his teeth against the pleasure-pain.

“Magnificent,” he breathed, and his heavy, aching cocked throbbed its agreement.

Her inquisitive green-eyed gaze roamed over him, a visual caress until she pointedly regarded the towel still at his waist. The minutest frown stitched her sable brows together.

“Is somethin’ wrong, Justina?”

That kissable mouth—Christ, what he could do with that mouth, what he’d teach her to do with that mouth—inched up at the corners coquettishly.

“You are not naked, *Your Grace*.”

Christ on the blessed cross.

Never had the two words induced such an erotic response. Henceforth, he’d sport a cockstand every time he heard them. Which might be deucedly

awkward, but at the moment, he didn't give ten damns.

With a flick of his thumb, he loosened the linen, and it slithered to the ground.

Her eyes widened as she took in his full, proud length. A slow smile bent her mouth.

"You are magnificent."

Then she opened her arms, and Baxter needed no further invitation.

She welcomed him into her embrace, eager to learn all that he could teach her. She met his hunger with her own, their moans and harsh breaths mingling together until it was impossible to separate one from the other.

He slid a finger between the slick, warm folds of her sex. "Ye're ready, sweetheart."

As he kneeled between her legs, circling the bud of her femininity, she arched her hips upward to meet his caress.

"Baxter. Please. I need..."

"I ken exactly what ye need, love," he said, positioning himself at her entrance. Capturing her gaze with his, he said, "Dinna look away, lass. Stay with me as I enter ye."

Trembling with unrestrained need, she nodded and raised her knees, opening to him. "Please," she moaned.

Their gazes locked, he slid into her tight, hot channel, gritting his teeth against the urge to spurt his seed.

Her mouth parted, her breathing coming in short little pants as he inched farther and farther inside her.

"Yes. Yes. Oh, God! More Baxter. More."

She pulled frantically on his buttocks, rotating her pelvis into his.

"As ye wish." He plunged forward, breaking through her maidenhead, until he was fully sheathed, then pulled nearly all of the way out and surged into her again.

Justina writhed beneath him, so overcome with passion, she hadn't even cried out when he'd taken her virginity. He rocked into her, his body thrumming with the need to find his release.

"Again," she pleaded, frantically running her hands over his back and buttocks. "Again. Again."

Baxter happily obliged, carried forward on a tidal wave of lust and love. "Come for me, Justina. Come," he commanded, peering into her glazed eyes.

And then she flew apart, screaming his name as she convulsed over and

over. He shouted her name as he exploded inside her womb, the orgasm so blindingly powerful, lightheadedness engulfed him.

He collapsed atop her, careful not to crush her beneath his weight. He'd enjoyed sex before. Enjoyed it very much. But this... What he'd just shared with his soon-to-be-wife. That had been a connection of their souls.

She opened her eyes and blinked, wonder and astonishment shining in their green depths. "That was..."

"Magnificent," they both said together before bursting into laughter.

Sometime later, when the sun had risen higher in the sky, and their absences from breakfast were sure to have been noted, he said, "I should like to announce our betrothal today."

She giggled and snuggled closer. "I shouldn't be surprised if Aunt Emily hasn't taken that upon herself, considering she knew I meant to seek you in your chamber, and I've not reappeared."

He couldn't find it in himself to regret what they'd shared or that in likelihood, Emily Grenville had announced his and Justina's impending marriage. And what was more, she hadn't done it to entrap him, but because that wise woman recognized love when she saw it.

Justina rolled onto her side, one satiny leg between his and her abundant breasts mashed to his chest. At once, his manhood jumped to attention, flexing against her soft stomach. She met his gaze, wonderment in hers. "Again? So soon?"

"I believe a verra short betrothal is in order," he said, rolling her beneath him.

"Uh-hmm," she agreed throatily. "Very, very short."

"I'll send a message to the archbishop tomorrow, requestin' a special license."

"That would be wise," she said, spreading her legs to receive him once more. Justina cupped his face and pressed a long kiss upon his mouth. "I get my wish, after all."

"Making love in broad daylight?" Baxter waggled his eyebrows as he slid into her.

Arching her back, she gasped. "No. I am to wed my very own Christmas duke."

"Nae, lass. Ye are marryin' the man who will adore ye for the rest of our lives."

About Collette Cameron

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

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Thank you for reading WEDDING HER CHRISTMAS DUKE!

I'm always delighted when a reader finishes a book I've written. It warms my soul.

For those of you skeptical about love at first sight, such as Justina and Baxter experienced, scientific studies have proven it does exist. And interestingly, many of those who fall in love almost instantly and marry, remain married decades later. I personally know of multiple instances, including myself. My husband asked me to marry him after two weeks, and at the writing of this letter, we've been married thirty-seven years.

If you're curious about some of the other characters you met in WEDDING HER CHRISTMAS DUKE, you can find all of the series that have been written so far on my [website](#). Watch for HOW TO WIN A DUKE'S HEART, Sophronie Slater and Evan Gordonstone, Duke of Waycross's story and THE DEBUTANTE AND THE DUKE, Rayne Wellbrook and Fletcher McQuinton, Duke of Kincade, romances coming soon. And yes, Aunt Emily does find love. I bet you can guess who her hero is after reading this story.

The Knot of a Knight

by Linda Rae Sande



A Widow Left Alone

*Bradley House, Curzon Street, Mayfair
December 1824*

Despite the bleak, gray skies outside her first floor parlor window, Xenobia Dunsworth was smiling for the first time in an age.

There were callers in her parlor.

And she wasn't wearing black, lavender, or gray.

In fact, she had instructed her lady's maid to find the brightest colored gown in her wardrobe so that she might greet her callers looking her very best. "Something that portends the holiday," she had said in response to her lady's maid's query earlier as to what she might like to wear that day. "Christmas is only a week away, Sullivan, and although I no longer have a husband with whom to share it, I intend to celebrate."

She was fairly sure Sullivan looked as if she were about to faint at hearing her proclamation. "Don't faint on me now," Xenobia warned.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare, my lady," Sullivan replied. She was quick to pull out a frock in a color that could best be described as poppy red, except that some draper thought it better to use the French term, *coquelicot*.

Xenobia didn't care. The gown had a blush appearing on her pale cheeks and enhanced lips she had surreptitiously dabbed with a bit of color.

"Now that you are out of mourning, we shall expect you at all the entertainments," Julia gushed as she helped herself to another Dutch biscuit. Lady Julia Comber, a cousin by way of her mother, had been Xenobia's closest friend since the death of her husband, Baron James Dunsworth. James had been Xenobia's very best friend her entire life.

"It is too bad there are so few here in London during the winter months," Lady Pettigrew lamented. The elderly viscountess, an inveterate gossip, eyed the remaining cakes as if she were keeping count of who had consumed which ones and how many.

"April is not too far away," Lady Caroline Chamberlain remarked. Her husband, Viscount Matthew Chamberlain, was the head of the Foreign Office

despite his age.

“I fear I have been forgotten by the *ton* since it has been so long since I attended even the theatre,” Xenobia lamented. James had died in November of 1823, which meant she had essentially been out of sight for over a year.

And out of sorts.

To lose her very best friend to pneumonia had been devastating. Then, to suffer alone for so long, with only Julia with whom to spend time when her cousin could manage to be away from a growing family, had her stitching and needlepointing until her fingers bled. She had taken up drawing, although her efforts had yet to look like whatever it was she was attempting to draw. A wish to escape her reality had her reading every novel she could borrow from the circulating library.

The Gothics kept her awake at night. The mysteries were predictable. The humorous stories barely made her smile.

“Well, I really must be going,” Lady Pettigrew announced suddenly.

“So soon?” Xenobia replied, a quick glance at the mantle clock showing the viscountess had only been in her parlor for half-an-hour.

“Yes, well, I must pay a call on your neighbor. She is so rarely in town,” she replied, referring to Countess Middleton.

“Of course. I’ll see you out,” Xenobia offered as she moved to stand up.

“Oh, there’s no need. Look. Chesterfield is here,” the older woman said, referring to the butler. With that, Lady Pettigrew sailed out of the room, the butler quickly escorting her down the stairs and to the front door.

Xenobia realized then that Eugenia Pettigrew had arranged for Chesterfield to interrupt them after exactly thirty minutes. She turned her attention on Julia and Caroline. “I do hope you’re not going to leave, too,” she murmured.

Julia angled her head. “Not for a few more minutes,” she replied as she helped herself to another cake. “Now that she’s gone, I feel as if I can speak freely and *eat*.”

Dipping her head as she attempted to suppress a knowing grin, Xenobia did the same.

Caroline grinned as she took another cake. “I’m of the same mind as you, even if I am not eating for two any longer.” Despite her age, the viscountess had given birth to her third child just a few years earlier. “Besides, Chamberlain said he would be late for dinner this evening.”

Julia and Xenobia exchanged quick glances. Xenobia knew first-hand

what a comment like that could mean. Caroline caught their concerned looks, though, and leaned forward.

“It’s not an *affaire*, unless you’re referring to his devotion to his job. He’s got his men after counterfeiters,” she whispered hoarsely. “Apparently, there are about to be some arrests made.” This last was said in a manner suggesting she was sharing a secret.

“Counterfeiters?” Julia repeated. “You mean, fake bank notes? I thought that had been solved a few years ago? All those women they put to death?”

Xenobia cringed at remembering the Bank of England’s efforts to stop counterfeiters. Their agents had caught mostly women passing the bank notes—many of whom had no idea they were doing so. Those making the counterfeit notes were rarely discovered and prosecuted. “As long as there is paper money instead of coin, there will always be counterfeiting. At least, that’s what James used to say,” Xenobia said before refilling Caroline’s teacup.

“Chamberlain would agree with that,” Caroline replied. “Apparently his agents are after some foreigners who are bringing it in from another country. I’ll just let you guess which one.”

Julia inhaled. “France?”

Caroline nodded.

“But, how are they passing them?” Xenobia asked.

“In gaming establishments. Here in Mayfair. In St. James Street, in fact,” Caroline replied. “That street has become nothing but men’s clubs and gaming hells,” she complained. She suddenly glanced at the clock over the fireplace mantle. “And speaking of St. James Street, I must head in that direction. I’ve an order in Jermyn Street to pick up.”

Julia and Xenobia said their farewells to the viscountess and returned their attentions to their tea.

“Are the children well?” Xenobia asked.

Waving a hand in the air, her cousin Julia rolled her blue eyes and gave her head a shake. Every last golden blonde strand remained in place. “Everyone is fine. Juliet has decided horses will be her life—and her father is doing nothing to disabuse her of the idea.”

“Perhaps he shouldn’t,” Xenobia countered. “By the time she’s old enough to wed, there will be men who will appreciate a fine horsewoman more than they do now.”

Julia allowed a shrug. “Perhaps.” The word didn’t hold much hope.

“What of your son?”

“Jamie has a head cold, but he’s the last to have it. Alistair says there will be four new colts in the Harrington House stables this spring. And this one...” She paused and leaned back as she placed a hand over her belly. “Has learned how to kick.” She straightened as much as she could. “I am worried about you.”

Xenobia’s eyes widened. “Why?”

Julia sighed. “You’re all alone. You’ve lost your best friend—”

“You needn’t make it sound as if I misplaced him.”

“—and you’re still young enough to find another and become a mother. You’ve always wanted children,” Julia went on, ignoring the interruption.

“I am nearly five-and-twenty years old,” Xenobia said in protest.

“But you’re not *dead*.”

Xenobia blinked. The words had sounded as if they were a scold.

“I was recently introduced to a gentleman whom I think you should meet.”

“Julia,—”

“My husband thinks the world of him, I believe because he knew what to do with Jupiter.”

“Jupiter?” Xenobia repeated, thinking she referred to the planet.

Whatever could a man do to Jupiter?

“His horse, of course. Now, I’m going to see to it you two meet—”

“Julia!”

“Just give him a chance, Xenobia,” Julia insisted. She paused a moment and dipped her head. “I believe he has suffered much like you have, given his wife died in the childbed.”

Xenobia relaxed into the settee. “Is... is he an aristocrat?” She struggled to recall if she had heard or read anything about a lord having lost a wife to childbirth in the last year.

Julia angled her head as if she were attempting to solve a math problem in her head. “He is certainly related to one,” she finally hedged.

“But I haven’t met him?”

Her cousin shook her head. “Doubtful, unless you’ve been at Tattersall’s or the race track.”

Xenobia rolled her eyes. She hadn’t been to the Derby or the Ascot in years, and she had never been to the auction house featuring horses. “You know I have not.”

“Well, then. It’s settled,” Julia announced as she struggled to stand up, the evidence of her pregnancy making itself apparent. “I’ll send you a note as to when you can expect him. I’m off,” she said, at the very moment Chesterfield once again appeared on the parlor threshold.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Xenobia said as she watched her friend take her leave. “And Happy Christmas!”

Allowing a sigh, Xenobia regarded the tray of cakes and helped herself to the last one. With no one to watch, she ate the entire piece with a second cup of tea as she considered Julia’s comment.

A Missive Most Curious

Later that afternoon

Xenobia finished a Christmas greeting to her late husband's mother and regarded the parchment with a critical eye. She never knew what to write to Agnes Dunsworth. The dowager baroness still lived on the barony's estate in Kent, and although she had written to invite Xenobia to join her there on a permanent basis—in *the event you find Town too much to bear*—Xenobia knew better than to accept the invitation.

No amount of desperation would have her moving to a country estate in Kent, no matter how beautiful or how vast. She didn't wish to feel more alone than she already did.

Chesterfield appeared on the threshold of her salon the very moment she finished folding the letter. "This was just delivered by a footman," he said as he held out a silver salver.

The white note emblazoned with only her first name had Xenobia frowning—until she recognized Julia's handwriting. "Very good, Chesterfield. And this one is ready to post," she added as she finished addressing her letter. She placed it on the salver and helped herself to Julia's missive, unfolding the note as if it might contain an explosive device.

Before the butler could take his leave, she asked, "Have the Christmas flowers arrived yet?"

The butler nodded. "They have, my lady. However..." He paused and allowed a pained expression.

"What is it?"

"There are far more of them than there is room in the parlor," he murmured quietly.

Xenobia considered how she had placed the order with the hot house in Chiswick. *Enough red and white flowers to fill a barrel.*

Apparently they were thinking of a very large barrel.

"I'll come down and arrange them in a moment," she replied. "In the meantime, gather up every available vase from around the house, and have a footman go up to the attic. See if he can't find the round table that used to be

in the hall. Near the base of the stairs.”

She had always been curious as to why her father had ordered all the furnishings in the hall be removed at some point before his death. Although he didn't live long enough to explain it to her, her mother had simply waved a hand and insisted it was nothing. Besides, she and her mother didn't live at Bradley House, but rather in a dowager cottage on the grounds of the Pendleton estate. Xenobia had moved into Bradley House upon her marriage to James Dunsworth after learning she had inherited it from the army captain.

“Yes, my lady,” Chesterfield replied before he quickly took his leave.

Smiling at the thought of fresh flowers filling Bradley House, Xenobia turned her attention to Julia's note.

My dearest Cousin Xenobia,

It has taken my very best behavior and all my cleverness, but I have managed to secure an appointment for you to meet with him at nine o'clock. I know it is a terrible time, but he will pay a call on you, so there is no need for you to go out.

Xenobia glanced up.

He? Him? Who?

She scanned the note again for a name and found none. Reading the rest of the missive was of no help, either.

Please do not dismiss him out of hand. I just have this incredible sense of wonder that you two might enjoy one another's company. Of course, that may be because the baby has spent the entire morning kicking me senseless. I do hope this one is a boy, or I will be doomed to have a hoyden. The horrors!

Do let me know how it goes.

Julia

Xenobia dropped the note on her *escritoire* as if it were on fire.

Nine o'clock.

Well, she was usually awake well before then, but not always dressed for the day. She would make an exception, of course, and have her lady's maid do her hair in something more appealing than a top knot or a bun at the back

of her head. She could wear the poppy-colored gown and hope that it would account for how red her face would be when the mysterious man appeared.

I don't know his name. We've probably never even been introduced, she thought as a bit of panic swept through her.

Then she remembered what Julia had said about Jupiter. About Tattersall's and the races.

She hurried down to the library and scanned the foiled titles of her late father's collection of books. When she found one with the word 'horse' in the title, she pulled it from the shelf. *A Treatise on the Breeding of Thoroughbred Horses* was printed on the title page.

Finding no other books about horses, she reluctantly placed this one in the crook of her arm and then stepped into the ground floor salon. The scents of hot house flowers assaulted her as she paused on the threshold, stunned to discover pasteboard boxes of flowers stacked about the room.

"Oh, dear," she murmured. A watering can and a number of vases were set up on the low table, and she quickly assembled several arrangements, passing them off to a housemaid and Smith, a footman, for placement in all the public rooms.

She still had several boxes of flowers remaining when the last of the vases was filled. "Chesterfield, I need the punch bowl," she announced when the servant appeared on the threshold.

"Right away, my lady. Colburn has just informed me that there are no tables in the attic," he said, referring to the other footman. "But he says that the table that used to be in the hall is now in the study. As are the caryatids that used to be in the hall between the doorways."

Xenobia blinked. She tried to recall ever noticing a round table in there—she was only ever in the study to pay bills—when Chesterfield added, "It's more of a... gaming table, my lady."

"Is it round?"

His eyes darting sideways, Chesterfield finally gave a nod. "It's covered in felt, my lady. For playing cards."

"Well, it will have to do until I can have a proper one installed," Xenobia replied. "Please see to its placement in the hall and just... cover it with a tablecloth. We'll put the punchbowl on it, and no one will be the wiser."

Although he seemed reluctant, Chesterfield finally gave a nod and took his leave.

With nothing to do until the punchbowl was delivered, Xenobia made her

way to the study. She immediately found the four caryatids—they had been in the study as long as she could remember—lined up on one of the short walls behind a leather sofa.

The gaming table was at the opposite end of the room. Featuring a huge tripod base of carved mahogany, the round surface was covered in a deep red felt. Although it was a bit scuffed, the fabric wasn't torn, and the wood's smooth finish was a testament to its frequent cleaning.

Bending down, Xenobia studied the edges of the table, her fingertips traveling over the curious ornate carvings and inlaid wood patterns. From their shape, she was sure they had some purpose other than decoration. She was about to sit in one of the accompanying chairs to gain a better vantage when two footmen appeared to move the table.

She took her leave so that the servants had room to work and then resumed her flower arranging in the salon.

By the time she had the punchbowl filled with white roses, it looked like a snowball when Smith placed it on the red felt-topped table.

"Vera appropriate, my lady," the housekeeper remarked when she paused on her way between rooms.

"Thank you, Barclay. These flowers may have to do for decorations this year. I haven't yet arranged for any evergreens for Christmas Eve. I wonder if it's too late?" She hadn't bothered with any Christmas celebrations the year before given her husband's death.

"I can find out for you on the morrow, my lady. Cook and I will be going to market. If I find a tree cutter, I'll make the arrangements. We can have the footmen see to bringing them into the house the morning of Christmas Eve."

"Very good," Xenobia replied, taking a deep breath when she realized the floral scents had already begun to fill the hall.

Once she had confirmed all the flower boxes were empty, she retrieved the book on horse breeding and made her way to the upstairs parlor. She rang for tea and settled in for another late afternoon of reading.

When dinner was served, Xenobia took it in the parlor, looking up from the pages only to take a bite of food. By the time Colburn retrieved the dishes and a maid had delivered tea, she had read over half the book, and the floral scents from no less than three vases filled with red roses had permeated the room.

If she had any intention of raising horses suitable for the Derby or one of the other horse races run under the auspices of The Jockey Club, she was

fairly sure she knew what she was looking for when it came to horseflesh.

As for riding a horse, she hadn't done so since she was a child. She was fairly sure she owned a riding habit, but it was no doubt long out of fashion.

As to racing her own horse in such a spectacle as the Derby, she found she wasn't the least bit interested.

Despite knowing of several aristocrat's wives who owned stables of racing horses—the Marquess of Reading's wife, Constance, came to mind—the horse racing circuit was most definitely a man's world.

Xenobia was thinking of this and more when she heard her butler make an odd comment from somewhere downstairs. Daring a glance at the mantle clock, she furrowed a brow and then murmured, "Damnation," when she noted the time.

It was exactly nine o'clock.

At night.

A Dinner with a Father and Stepmother

Two hours earlier, at Reading House in Curzon Street

Constance Fitzwilliam Roderick, Marchioness of Reading, watched as her maid added another curl to an already elaborate hairstyle. “Really, Simmons. There will only be three of us for dinner this evening. Randall and I aren’t even planning to leave the house afterwards.”

Simmons paused, a hairpin held between two fingers as she regarded her mistress in the dressing table mirror. “Three?” she repeated, apparently unaware they were to host Randall’s oldest son for dinner.

“Randolph will be joining us. In fact, I expected he might be here by now,” Constance replied, hoping her lady’s maid might be finished. “He’s probably in the nursery, tossing his son and his brother about.”

Simmons’ reflection in the dressing table mirror showed her widened eyes. “Tossing?” she repeated.

Constance couldn’t help but grin. “He claims his father did it with him when he was a child, and I have paid witness to Reading doing it with our son when he doesn’t know I’m watching,” she explained. “As much as it frightens me to see my youngest son thrown into the air, his giggles are so delightful. Reading seems to enjoy it as much as Robert does,” she added.

Simmons had never had children of her own, but she probably wouldn’t have allowed baby tossing. “I believe I might have heard a commotion in the nursery earlier, my lady. I’ve just one more pin to place.” The hairpin was quickly inserted into the last curl and Simmons stepped back. “Will there be anything else, my lady?”

Constance rose from the small chair and regarded Simmons for a moment. The maid had been her companion for several years before her marriage to Randall Roderick. Back when she still lived at Fair Downs in Sussex. Despite living in London and near Reading for all the years since, Simmons still hadn’t adapted to their new lives. “Not tonight. In fact, I expect I won’t have need of you after dinner.”

At least, she hoped not. With any luck, her husband would be undoing the fastenings on her scarlet dinner gown. He was finally over a head cold, and she had every intention of spending the night in his bedchamber.

Simmons' eyes widened. "Very good, my lady." She dipped a curtsy and moved to the door. When she opened it, she let out a squeak.

"Ah, Simmons, I didn't mean to startle you," Randall Roderick, Marquess of Reading, said as he glanced beyond the lady's maid. "My oldest son and I have worn ourselves out playing with the boys, and I've come to collect my lovely wife."

Simmons dipped a curtsy and hurried out the door as Constance afforded her husband a brilliant smile. "I am so happy you are feeling better," she said as she allowed him to kiss the back of her hand and then her lips.

"As am I. Did you dismiss her for the night?"

Constance eyed him through lowered lashes. "Should I have?" His look of disappointment had her smile returning. "I did, of course. If you think I would spend another night alone in bed—"

The rest of her comment was cut off when Randall kissed her again. "I nearly came to your bed last night," he whispered. "I wanted you..."

The rest of his comment was cut off when Giles, the butler, appeared outside the marchioness' door and cleared his throat.

"What is it?" Randall asked, struggling to keep annoyance from sounding in his voice.

"Sir Randolph has finally taken his leave of the nursery. I put him in the downstairs parlor, sir."

Constance and Randall exchanged quick glances. "This must be a night to celebrate," he murmured, one of his bushy eyebrows lifting in delight. "I think he was in there for nearly an hour. His son is going to grow up thinking he's a bird."

"And our son won't?" she teased, giggling when she saw how he reacted.

"He's grown too heavy to throw up into the air. I'm reduced to spinning him around by his arms until I'm dizzy," he explained. "Children are hard work," he added, sounding as if he was complaining. The expression on his face said he was teasing, though.

"I do hope Randolph did well today," Constance said as she placed a hand on her husband's proffered arm. They made their way down the carpeted stairs.

Her husband did his best to hide his first reaction at hearing her words.

Had Constance somehow discovered his oldest illegitimate son's true occupation? There was a reason Randolph had been knighted by the king, and it had nothing to do with training horses.

Then Randall realized she referred to that day's auction at Tattersall's. Two mares that Randolph had raised and trained since their birth were set to be sold. "He would not have come for dinner if he had not," Randall replied, his manner having sobered. "But that doesn't mean you should ask him if he's courting anyone," he warned.

"I wouldn't," Constance replied, feigning shock. "What has *courting* to do with how he did today at the auction?"

Randall ignored her query. "Although I favored his wife, I never thought Barbara was good enough for him."

Constance knew better than to argue. Barbara Hancock had been a perfectly acceptable young lady for Randall's oldest son. The daughter of a tradesman, she had been petite and pretty and didn't seem to mind she was marrying a bastard. He was a knight, after all, so she could style herself a lady.

But after a year of being subtly reminded of his illegitimacy—and his tendency to labor in horse stables—by those who hosted her for tea or the occasional garden party, Barbara's good nature changed. She grew resentful, as if she was feeling trapped by circumstances over which she had no control.

When Barbara died giving birth to their son, Randolph found himself a widower at the ripe old age of two-and-twenty.

Randolph's son, Charles, shared the upstairs nursery with Randall and Constance's son, Robert, Earl of Farringdon.

"I heard that, Father," Randolph said from where he stood just inside the parlor, referring to the marquess' comment about Barbara. "You should know better than to speak poorly of the dead."

Randall feigned regret. "Noted," he murmured as his son bowed and then kissed the back of Constance's hand.

"I'm so glad you could join us this evening," she said, just before she moved to her favorite chair. "Does this mean the mares sold for a fair price?"

"Constance!" Randall scolded.

She gave him a quelling glance. "*You* would have asked if I had not," she countered.

Randolph allowed a brilliant grin. "They did. And for well over the expected price," he said as he moved into the parlor. He waited until both his

father and stepmother were seated before he took a chair near the fire.

“Spirited bidding?” Constance guessed.

Randolph angled his head. “Truth be told, I think it was a case of mistaken impressions.” He accepted a cup of coffee from a footman and helped himself to a few walnuts from a proffered bowl.

“Oh, now you really must explain,” Constance urged. Having declined the offer of coffee, she was able to place a hand on his arm to reinforce her words.

Her stepson grinned. “Alistair Comber’s wife came to the stables at Tattersall’s while I was brushing one of the mares,” he explained. “Comber was there, of course, but she was there to ask a favor of *me*. Apparently the buyer was watching from the door. He saw Lady Comber, dressed all fine like she always is, and he thought she was interested in the nags as a Christmas gift, so he bid high from the start, and the other gentleman who was bidding didn’t seem put off by the price, so he upped the bid several times.”

Having taken a sip of his coffee, the marquess furrowed his brows. “Lady Comber? What was she about?”

Giles appeared at the threshold and announced dinner.

Relieved he didn’t have to answer the query, Randolph set down his coffee and offered an arm to Constance. “Might I have the honor, my lady?”

Constance allowed a grin. “Yes, but if you think for one minute *I’m* not going to ask the same question—”

“Connie,” Randall said in a mock scold. “Let the man at least get through the first course,” he teased.

Randolph dipped his head in Constance’s direction. “She was there to ask if I might consider taking on the training of a filly.”

Randall and Constance exchanged quick glances. “Surely not one of her father’s horses,” Constance commented. Lady Comber’s husband, Alistair, saw to the Earl of Mayfield’s stables at Harrington House, including the training of the colts.

Giving his head a shake, Randolph said, “One belonging to a Lady Dunsworth.” He led Constance to her chair and pulled it out for her. “Are you familiar with her?”

The name had Constance jerking her head to look up at him. “Xenobia Dunsworth?”

He shrugged as he took his seat opposite of hers while his father sat in the

carver. He didn't recall if Julia Comber had mentioned the woman's given name. "Apparently she has a timid filly in need of training. I told Lady Comber I would pay a call on Lady Dunsworth after dinner this evening."

Once again, Constance and Randall exchanged curious glances. "*This evening?*" his father repeated, as a footman poured wine and another delivered the soup course. "I had hoped we might play a game of billiards."

"Lady Comber assured me nine o'clock wouldn't be too late," he replied. "But where exactly might I find Bradley House?"

Randall seemed to count in his head as he regarded the chandelier above the table. "Tenth house east of here, same side of the street," he murmured.

"She has wrought iron balconies on the second and third stories," Constance added. "With flower boxes, although of course they are empty now. And a bright blue front door."

Randolph nodded his understanding as he regarded his soup. "My lady, are you acquainted with Lady Dunsworth?"

Constance finished a sip of wine before saying, "I am, although not well. Since her husband died last year, she hasn't paid calls. Perhaps that will change now that she's out of mourning."

"An older lady then?" Randolph guessed.

Pausing in the midst of bringing a spoonful of soup to her lips, Constance shook her head. "Not at all. I rather think she's younger than me. Perhaps by five or six years."

Since he had no idea how old his stepmother was—he was terrible at guessing people's ages—Randolph made a mental note to ask his father when they would be alone later that evening. "Do you think her agreeable?"

Constance set down her spoon. "I do." She narrowed her eyes. "Are you... considering courting her?"

Randall let out a guffaw as Randolph displayed a suddenly reddened face. "I am not," he said with a shake of his head. "I am just trying to be sure I am... *prepared* for when I meet with her. I'd like to make a good impression. Perhaps her good opinion will then be shared with others who are in need of a horse trainer," he reasoned.

A grin lighting her face, Constance leaned forward. "I apologize. I could not help myself. She's such a sweet woman. I cannot imagine how the loss of her husband must have affected her. They were such good friends, you see."

Randolph remembered Julia Comber's description of Lady Dunsworth, remembered her making a similar comment. At least Constance corroborated

what his friend's wife had said about the woman. He still wondered about her parting comment, though.

Just let yourself in. The footman is only there during the days, and the Dunsworth butler is very old. He probably won't hear your knock.

About to ask about the servant situation at the Dunsworth house, Randolph didn't have to when Constance said, "The baroness really should hire a younger butler. I really don't know how Chesterfield manages all the stairs. He is a hundred years old if he's a day."

Randolph blinked. "Thank you for your insights," he said as he returned his attention to his soup. When his father asked about the auction, Randolph was glad for the change of topic.

The three spent the rest of dinner discussing horses, the stables that one of his three younger half-brothers managed in Reading, and horse racing.

Later that evening...

The third to the last billiard ball careened off the side of the billiards table and into a leather pocket. "You are far too good at this," Randall grouched as his son straightened and moved to set up his last shot. They hadn't even been in the billiards room for ten minutes, but it was beginning to look as if Randall might not get a chance to sink a single ball.

"I have been practicing," Randolph said as he leaned over. "And apparently you have not."

Randall set aside his leather-tipped cue stick and crossed his arms. "I have better things to do at night these days."

His shot having sunk the second-to-the-last billiard ball, Randolph regarded his father with a furrowed brow. "A new mistress?" he guessed.

The marquess' eyes widened. "God, no!" he exclaimed. "I'll have you know I am a happily married man." When his son didn't look convinced, he added, "I'm spending my evenings with Connie, of course. And my heir and my grandson. I've no desire to spend them with anyone else." There was a pause before he added, "You excluded, of course."

Randolph seemed to finally believe his father's words when he sunk the last ball. "Can you afford her?"

Randall let out a guffaw that had his son straightening in alarm. "Afford her? Why, Connie is the most frugal woman in all of England," he replied. "She'd be sewing her own clothes if I didn't require she use a decent modiste. Even then, she chooses the least expensive fabrics, which I then

surreptitiously have to have replaced before the modiste starts any gown for her,” he complained. “Your brother and your son would be riding in a perambulator previously used by another’s heir if I hadn’t insisted on a new one.”

Retrieving the billiard balls from the six pockets around the table, Randolph considered his father’s description of his marchioness. He had worried that when Randall Roderick finally decided to marry and sire legitimate children, he might end up with a fortune seeker for a wife.

“May I ask how old she is?”

Randall narrowed his eyes. “Eight-and-twenty, so, yes, there is more than a decade betwixt us, but she is...” He allowed the sentence to trail off as his face displayed a quizzical expression.

“More mature than you?” Randolph guessed with a grin.

His father pretended offense. “Yes, but only because she lived so long without assistance,” Randall replied. “Poor thing saw to a household and stables for years and did so on funds she found hidden around her late father’s house in Fair Downs,” Randall explained.

“Hidden blunt?”

“She thought her mother had left it for her to find, since her father gambled away all his horse racing winnings, but I later learned from one of the servants that her late cousin, Norwick—David, not Daniel—would go to Fair Downs when he knew she wasn’t there and leave coins under the floorboards and at the bottom of containers and vases, under mattresses and inside her favorite books.”

Randolph stared at his father. “You said that with such glee, I have to wonder if you are doing the same thing now?” he half-questioned.

His father’s eyes drifted up and to the side. “If you could see the delight in her eyes when she finds a five-pound note tucked under our son when she picks him up from his bed, you would do exactly the same thing.”

Furrowing a brow, Randolph asked, “What if the nurse discovers it first?”

Randall shrugged. “Unlikely, since Connie is always the first in the nursery in the morning, but if she did, then I have delighted a faithful servant and ensured she will be with us for the next babe,” he replied. “Which I think may be on the way.”

At that moment, Randolph’s opinion of his father went up a notch, and not because another sibling was in his future. Despite the fact that his father had seen to every expense Randolph had incurred since birth, he had thought

the marquess a selfish, entitled man. Now he questioned everything he had ever thought about his father. “How did you know she was right for you?” he asked as he arranged the balls on the green felt.

Randall allowed a shrug before he started to respond. He stopped and then said, “I met her in the park whilst on an early morning walk. She was with Simmons, her lady’s maid, and...” He remembered her bearing and the intelligence she had shown. How she had captured his interest. Once he learned she raised horses—that she was familiar with horse racing and all that it entailed—he was hopelessly in love.

“And?” Randolph prompted, just before he took the first shot. The billiard balls scattered about the green felt, one of them falling into a corner pocket.

“Just how much have you been practicing?” Randall complained as he watched his son line up his next shot.

“Nearly every night, but only because I’m on an... an assignment,” he stammered, hesitant with how much he admitted. “At a couple of gaming hells.”

Randall furrowed his brows as he considered the hint. “Foreigners passing counterfeit blunt?” he guessed. “Or gaming hells serving smuggled liquor?”

Randolph sunk another ball into a side pocket. “Yes,” he replied with a smirk, and then his expression sobered as he missed the next shot.

“About damned time,” Randall murmured, positioning himself to finally take a shot. “Thought I’d never get my chance.” He leaned over, hit the white ball, and watched with satisfaction as the ball it collided with landed in a side pocket.

“Good shot,” Randolph remarked, but sighed when he saw his father’s next attempt go off at a bad angle.

“It’s nearly nine o’clock,” Randall said, his attention on the mantle clock directly across from where he stood. “As I recall, you have an appointment with Lady Dunsworth.”

Randolph straightened from his missed shot and allowed a sigh. “I should be off then,” he said, his expression showing indecision.

“Son, I just *knew*,” Randall stated then, in answer to Randolph’s earlier query. “I cannot admit that it was love at first sight, for I believe I was merely *intrigued* with Connie at the start. But I could not imagine finding a better woman to be my wife. My marchioness. The mother of my two youngest sons.”

Allowing a nod, Randolph gave a slight bow. "I'll see myself out and discover what I can about this timid filly."

He took his leave of the Curzon Street townhouse and made his way east, counting doors until he reached the tenth one with the blue door.

Following Lady Comber's advice, Randolph opened the door and let himself in.

A Mysterious Man Pays a Call

A moment later, in Bradley House

There was no knock at the door, no indication a caller had come to Bradley House. Chesterfield only discovered the intruder because he was on his way to secure the front door for the night.

Finding a man at the base of the marble stairs had him pausing. He might have let out a shout to summon a footman, but both Colburn and Smith had left the house earlier that evening. Seeing the manner in which the intruder was dressed had him instead giving a slight bow. That and the way he was gazing up, as if he were staring at someone at the top of the stairs.

A quick glance up assured Chesterfield his mistress wasn't standing there. Nor was anyone else, for that matter.

"On whom do you pay a call this evening?" Chesterfield asked.

Randolph dared another quick glance up the stairs, noticing that the railing was decorated with red velvet ribbons. Coupled with the huge bouquet of white roses that adorned the odd hall table, he knew the mistress of the house was looking forward to the holiday. He turned his attention to the servant. "Your question implies there is more than one master or mistress in residence. I understood there was a single mistress," he replied. "I've been told I am expected." He didn't offer a card, though, nor his name. Lady Comber had implied the butler would be deaf to his arrival.

Chesterfield bristled, his immediate dislike of the gentleman sounding in his response. "Sir, I must ask you to leave. Lady Dunsworth isn't receiving callers this evening," he said, waving his hand toward the small vestibule.

His gaze once again going to the top of the stairs, Randolph allowed a smile and a deep bow. "Good evening, my lady."

Having heard the conversation from the first floor parlor, Xenobia now stood at the top of the stairs and regarded her caller with a combination of curiosity and caution. "Good evening, Mr...?"

"Roderick. We've an appointment. I was sure it was for nine o'clock," he said, just then wondering if Lady Julia Comber might have meant nine o'clock *in the morning*.

But what lady of the *ton* was up and about at nine o'clock in the morning?

“Yes. Yes, of course. I apologize. I didn't realize the time had grown so late. Do come up,” Xenobia said as she waved a hand to reinforce her words.

Randolph paused for only a moment before ascending the stairs, his polished Hessians barely making a sound on the carpeted steps. His voice had echoed in the nearly empty hall, and he took a moment to discover the hall had no furnishings. No caryatids. No chairs along the walls. No statuary.

There was just the round table sporting a huge ball of white roses. Even if he hadn't been able to ascertain what kind of flowers they were by their appearance, the scent of roses wafted around his nostrils. As for the table, he could swear it was a gaming table, but he didn't have a chance to look at it more closely.

He paused at the top of the stairs to reassess the situation. Lady Dunsworth was not at all what he was expecting.

Even though his stepmother had said Lady Dunsworth was younger than she, Randolph had imagined the baroness as a far older woman. He had imagined her hair gray and her body more frail.

Instead, she was a comely young woman with honey blonde hair and eyes the color of aquamarine gemstones. The teal blue dinner gown she wore only accentuated the striking eye color.

Once he could see her more clearly by the light of the hallway sconces, all of them sporting red ribbons around their brass fixtures, he knew his imagination had conjured an entirely different creature.

Lady Xenobia Dunsworth was indeed a beautiful woman. Not young, exactly, but not old, either. Five-and-twenty maybe? Thirty at most, her once youthful appearance replaced with an ageless elegance. Her hair was caught up in a neat bun atop her head with loose tendrils at her temples.

Still dressed in her dinner gown—a velvet skirt with a pleated bodice and short sleeves void of decoration—she looked far more elegant than most widows. The collection of jewels between her breasts and the two that hung from her plump earlobes merely enhanced her regal bearing.

Caught up in the crook of her arm, was a copy of *A Treatise on the Breeding of Thoroughbred Horses*.

A jolt of excitement passed through Randolph at the thought that her filly might be a Thoroughbred.

He reached for her hand, startled at how cold it felt in his. He brushed his lips over the back of her bare fingers, sure he felt her reaction in how her

hand shook beneath his hold.

Perhaps she hadn't been touched in a long time, which had him wondering if she had eaten alone that night. "Sir Randolph Roderick. It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, once again bowing before her.

A bit dismayed her caller had appeared at exactly nine o'clock *at night*—Xenobia had thought he would be there at nine in the morning—she found she couldn't be cross with him. He was punctual, and not at all what she expected. She knew this because she had spent her entire dinner imagining the man her cousin had described in her letter.

Xenobia noted the expectant expression he displayed and remembered his pleasantry. "And you as well." She motioned to the open door just beyond the first scone. "We can speak in the parlor," she offered, rather glad the servants had placed several vases of flowers about the room.

The floral scents of roses and lilies helped to mask the odor of disuse she had noticed the day before—unfortunately only moments before her callers had arrived for tea. The addition of red velvet bows on the door handles and red ribbon along the top of the mantel had been her meager attempts at decorating for the upcoming holiday.

"Very good, my lady," her visitor responded, as he followed her over the threshold.

"Should I ring for tea?" she asked, cringing at the thought that another servant would discover she was alone with a strange man. "Or would you like some brandy, perhaps?"

"Only if you wish some for yourself," Randolph replied, waiting until she was settled into a chair near the fireplace before he lowered himself into the adjacent chair. "I must admit you are not quite what I expected."

That odd sensation skittered down her spine again, along with a flash of annoyance.

What had *he* expected?

"For some reason, I thought you would be much older. Not so... beautiful," he added.

The words were said so matter-of-factly, Xenobia was left staring at him. But of course he would say such a thing. He was probably expecting to be paid for putting voice to compliments, although she still hadn't decided if she would go through with any kind of arrangement with the man.

Why, oh why had she allowed Julia to talk her into this? Julia had never

actually employed this man—she had merely arranged this meeting. However did she even know about him?

Had one of their mutual friends employed him to keep them company?

Company probably wasn't exactly what they enjoyed. Her gaze dropped to his thighs, their muscled shape straining his Nankeen breeches. She briefly wondered if his tailor had to double-stitch the seams to keep them from splitting.

Besides the double-stitching of his breeches, his tailor could be commended for the perfect points of his shirt, and the immaculate cravat, a tasteful waistcoat and a topcoat made of superfine. He was dressed better than most gentlemen.

"I have not been in the company of an unmarried woman—without a chaperone—for some time," Randolph said in low voice. When he heard his words, though, he nearly winced, thinking he sounded like a dandy for hire. One of those men who were paid to accompany older women to all the events of the Season and then entertain those very women in their bedchambers until the wee hours of the morning.

Or until they were sound asleep.

"I am hardly in need of a chaperone," Xenobia countered sure he said such things to all his potential clients. Flattery was rather effective with women. "But thank you for the kind words." She paused before she dared another glance in his direction. "You're not at all what I expected."

Randolph straightened in the chair, not sure from the tone of her voice if she was disappointed. He had no idea how Lady Comber had described him. That she had even agreed to recommend him to Xenobia Bradley Dunsworth was a testament to the exuberant woman who charmed everyone with whom she made an acquaintance.

"No?" he replied, thinking he would have to scold Lady Comber when next he saw her.

The thought merely reminded him of how he ended up at Bradley House in the first place.

An Arrangement to Meet is Made

Earlier that afternoon at Tattersalls'

"Who?" Randolph asked as his best friend's wife talked of a woman she'd had tea with earlier that afternoon.

Outside the stables, an auction about to start. He had clients in the crowd to whom he had made recommendations. Should they end up the owners of the mares he had raised and trained and then been charged with selling, he stood to earn a good deal of blunt from the commission.

"Lady Dunsworth. She's Baron Dunsworth's widow," Julia Comber explained. "And one of my dearest cousins. Would you be a darling and go meet her?"

Randolph finished brushing the Cleveland Bay mare that stood before him just as Alistair Comber entered the stables. "Ah, my sweet. What brings you here?" the second-son-of-an-earl asked as he stopped to give his wife a peck on the side of her head. His gaze changed to one of worry. "Are you all right?" he asked as one of his hands moved to her middle.

Julia gave him a brilliant grin. "I am, and so is the babe," she assured him. "But I am on a mission to seek Sir Randolph's help."

"Help?" Alistair repeated, giving her and his friend a dubious glance. "What are you about, my sweet?"

"Lady Dunsworth's filly," she replied. "She's a timid thing, and apparently Xenobia has been unable to find someone to break her. Why, if Sir Randolph was successful, she'd be forever in his debt."

Intrigued, Randolph moved the mare into her stall and regarded Julia with a furrowed brow. Most of the horses he raised in his father's London-based stables were temperamental colts, work horses that would eventually pull all manner of equipage. To train a filly from a young age, perhaps for riding, would be a welcome change.

"It will be such a pleasant surprise for Lady Dunsworth," Julia gushed. "To learn there is someone who might help her in this situation. Of course, her late husband would have seen to such things if he were still alive," she added, apparently to make sure he understood the baroness was a widow. "I

always felt a bit sorry for her whilst they were together. He was her very best friend—”

“Best friend?” Randolph interrupted. “Why ever would you pity her for that?”

Julia’s eyes widened and her mouth clamped shut. Her head nodded, though, as if she was sharing a secret. “There was no... *passion* in their marriage. Just friendship, I think. Which is probably why she never bore him a child. The barony went to his cousin, which is just as well.”

Curiosity had Randolph listening more intently. He had been married to a dear friend. Barbara had known he was a bastard before they wed, and yet she had happily accepted his suit. Welcomed him into her bed—insisted he remain there for the entire night, sometimes—and then was giving birth to their son when it all went so terribly wrong.

He had buried her three days later, and he hadn’t thought of bedding another woman since. Thank the gods his father had offered his nursery. Besides the assurance his son was receiving the best of care with Mrs. Foster, his son had a playmate in the form of an uncle who was only a year older.

When would he have had the time to consider female companionship?

When he wasn’t minding horses or paying calls at his father’s townhouse to spend time with his son, he was answering to the head of the Foreign Office.

Although it had been some time since he had been sent on a mission in another country—the Foreign Office couldn’t always afford the costs of travel for their agents—he was on an assignment that occupied him most nights after London’s gaming hells opened.

“Well, it is unfortunate her husband died,” was all he could say when reason returned and he was able to think clearly. “She lost both a husband and her best friend.”

Julia dipped her head, her gaze dropping to note his large fists. “Indeed,” she replied before lifting her eyes to meet his. “I know it’s probably not appropriate for you to pay a call on her at Bradley House, but would you consider doing so? Mourning has kept her home for over a year, and although she could have enjoyed a bit more freedom these past few months, she hasn’t taken advantage. She’s practically a hermit.”

For just a moment, Randolph wondered if Lady Comber was attempting to play matchmaker. She was telling him things about Lady Dunsworth that had nothing to do with her timid filly. But then he held his tongue when she

waved a hand and asked if he might be able to see to the baroness' filly later that evening.

"Tonight?" he countered in surprise.

"Why, yes," Julia replied, her voice having softened to nearly a whisper. "From what Alistair has said, I know you are far too busy to meet with her during the day. Bradley House isn't far from Reading House at all. It's in the same street, in fact. Would you be available at nine o'clock perhaps?"

The time had Randolph furrowing a brow, although the suggestion was a relief since his entire afternoon would be spent at Tattersalls'. Then there would be dinner with his father, Randall Roderick, Marquess of Reading, and the man's marchioness, Constance. If their townhouse was just up the street from Bradley House, he decided he could make the appointment.

Besides, his other position didn't require he attend a gaming hell on this night. His marks weren't known to gamble on Wednesday evenings, instead choosing to attend the assemblies at Almack's when they were open. If the young ladies who accepted dances from them had any idea of their true reason for being in London, Randolph was sure they would faint.

"I will pay a call on her at nine o'clock," he said then, giving Julia a bow before he headed to another stall.

"This will be such a great relief for her," Julia replied. "I will send her a note and let her know to expect you."

Her husband, Alistair, returned to her side whilst leading a large draft horse. "Are you dabbling in matchmaking?" he asked in a whisper.

Julia's eyes widened before she turned to be sure Randolph was out of earshot. "My darling, I don't *dabble* in anything," she replied with a mischievous grin.

Expectations

Back in the parlor at Bradley House

His usual confidence with a new acquaintance faltering, Randolph considered Lady Dunsworth's words.

You're not at all what I expected.

Well, he was dressed in the clothes he had worn to dinner at his father's, and although he really should have worn shoes, he had instead worn his Hessians. His shoes weren't shined but the boots were.

Besides, his stepmother, Constance, claimed to prefer seeing men in boots. She had already seen to it his two-year-old half-brother, Robert, had a pair of black riding boots for when he rode his Welsh pony—with a footman's assistance, of course. Constance was as much of a horsewoman as his father was a horseman, after all.

Had Lady Dunsworth expected he would show up wearing the clothes he wore whilst working in the stables?

Or was she referring to his physique?

He was a bit taller than most, a bit larger in the arms and across his shoulders, but then most in his profession were. Lifting bales of hay and saddles all day along with pushing horses into place in front of various carriages had a tendency to strengthen arms and legs.

Had Lady Dunsworth thought she might have recognized him? There was certainly a glimmer of something in her eyes when she first saw him standing at the bottom of the stairs.

They could have met for a ride in the park, a time he was learning to appreciate given he could exercise a different horse from his father's stable every afternoon in Hyde Park.

He didn't care if he wasn't recognized. As a bastard son of a marquess, he didn't expect it, even if his father had acknowledged him as his son when he was but a babe, paid for his upbringing and education, and was seeing to a generous allowance every month.

Although he attended this initial meeting with little in the way of expectations, he wanted it to go well. If Lady Dunsworth recommended him

to her friends, and they then made mention of him to their husbands, he might gain more clients at Tattersalls’.

“May I inquire as to what you expected?” Randolph asked as he settled deeper into the floral upholstered chair.

He wanted to impress this particular woman.

Especially now that he thought she had a Thoroughbred.

Xenobia tore her attention from her caller and briefly regarded the flames in the fireplace. Besides the beauty of their hypnotic waves and ever-changing colors, the warmth they provided was also welcome. “I expected you would be a fop,” she finally replied, once again daring a glance in his direction.

She almost hoped he would be.

At least then she could easily dismiss him out of hand.

When she noted his furrowed brows, Xenobia continued. “A dandy, wearing heeled slippers and rings on every finger. A powdered wig on your head and a mouche on your cheek. Dressed in puce satin pantaloons with a matching tailcoat, and an embroidered waistcoat with more flowers on it than anything in my wardrobe.” A smile lightened her face then as her description grew ever more ridiculous, despite her having described what her late husband looked like on the nights they attended the theatre.

She didn’t want to think about him. Didn’t want to think about how best friends could grow apart after a few years of marriage.

At first confused, but then amused by her words, Randolph allowed a grin. “Oh, my. I do hope you’re not disappointed,” he murmured, appreciating her attempt at humor.

She shook her head. “If you had been a fop, I would have had Chesterfield show you to the door.”

If he had looked anything like James, she would have retrieved her small pistol from the dressing table in her bedchamber and shot him in the head.

Both of them.

At least Sir Randolph was handsome, in a rather brutish sort of way. His body wasn’t anything like her late husband’s, although his clothes seemed to fit him to perfection. His dark hair, wavy and a bit too long in the back, would not have worked in any of the Roman styles currently favored by men in the nobility. His jaw was entirely too square, his nose didn’t include a hook at the end, and his dark brows framed eyes that were so blue, she was sure she would be caught staring if she so much as looked in his direction.

Randolph blinked. “I thank you for seeing me then,” he replied. “Lady Comber gave me just a brief description of the situation. What are your expectations?”

Xenobia inhaled softly, not sure if she could admit just why it was she had agreed to this meeting. Julia’s note was so unexpected and yet described exactly something her cousin would do. “May I ask first what others say in response to that question?”

Angling his head slightly, Randolph wondered at her hesitance. From what he had learned of her from his discussion with Lady Comber, she was a widow just recently out of mourning. She had no children. Just a filly in need of training.

“Well, we usually discuss the expected amount of time it might take. It varies, of course.”

Xenobia blinked. “So, you are paid according to the amount of time you spend with a... a client?” she struggled to get out.

He nodded. “I am, but I am very good at what I do, and I’m usually able to break a filly in a couple of weeks at most.”

Xenobia blinked again, never having heard the term used to describe a full-grown woman before. “Break a filly?” she repeated, a stab of fear causing her heart to race. “Do you often equate the female sex to a... a horse?” she asked in confusion.

It was Randolph’s turn to blink. “Rarely,” he replied. He held up a finger, as if to make an exception. “I might have. My father has said many times that he is married to a ‘spirited filly.’”

“And if your... *client*... is not *spirited* as much as she’s simply in need of... *company*, what then?”

Randolph’s gaze darted to the fire as he parsed her words in his head. “There are no other horses in your stable?”

Understanding his query as a metaphor, Xenobia said, “The only stallion died more than a year ago.” As she gave her own metaphor further consideration, she thought she should have referred to her late husband as a gelding. He certainly hadn’t done his job as a stud, given he never got a child on her. “And other than the two shires that pull my barouche, there are no other horses in the mews. That belong to me, at least.”

Angling his head to one side, Randolph displayed an expression of disappointment. “There is no *timid filly* in need of attention?” He thought of the book she’d had in her arm.

Still had in her arm.

She hadn't set it aside when they took their seats, and now he wondered if she'd kept it in the event she thought she might need it as a weapon. Something to clobber him with should he attempt to take liberties with her.

Randolph took a deep breath and held it a moment. This encounter was not at all going as expected, but then he had been experiencing a number of odd situations of late.

Especially the one that had happened just the day before.

Secrets of a Gaming Hell

The afternoon before at The Jack of Spades, St. James Street, Mayfair

Randolph stepped into the dimly lit gaming hell that had at one time been a bastion for *vingt-et-un* players. Their dealers, most of them young women of questionable virtue, were known as the best in the business. The odds of the card game usually favored the player, but with a skilled and beautiful operator, the house broke even and instead made its money on the other offerings of the typical gaming hell—liquor, high-stakes card games, and the brothel on the second story.

Once Frank O’Laughlin had installed a billiards table in a space that had at one time acted as a smoking room, the clientele changed.

So did reports of foreigners attempting to pass counterfeit currency.

Randolph knew Frank bought his liquors from a reputable source, a broker who had a royal charter from the Crown. But when his deposits into the Bank of England started to include notes of questionable authenticity, he went on notice.

Allow an agent of the Crown to investigate by acting as a client, or shut down his establishment.

Frank agreed to not only host an agent to investigate, one who would act as a frequent gambler, but he went one step further. “I’ll supply an apartment in which he can live and a reward for when the damned frogs are caught,” he claimed.

At no point had the suspected source of the problem been mentioned, although early intelligence reports did suggest a French connection. The Napoleonic Wars were a distant memory for most, but that didn’t mean the treachery of the French had been forgotten.

Although Randolph was glad for the offer—there were times when he played billiards until well past three in the morning—he only took advantage of the apartment a couple of nights a week. He had a more than modest townhouse in Westminster, courtesy the Reading marquessate, where he preferred to spend his nights.

Even if Barbara no longer lived.

The reminders of her were everywhere. In her bedchamber, where his gifts of an ivory comb and brush from Floris still decorated the dressing table and her gowns still hung in the elaborately decorated dressing room.

In the breakfast parlor, where the sideboard featured an array of delicate pottery from Wedgwood, pieces she had personally chosen while on a trip to Stoke.

In the dining room, where the Waterford crystal goblets added brilliance to his otherwise dull dinners.

In the nursery, where Charlie's bassinet sat in one corner and her oak rocking chair stood in another.

And in the parlor, where her portrait, commissioned by her father upon her betrothal, still hung above the fireplace mantel.

Twice he had ordered its removal, and twice he had stayed the order before the butler could see to carrying out the mission. "My son will wish to know his mother's likeness," he had said, usually after he recovered from his hangover.

Thank the gods he could still play billiards when he was half-foxed. *Vingt-et-un* and French Hazard, not so much.

He couldn't seem to add numbers when his brain buzzed from too much alcohol.

The burly dunner at the front door of The Jack of Spades gave Randolph a nod and checked the time on his chronometer. "You're early," he accused.

Randolph waved a hand down the front of his body. "I need to change into different clothes," he replied, annoyed by the guard's comment. If the large, bald dunner, whose primary job was to collect the debts owed to the hell, knew his usual arrival time, then his marks might have noticed as well. "Next time, I'll be late."

Randolph knew they were down a side street at The Ace's Hole, a seedy public house that offered rancid meat pies, sour ale, and games of chance that definitely favored the house. The dice were loaded, as was the director who kept tabs on the proceedings.

He knew because he had just come from there.

Before that, his marks had been at Crockford's, a hell that featured a varied clientele and existed for the sole purpose of separating their players from as much of their money as possible. Although a sharp eye could catch Crockford's operators' frequent attempts at cheating—their operators

employed slight of hand along with waiters that made sure to distract a player's attention when a cheat was in progress—there were few when the drinks were encouraged and kept full.

Randolph was glad his assignment was based primarily out of The Jack of Spades. If cheating happened, it wasn't because Frank O'Laughlin encouraged it. In fact, the owner employed a number of crowpees to watch the play, not only to catch customers who might be cheating, but to keep an eye on the employees as well. Frank had just the week before fired a clerk and an operator for taking a baron for all he had, most of it through slight of hand.

Both were now employed at Crockford's.

Frank also didn't employ any puffs. "I don't want decoys playing with high stakes," he had said when his director—the superintendent of the play—suggested it one night when the floor was quieter than usual. "Cheating will not be tolerated at the Jack," he had added in a hiss. "You want to cheat? Go to Crocky's."

Dressed in his most pedestrian clothes—worn trousers, a plain brown wool waistcoat, and a top coat from the turn of the century, Randolph appeared as if he were a down-on-his-luck farmer who gambled for the sake of his paltry existence.

The deceiving appearance meant he now had over fifty pounds in his pocket, probably all of it counterfeit.

After he changed into the garb of a well-to-do member of the gentry, he intended to win far more from the targets. He had overheard their comments about intending to finish their night at The Jack of Spades.

Besides the difference in his clothes, he would change his overall appearance by wetting his wavy hair and combing it back from his face, shaving, and then donning a pair of spectacles that would have him perceived as a gentleman fresh from the country.

He made his way through the gaming hell to the back and up the stairs to the first story. His room, all the way at the end of the hall and facing the street, required he pass the doors of rooms belonging to *vingt-et-un* operators, crowpees, bartenders, waiters, and the gaming hell's cook, a cranky old woman known for morning meals that rivaled an aristocrat's wedding breakfast.

Randolph looked forward to those breakfasts on the two or three days a week he woke up in the gaming hell. If he didn't respect Frank so much, he

would have made an offer to Annie to be the cook at his townhouse.

His apartment was one of only two that featured windows that looked out over Stafford Street. Not that the view was particularly pleasant. Although poverty wasn't rampant in Mayfair, desperation was for those who hoped to earn a shilling or two from its residents. A young woman who looked as if she hadn't slept for several days was attempting to sell wilted flowers to anyone who passed on the street. A three-legged dog followed his charge, a young boy pulling a cart filled with limp vegetables.

But the one sight that had Randolph pausing before stripping off his cheroot smoke-laden clothes was that of a familiar man taking his leave of a gaming hell across the street.

The Queen of Hearts was anything but—a gambling den lined with red velvet walls and faux gold gilt decor that made most of its money from prostitution. The girls they employed were considered the equivalent of courtesans, well-dressed young women who were the daughters of courtesans, educated and trained in the bedroom arts from the time they were old enough to be bedded.

The owner, fairly new compared to the owners of the other gaming hells and men's clubs that lined the street, was an older matron who sported a mouche on one cheekbone and a white wig that was tall enough to house a colony of mice.

So what had his father, Randall Roderick, Marquess of Reading, been doing in there?

Randolph straightened in the chair in which he had become far too comfortable in Lady Dunsworth's parlor. Then he winced at remembering his father's earlier claim that he was spending his nights with his marchioness.

Randall Roderick's claim that he was no longer a rake rankled.

Why did he lie to me? Randolph wondered.

The question had him wondering the same about Lady Comber. Did she really think it was necessary to make him believe Lady Dunsworth needed a horse trainer when all she wanted was for the two of them to meet?

He focused his attention more closely on the woman who had no intention of hiring him to train a horse.

He had just come to realize that it was *she* who was the timid filly.

The very last thing he wanted to do was to break her.

Mixed Metaphors

Still in the parlor at Bradley House

Timid filly?

It was Xenobia's turn to wonder at their strange conversation. Was the term in reference to a horse? Or to her? As far as she knew, no one had ever called her a timid filly.

One of her finishing school friends, Rachel, had secretly called her a spendthrift due to her hesitance to buy things she could easily afford.

Her husband had called her "Dear Heart" whether he was pleased or vexed by her.

Her mother called her "Bea" when she'd had too much to drink.

Her cousins sometimes referred to her as "Lady X," although never in public.

So what had Julia said to this man?

"I do not own a filly," Xenobia stated. "Both of my shires are old and gelded," she added, her mind racing with how she might gracefully dismiss Mr. Roderick and then hide in her bedchamber for the next decade.

But she noted the change in his expression, as if he had just realized exactly what she had just come to believe.

Julia Comber had obviously played a trick on him.

And on her.

"Forgive me, but I am left with the impression you think me something I am not," he said quietly. When Xenobia turned her gaze on him, as if she expected him to say more, he added, "I am not a... fancy man for hire, my lady."

Lady Comber had obviously given her that impression.

When he noted the look of confusion that crossed her face, he dipped his head. "I will admit, that once, a very long time ago, before I was married, of course, I accommodated a widow who was looking for a tumble. And I escorted a baroness to the theatre. Once." He paused, remembering Lady Dunsworth was a widowed baroness. "She was old enough to be my grandmother and was in want of another man in her box in order to even out

the sexes of those whom she had invited that night.

“But I am nothing like my father once was,” he quickly added.

When he watched her for what appeared to be signs of approval, as if he hoped her estimation of him had gone up just a fraction, her steady gaze gave away nothing of her thoughts.

Xenobia finally blinked twice, deciding for certain that she had completely misunderstood Julia. Misunderstood why her friend had insisted she meet this Mr. Roderick. He probably thought her a Merry Widow, fresh out of widow’s weeds and in search of a man to warm her bed every Tuesday and Friday night.

And why would he assume she knew anything about his father?

Who was his father?

“I must apologize, Mr... Uh, Sir Randall, did you say?”

“Randolph,” he replied, a wince crossing his face.

She allowed her mortification to show in her expression. “I am so sorry, but I think my cousin Julia might have...” She allowed the sentence to trail off as she considered how to save face with the young man. “She may have misrepresented my situation when she asked that you pay a call. With you as well as with me.”

Instead of appearing annoyed as he had every right to be, Randolph allowed a wan grin and then sighed. “I had just come to that very conclusion as well, my lady.”

“Oh, dear. I feel awful. I’ve taken your time—”

“It’s not your fault, my lady,” he said with a shake of his head.

“I plan to be very cross with Julia when next I see her,” she said. “I cannot believe she would do this. May I... may I at least offer you compensation for your time? Or... or arrange for a coach to take you home, or wherever you would prefer to be? Your club, perhaps?”

Randolph stared at her. “No. No, my lady. That’s not necessary. My coach is parked just down the street.” He moved to get up, but saw how agitated she appeared. How tears were on the verge of falling from her bright eyes. “Please, don’t cry.”

“You must think me a... a wanton.” She dropped the book she was holding onto the adjacent side table and fished a hanky from inside the sleeve of her gown.

Settling back into his chair—hard—Randolph stared at her. “Hardly,” he

said. “Lady Comber obviously made me out to be something I am not when she spoke of me with you, and then led me to believe you were in possession of a timid filly. A terrible trick for which I shall take a whip to her when next I see her.”

As he expected, Xenobia’s eyes widened as she gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

He allowed a smirk. “Of course not. But her husband might once I tell him what she’s done,” he argued.

“Oh, please don’t,” she begged her eyes still wide.

His brows furrowed at how frightened she looked. At least tears no longer brightened her eyes. “You are not angry with her?”

The air seemed to leave her all at once. “Ever since my husband died, Cousin Julia—Lady Comber—has been one of the few who has continued to pay calls on me. To ensure I haven’t joined my husband from the sheer boredom of mourning,” she explained with a sigh. “So, yes, I will be cross with her, but I will ensure we will still be friends once she has heard my complaints.”

Randolph considered her words and allowed a sigh. “Comber wouldn’t raise a hand against her, nor a whip,” he murmured. “He loves her too much.”

“But he will be cross with her,” Xenobia said with a grin, rather liking his last comment. “Until she reminds him that she’s carrying his child, and then all will be well.”

Chuckling, Randolph said, “Much like my father would be with his wife, I suppose.” He remembered his father’s mention that he thought another babe was on the way. “For the very same reason.”

Xenobia noticed the change in her guest’s expression, how he seemed unsure of how he felt when speaking of his father. “Pray tell, is there a chance I might have been introduced to your father or mother?”

Randolph dipped his head. Lady Comber obviously hadn’t mentioned his relationship to the couple who lived just down the street. “I suppose there’s a chance,” he replied. “Lord Reading. Are you acquainted with him or... or with his marchioness?”

The word ‘Reading’ had Xenobia blinking. There was only one man she knew of that went by that moniker. “Your father is the Marquess of Reading?”

Randolph nodded. “He is.”

The Rake of Reading, Xenobia almost said out loud. At least, that had been the man’s reputation before he had finally, at the age of five-and-thirty,

married Constance Fitzwilliam. That reputation as a rake had been well-earned. Four bastard sons and one daughter by four different women, although Randall Roderick had seen to it all were raised by good families.

She had only ever met the daughter. Despite the four years' difference in their age, she and Rachel had become fast friends over their similar circumstances.

"I am the oldest," Randolph said, as if he could read her thoughts.

Xenobia blinked. How had she not realized he looked like a younger version of Randall Roderick? No wonder he seemed so familiar! His father lived only ten doors down in Curzon Street. Before her husband had died, Xenobia had been a guest in the marchioness' parlor many times. She had even visited the nursery. Held the babes and remarked on how much she wanted one of her own.

Then she realized why his coach would be parked just down the street.

Not because he had thought to save her from gossip, but because he had probably come directly from the marquess' townhouse.

"Were you at Reading House this evening?"

Randolph wasn't sure if he was relieved or bothered that she was familiar with his father. Given her age, it was unlikely Xenobia had ever had an *affaire* with the marquess, but given Reading's reputation as a rake prior to his marriage, it wasn't outside the realm of possibilities.

"I was there, yes," he admitted finally. "I had dinner with him and his marchioness, so it was not at all an inconvenience to pay a call on you." Despite his opinion of Constance having changed considerably over the past year, he still found it impossible to refer to her as his stepmother in conversation.

Xenobia wished she still held the book. She desperately wanted to hug it to her chest—hold it before her as if it was a shield. To pick it up from the table now would only draw more attention as her expression displayed a look of horror. "Oh, dear. I've just now realized Lady Comber was playing at *matchmaking*."

For a moment, Randolph wished he had accepted the offer of a brandy. This was the one night during the week when he could imbibe and not be concerned about whether or not he got too drunk. "Has she been led to believe you want another husband?"

Stunned, Xenobia held back a rebuke and considered how she might answer. The question would come up the next time she took tea in someone

else's parlor—if not directly, then in some roundabout fashion that would no doubt leave her embarrassed. “I don't know that I wish to marry again. At least, not so soon,” she finally admitted.

“If not marriage, then what would you like to do next, my lady?” he asked. From her manners, he knew she hadn't given a thought to the life of a Merry Widow. She was far too meek.

Too timid.

When she seemed confused by his query, he said, “Your status as a widow allows you a good deal of latitude.” When her eyes widened, as if she intended to scold him, he quickly added, “You can travel, for example. Move to a different town, or live in the country. Take a holiday to Brighton, or enjoy the waters in Bath.”

From the way he had qualified his question, Xenobia knew he did not ask what she wanted in order to satisfy his own curiosity, but rather to suggest she think about what she wanted for herself.

“Companionship at first, I should think,” she blurted. “Before I would consider traveling anywhere.” At seeing his gentle nod, she added, “A friend. Someone with whom to attend the theatre or a soirée. Someone to invite for dinner.”

“So, the death of your husband has left you... lonely?”

She nodded. “He was my best friend. For nearly my entire life. But after we married...” She allowed the sentence to trail off.

“Not so much?”

Xenobia once again looked as if she might cry. “I found him annoying. The boy I knew hadn't grown into a man but rather into a... a fop,” she whispered. “There were nights he was far better dressed than me, in shoes far more ornate than mine.”

Randolph regarded her a moment as he considered his own situation with Barbara. Although he hadn't known her his entire life—or hers—he had thought the two of them were well suited when he proposed marriage. He had thought they were happy together. To discover Barbara had not shared his sentiments had been both a shock and a disappointment.

Given her pregnancy, he had hoped she might grow fond of him once the child was born.

He hadn't considered the alternative.

Remembering something of what he had said at the beginning of their

conversation, Xenobia said, “You mentioned being married.” She held her breath, hoping the floor would open up beneath her.

Surprised by the sudden sadness that had him clearing his throat in order to reply, Randolph said, “I was. My wife died shortly after giving birth to our son, Charlie.” He winced at hearing the harsh words spoken aloud, and then swallowed hard as he tried to avoid his hostess’ look of astonishment.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Xenobia replied, her words at odds with the sense of relief she felt just then. At the thought that she had already met Charlie. Held him, in fact. “A friend, too?”

He nodded. “She was a good friend, and yet I still thought it remarkable that she agreed to marry me knowing I was illegitimate.”

Xenobia struggled to maintain an impassive expression. “But your father has recognized you as his own, has he not?”

Then she remembered how he had introduced himself. *Sir Randolph Roderick*. As a bastard, it was doubtful he was a baronet. The only other means of acquiring his title was if he were a knight.

“Oh, he has,” Randolph replied, and then because he was feeling rather peckish toward the man—especially because he had seen him leaving The Queen of Hearts the afternoon prior—he added, “Me, as well as three other bastard sons. From the day we were born.” When she didn’t react—he was sure he had scandalized her with the comment—he dipped his head. “Barbara seemed fine with it, but after a time—”

“Society reminded her.”

Grimacing, Randolph angled his head to one side, as if he was about to say something. Instead, he finally nodded. “Every day, it seems. I could not change what I am, and Barbara seemed less inclined to accept the situation for what it was.”

“And then she died,” Xenobia murmured.

The simple words felt as if a door had slammed shut. Randolph inhaled, the scents of various flowers tickling his nostrils. His gaze darted to a vase of red roses and then to another of lilies. Both were reminders of the parlor in his own townhouse at Christmas time. Reminders of Barbara.

He was about to make his excuses and take his leave, but the expression on his hostess’ face—her eyes were wide, as if she couldn’t believe what she had just said—had him reconsidering. “I think you could do with a brandy, my lady. I know I could use one.”

“Oh, dear,” she replied. “I think you may be right,” she added as she

moved to stand. Randolph held out a staying hand. He rose from his chair in an instant and quickly moved to the sideboard where the crystal decanters of various liquors were lined up on a large silver salver.

As Randolph reached for the brandy, he wondered if the decanters had been touched since Dunsworth's death.

Brandy Makes It All Better

A moment later

Xenobia watched as he poured a finger's worth of brandy into two crystal glasses. He had mentioned having brothers, but he hadn't mentioned his sister, Rachel, and she wondered at the omission. Perhaps he wasn't on good terms with her. Xenobia sighed and then angled her head as she considered a safe subject. "What of your child?"

Randolph's face brightened, and for the first time that evening, Xenobia thought him handsome. She wondered what he might look like freshly shaven in the morning, with his hair trimmed a bit shorter.

"Charles is just past one and quite a handful," he said. "I expect he'll be walking at any moment. He's living in the nursery at my father's house."

"Growing up with his..." Xenobia paused to consider the relationship. "Uncle?"

"Indeed," he said with a grin as he handed her a glass.

"Thank you. Are you able to see him often?"

"As often as I can. Usually a few times a week, and always Wednesday nights, like tonight."

"A short walk," she murmured.

"But a pleasant one," he said as he leaned forward in his chair.

"Even in this wintery weather?"

Randolph lifted a broad shoulder. "It's a bit chilly, but it wasn't snowing when I was on my way here," he replied. He held out his glass. "In a few days, we shall see more greenery decorating doors, and it will be even more pleasant. Now, what shall we drink to?"

Xenobia considered how to respond. "New friendships?" she offered, holding her breath in anticipation of what he might say.

A wan grin appeared and seemed to further soften Randolph's harsh features. "New friendships," he agreed before lifting his glass in salute. He took a sip, nearly purring with appreciation of the fortified wine.

Baron Dunsworth might have been a fop, but he certainly had good taste in liquor.

“I know I shouldn’t, but I find I do like brandy,” Xenobia said, just before the tip of her tongue touched the edge of her lip.

That little gesture had Randolph blinking. For a moment, he imagined her doing that immediately following a kiss, as if she wished to retain the flavor of it. “I find it a civilized drink,” he agreed. “Too many of my acquaintances have begun drinking scotch from up north. Can’t say I have an appreciation for the stuff,” he added with a grimace.

“I’ve heard of it, but never tried it,” Xenobia replied. “I rather imagine men of leisure appreciate all sorts of spirits, though.”

Randolph furrowed a brow as he wondered if she had deliberately put voice to a double entendre. “Not being a man of leisure, I cannot say from first-hand experience.”

Her eyes widened. “May I inquire as to your... work? Or are you referring to the horse training?”

From the way she asked, Randolph knew he had surprised her. She had assumed that as a son of a marquess—even a bastard son—he did not have to work for his living.

He didn’t—not really—but he wasn’t about to admit it.

“I am in charge of one of my father’s stables. The one just east of town,” he replied. “I train horses and arrange for the sale of those we do not need for the marquessate, usually at Tattersall’s.”

As for his other employment, he could have admitted to working for King and Country, but he knew she would ask by which office he was employed. He didn’t want to lie to the young matron, but there were some secrets he needed to keep.

“So, you were not at all surprised when Lady Comber asked if you might consider training my horse?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not at all. I would have welcomed the commission, actually, in the hope that I might secure future employment from others.”

“From my recommendation?”

Randolph was struck by how quickly she sorted his reason for meeting with her. “Or your husband’s, if you’d had one.”

Xenobia dipped her head. “I am terribly sorry about the misunderstanding. For the inconvenience this has caused you.”

Randolph finished off his brandy. “You needn’t be.”

“I’m happy to pay you for your time. For the... consultation,” she stammered.

“No need, my lady.” He noted her expression. Besides being embarrassed, she seemed at a loss as to what to say or do next. He had already determined she wasn’t an empty-headed English miss, but she surely was timid. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel as if Lady Comber’s machination was her fault.

He cleared his throat. “It’s unfortunate the Season’s entertainments will not begin for a few months, but once they do, may I expect to claim a dance with you, my lady?”

“You wish to dance with me?”

Straightening in his chair, Randolph regarded her a moment. She reminded him a bit of Barbara, although where Barbara’s innocence about the world had been feigned, Lady Dunsworth’s seemed genuine. “I do.”

Xenobia’s question had left her bow lips slightly parted, and Randolph’s thoughts of innocence were suddenly replaced with thoughts of what those lips would be like to kiss. At the moment, they would no doubt taste of brandy. Perhaps there would be a touch of the wine she had drunk with dinner. A hint of sweetness from whatever dessert her cook had created. The tang of salt from a tear.

It would be easy to pity the poor woman, but he was determined to see her as something more than an unexperienced widow. More than an innocent young matron.

Thoughts of what she might be like in his bed flitted at the edge of his thoughts. Would she become a tigress? Purring as he pleased her and then pouncing when it was his turn to be pleased?

His manhood hardened behind the fall of his breeches, and Randolph struggled to erase the carnal thoughts.

The last of Xenobia’s brandy made its way down her throat, its warmth combined with his words emboldening her. “Pray tell, do you have any evenings free for the likes of me?” she asked. “I mean, to spend like this, of course,” she quickly qualified. “Drinks and... conversation. Perhaps on nights after you’ve said good-night to your son? I fear I have become a bit of a hermit this past year, and I could really use the practice.”

Randolph stared at her before his gaze dropped to the empty glass she held. Apparently, the brandy had loosed her tongue.

And her timidity.

He allowed a shrug. “I... I suppose I could return next Wednesday

evening. It would have to be after dinner with my father, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” she replied. “We can enjoy a glass of brandy, and you can tell me more about your son.” Since she had already met the babe, she was curious as to how he was getting along.

Randolph allowed a grin. “My stepmother thinks he will grow up believing he is a bird, since I’m inclined to toss him into the air so much.”

Xenobia leaned forward, her face brightening. “Oh, how delightful. I suppose his giggles can be heard throughout the nursery.”

“Oh, I think down to the second story,” he replied with a chuckle, just then realizing he had referred to Lady Reading as his stepmother.

Well, there was a first for everything, he supposed.

“At some point, he will grow too heavy, and I will be reduced to entertaining him by spinning him around as I hold onto his arms. That’s what my father was doing this evening with my brother, Robert.” He resisted the urge to blink when he realized he had referred to Robert as his *brother* rather than his *half-brother*. Glancing into his glass, he wondered from where the brandy had come.

If he knew, he would see to stocking it at his townhouse.

Xenobia’s face lit up again as a hand went to cover her mouth. “I cannot imagine it. The Marquess of Reading playing with his son.”

“It is a sight,” Randolph replied as he sobered. “One I did not experience as a child, I assure you.”

“Which means you were not rendered dizzy.”

“True,” he acknowledged, a grin once again returning to his lips and a dimple appearing in his right cheek.

Kissable lips.

Xenobia resisted the urge to blink, wondering why she would think such a thing just then. Why she suddenly imagined what it might be like to be kissed by this man, his firm lips sliding over hers until she opened her mouth to his questing tongue. Even as he suckled the pillows of her lips, she could imagine the tip of his tongue sliding over her teeth, tangling with hers, tasting the brandy she had finished, and perhaps the wine she had had with dinner.

Would he also taste the sweet dessert?

Or merely taste the salt from her tears?

She was contemplating this last when Randolph asked, “Did you wish for me to pour you some more brandy?”

Blinking away her reverie at the same moment she noted how aroused she

felt, Xenobia shook her head. “Oh, no. I would be left foxed,” she replied with a grin, rather liking how her knees no longer seemed to be part of her body. There was a slight buzzing in her head, as well, a rather pleasant sensation she had only ever experienced when she drank too much champagne at balls. Her eyes widened, though, when she thought perhaps he had asked because he wanted more. “But do help yourself.”

Randolph considered teasing her—perhaps she intended to get him drunk and then have her way with him—but he knew it was too much to hope for. “You will not mind?” he asked as he stood and moved to the sideboard.

Xenobia watched as he made his way, his long legs topped with wide thighs covering the distance in only a few strides. Although the tails of his coat hid what was atop those muscular thighs, she imagined he sported a firm bottom. Not the flabby ass Dunsworth had possessed.

Knowing she had to clear her mind of his person, Xenobia thought to clarify a few things before the buzzing in her brain rendered her mute. “May I ask how it is you know Lady Comber?” He had mentioned it, she was sure. But for some reason, she couldn’t remember the details.

Randolph turned from the sideboard, the brandy glass held in one hand while the other rested on his hip. He allowed a grin, the very slightest of dimples appearing in his right cheek.

Xenobia swallowed, struck by how the expression made him seem younger. Not nearly as severe as she had first thought him. His resemblance to Lord Reading was now unmistakable.

“As well as anyone can know their best friend’s wife, I suppose,” he hedged. “I have known Alistair Comber for some time because he runs his father-in-law’s stables—the Earl of Mayfield’s stables. I took on the management of one of my father’s London stables when I finished my studies at Oxford.”

Nodding her understanding, Xenobia angled her body in his direction and asked, “It sounds as if your father’s stables are large. Is there a reason he owns so many horses?” She imagined a man who owned a fleet of hackneys or who provided the horses for the mail coaches.

Randolph allowed a shrug. “He and my stepmother raise racehorses, actually. My brother sees to the stables in Reading—that’s where most of the Thoroughbreds are—while I see to the horses we use for all the various equipage and the horses we use for riding in the park.”

Thoughts of his father’s reputation had Xenobia curious. “You’re not

following in his footsteps, are you?” she asked, her voice quiet.

“If you mean by being a rake or... or a rogue, then no, my lady. He, um, he was quite adamant that none of his sons behave as he did,” he stammered. If she’d been a man, he would have mentioned the pasteboard box filled with French letters he’d been given upon the occasion of his sixteenth birthday along with the stern warning they be used.

A profound relief fell over Xenobia, enough so that she knew she had been far too bold with her queries on this night. “Forgive me for having asked if you would be available to keep a widow company,” she whispered, knowing a blush colored her face.

Disappointed by her words—Randolph thought she might be about to dismiss him—he said, “There is nothing to forgive, my lady.”

Once again, Xenobia wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

However was she going to end this gracefully?

Randolph returned to his chair. “I do admit to feeling concerned that you would allow me entry into your home when you thought me something else.”

Xenobia dipped her head. “It was foolish of me, but Julia recommended you so highly. She insisted in her note to me that we meet.”

Randolph dipped his head. “She was as insistent with me,” he replied, remembering Alistair’s comment that he thought his wife was up to something.

Matchmaking, he had said, as if to warn him off. Well, there was no doubt of that now.

Xenobia sighed and remembered why she and James had grown apart those last few years. Never expecting to see her caller again, she asked the question that had bothered her for so long. “Tell me, Mr. Roderick. Since you no longer have a wife, do you then employ a mistress?” She gave her head a shake. “I do not ask to judge you, of course. I merely ask out of... curiosity. And because I think I’m experiencing a bit of brandy brain.”

Randolph was torn between frowning and chuckling. Lady Dunsworth was proving even the meekest of young matrons could be shocking when she’d consumed a bit of alcohol. “I do not. I... I admit I had thought about it. Once. But I hear tales of how much they cost, and how demanding they can be, and I think I would rather just have a wife.” His gaze had gone to her left hand, where her gold wedding band still graced the base of her fourth finger.

“Do you ask because your husband employed one?”

Xenobia dipped her head again. “The last two years of our marriage. I was terribly jealous of her.”

Randolph frowned. “Because...?”

She allowed the latent anger to help keep the tears at bay. “The time he spent with her instead of with me. Doing things with her that he claimed he could not do with me. To me.”

“Because you were his best friend.”

All the air seemed to go out of her at once, and her back suddenly settled against the stiff upholstery. His words weren’t an excuse, exactly, but merely a statement of fact. “Yes,” she whispered. “But why? He assured me he did not hurt her.”

Randolph swallowed, wishing he didn’t have to be the one to explain a man’s desire for dark carnal pleasures. “I have reason to believe it is a consideration among married men who might have more... more carnal appetites than what they think their wives should have to abide,” he tried to explain.

“That they cannot treat their wives with as much consideration as they do their mistresses?” she countered, her anger once again apparent. “As if they are doing us a favor?”

“That they cannot do to their wives the *unspeakable* acts that they can do to their mistresses. Because they pay coin for the privilege,” he shot back, thinking she sounded terribly naive.

For the first time that evening, Xenobia felt a red-hot flush color her throat and cheeks. The role of a mistress had never been explained in such bald terms before.

Had James thought her too fragile? Too timid for what he wanted when it came to sexual relations? If so, he had never put voice to his concerns. Never asked her if she would object to more adventurous antics in her bedchamber.

Or in his.

The thought had her remembering once again that Julia had been referring to *her* as the “timid filly” when she had spoken with Mr. Roderick earlier that afternoon.

Apparently, he had already come to the same conclusion.

“Is it wrong for me to want... companionship?” she whispered. “Please do not tell me to hire a young woman capable of conversation.”

Randolph shook his head. “It is not wrong, nor would I suggest a paid

companion for you,” he replied. “You are far too young for such an employee.” He paused. “But, besides what you mentioned earlier, what exactly *do* you want?” He reached for her hand, intending to provide comfort, but he hissed as he took it into his. “Your hand is still cold,” he murmured. He set down his brandy glass and reached over to hold her hand between both of his.

She nodded. “I cannot seem to get warm this winter,” she replied. “Especially at night. Which is partly why Julia asked you to come, I think.”

Randolph regarded her for a long moment, his suspicions confirmed. Lady Comber had been acting as a matchmaker, which meant he could do one of two things.

Take his leave of Lady Dunsworth and never see her again, or make an attempt to get to know the lonely widow. Perhaps take her up on her invitation to spend his Wednesday nights in her company. For drinks and conversation. The quality of the brandy alone would be enough of an incentive for him to return.

“Would you be amenable to a ride in the park?” he asked.

Xenobia’s eyes widened. “I... I haven’t been on a horse in an age,” she replied.

Wincing, Randolph amended the query. “A ride on a phaeton in the park, perhaps? I have a shire in need of exercise as well as the experience of pulling a phaeton by himself.” He had several horses he needed to train, but he couldn’t imagine she’d be interested in riding every day of the week.

Her face breaking out into a radiant grin, Xenobia dipped her head. “I have only ever ridden on a phaeton once,” she claimed, deciding it better she not describe Julia’s driving skills—or lack thereof. “It was most exhilarating.”

“It can be,” he affirmed, a grin once again youthening his appearance. “I will come for you at half-past-three o’clock tomorrow.”

Xenobia blinked. “And if it is snowing?”

Randolph shrugged. “Then I suggest you bring an umbrella.”

With that, he stood while he still held onto her now-warm hand, and brushed his lips over the back of it. “I will see myself out, my lady,” he said. He gave a bow and took his leave of the parlor.

Xenobia watched as he strode over the threshold. Heard his descent as he made his way down the carpeted stairs. Heard him pause and then climb back up the stairs, as if he might have forgotten something.

When he reappeared on the parlor threshold, he paused and then said, “Whatever you do, don’t scream.” He crossed to her in three strides, placed his hands on either side of her waist, lifted her to her feet, kissed her quite thoroughly, and then he settled her back in her chair.

He must have known her legs wouldn’t support her.

“Why ever would I scream?” she asked in confusion.

His eyes darting to the side, Randolph finally shrugged and said, “Why, indeed?” He bowed and once again took his leave of the parlor.

This time, Xenobia wasn’t aware of anything except the sound of the front door closing.

For the first time in a very long time, she made her way to her bedchamber with a smile on her face.

A Father's Secret Revealed

A few minutes later

His thoughts scattered in a thousand directions—the two brandies had thoroughly addled his ability to reason—Randolph made his way west in Curzon Street. One topic he could handle was the question of where he would spend the night.

For a moment back at Bradley House, he knew he would have been welcome to spend the night in Lady Dunsworth's bedchamber. Her response to his kiss was that enthusiastic. That passionate.

But he was sure she would be mortified in the morning.

Even if he left her in the wee hours before dawn, she would spend the entire day wishing a floor would open up and swallow her whole.

Probably the floor on which she stood when he arrived to take her for the ride in the park at half-past three o'clock.

Randolph had decided he would spend the night at his father's townhouse. He had an apartment there, although he rarely used it. He thought it enough that his father's wife allowed his son to live in the nursery with her son. He didn't wish to prevail upon his stepmother's hospitality overmuch.

And there it was again.

Stepmother.

He once again wondered at the brand of brandy that could have him changing six years of thinking in a matter of sixty minutes.

The butler, Giles, answered the door after only one knock, which had him wondering if the servant had been told to expect him. "Much obliged," he said as he handed Giles his hat. "Pray tell, do you know if the nursery is quiet on this night?"

The butler allowed a rare grin. "I've not heard a peep from the third story since you took your leave, sir."

Embarrassed, Randolph dipped his head. "Has my father retired for the night?"

Giles said, "He did and then... well, he's in his study now, sir," he hedged in hushed tones.

Randolph frowned, quite sure his father expected to spend the night with Connie in her bedchamber. Had she asked him to leave? “You should retire for the night,” he suggested to the butler. “I can see my way.”

“You’re not in need of a valet, sir?” Giles countered.

“Not tonight.” He rarely had the services of such a servant, preferring to shave himself as well as dress himself in the mornings. He did arrange for one to shine his shoes and boots and see to his laundry, however. “I will avail myself of breakfast in the morning, however.”

“Ah, the master and mistress are usually down by nine o’clock,” Giles replied.

“Can I expect those in the nursery to be awake before then?”

The butler allowed a grin. “Undoubtedly.”

Randolph gave the servant a nod. Although he was used to being up long before nine in the morning, he had a groom and a stableboy who could see to the stables if he wasn’t there.

He made his way to his father’s study.

“Ah, I’m so glad you returned here,” Randall said as Randolph peeked around the edge of the open door. “I feared you might take a hackney to your townhouse.”

“I came in the town coach tonight, but I’m too tired to make the trip to Westminster,” Randolph admitted. “I told Downley to park it in the mews and spend the night with your grooms,” he added, referring to his driver.

“Glad to hear it,” his father replied as he indicated an overstuffed chair.

“Which has me wondering why it is you’re not in my stepmother’s bed?”

Randall sighed. “I plan to return there shortly. But I hoped I might have your company for a few more minutes before you retire. You were gone longer than I expected.”

“Lady Dunsworth and I had much to discuss,” Randolph replied as he moved to take the chair in front of his father’s massive mahogany desk. “What is it?” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Connie confirmed this evening that she is indeed breeding,” his father stated.

Randolph allowed a shrug, not the least bit surprised by the comment. He always expected there would be more siblings. “Congratulations.” When Randall didn’t acknowledge the sentiment, his brow furrowed. “Or... or not?”

“Oh, I am... over the moon, of course,” Randall said, allowing a grin. “But I will be two-and-forty by the time this one is born. *Two-and-forty*,” he

repeated, as if the number were somehow a curse.

His frown deepening, Randolph moved forward so he was perched on the edge of the chair. "Four years younger than Torrington was when his twins were born," he countered, hoping he could assuage what he realized was his father second-guessing his mortality. "Grandfather lived to be sixty... sixty-two, did he not?"

"That's not the point," Randall argued, although he couldn't help the sense of relief that swept over him at learning his oldest son had known Randall's father.

His mother would have been the one to have seen to it.

The fifth Marquess of Reading had been an amiable aristocrat, friendly to all and not the least bit proud while ruling over a huge estate on the edge of Reading. His tenants had been loyal, and his lands had produced crops that could be counted on to keep the coffers full.

His interest in horse racing, although expensive, had paved the way for the string of winners that the sixth marquess had overseen with the help of his marchioness.

"He was sixty-two," Randall acknowledged. "I don't know why this has me so worried, but... should something happen to me, I want you to act as regent until my oldest is of age."

Randolph's eyes widened. "Me?" He gave his head a quick shake. "But... I cannot take your place in Parliament," he argued. "I've only been granted a knighthood." Even if his father petitioned the Crown to elevate his status so he might inherit a title, it was unlikely he would ever become a peer of the realm.

"I know. I just... I want you to be sure Raymond and Robert are raised right."

"You don't think your marchioness will see to that?" Randolph argued. "She's a damned good head on her shoulders, Father," he added. When he saw that his words didn't seem to change the marquess' mind, he allowed a sigh. "I will see to it, of course," he finally agreed. "I just... I do not think it will be an issue."

Randall dipped his head. "As my heir, Raymond will inherit all the entailed properties, of course, but I intend to settle you and Connie with most of the unentailed properties."

Randolph stilled himself. "What of my half-brothers?"

His father displayed a look of offense. "I have already seen to suitable

allowances for all three of them,” he replied. “Along with some small properties on which they can live or lease, depending on their preference.”

Randolph considered his father’s motivation. “Why are you doing this?”

Randall allowed a shrug. “Truth be told, I hadn’t given it much thought, but after our discussion at dinner tonight, I thought you might end up settled with an aristocrat’s daughter after all. Or... an aristocrat’s widow, perhaps? There’s no reason for you to expect you can only court commoners. You are a knight, after all.” Randall reached across the desk and plucked a small box from atop a pile of papers. He set it down in front of Randolph.

“What’s this?” Randolph asked as he gingerly took the hinged box in hand. He popped open the lid and stared at the gold ring. Clusters of round diamonds hung from either side of a large garnet.

“Just in case you don’t have one on hand. I saw to ordering a few when I was last in Ludgate Hill. Thought to make sure you and your brothers were prepared.”

Blinking, Randolph regarded his father in surprise. “I am not courting anyone, Father,” he stated, at the very same moment a flash of Lady Dunsworth and their kiss came to mind.

“But you will. At some point, you will want a mother for your son. You will want another son. Maybe a daughter or two,” he replied. “I want to be sure you can afford them. That you will not be limited by your lot in life as a bastard son.”

Clearing his throat, Randolph said, “I have never felt as if I were limited by my ‘lot in life’,” he argued. “Besides, I have a position.”

“That pays shite,” Randall countered.

Memories of what Barbara had said to Randolph in the last months of her pregnancy had at one time brought forth doubting thoughts. Reminders that she thought he had no business living in the world of aristocrats despite having been acknowledged by his father. “Nevertheless, you keep reminding me that I am not limited,” he added.

“There’s another matter,” Randall said in a quieter voice. “But I suppose you already know.”

Randolph straightened in the chair, about to agree. About to blurt out his frustration at his father over what he had witnessed from his apartment at The Jack of Spades the day before. And then, because the brandy had loosed his tongue as much as it had Lady Dunsworth’s, he said, “Would it have anything to do with why you were at The Queen of Hearts yesterday

afternoon?”

Randall gave a start. “Were you following me?”

“My room at The Jack of Spades looks out on Stafford Street.”

Allowing a nod, Randall’s eyes darted sideways before he sighed and said, “I have been in search of your sister for years—”

“*Sister?*” Randolph repeated, his voice loud even in his own ears. “How... how long have I had a sister?”

“Shhh,” the marquess replied, holding a finger to his lips. “Although I don’t mind all of Curzon Street knowing, I rather doubt they wish to learn of it at eleven o’clock at night.”

Eleven? Randolph almost countered. He was sure he had been at Bradley House for only an hour. Pulling his chronometer from his waistcoat pocket, he frowned when he realized it exactly matched the clock on the fireplace mantle. He had obviously been with the widow far longer than an hour!

Randall’s brows furrowed. “I was sure Xenobia Dunsworth would have mentioned her when she learned who you were.”

Wondering if he’d had more than two glasses of brandy, Randolph stared at his father. “Why would *she* know I have a sister?”

Lifting a shoulder, Randall said, “Because Lady X befriended her. They attended the same finishing school together, but then I lost track of my daughter when her mother left London for a time.”

His father’s reference to Xenobia as ‘Lady X’ had Randolph wincing. “Did you find her?” Although he had a dozen other questions, such as why Lady Dunsworth hadn’t mentioned her, he knew his father wouldn’t know the answer.

Randall angled his head first to one side and then the other. “I’ve been given an address by her mother.”

Dumbfounded, mostly because of the brandy, Randolph finally asked, “Do *I* know her?” The mention of the mother then had him wondering if she was a prostitute at The Queen of Hearts. “Or her mother?”

Furrowing his bushy brows, Randall said, “I should hope not in the biblical sense. Her mother is the queen at The Queen of Hearts. Violet Higgins.”

Randolph blinked. Several times. “The one with the wig large enough to accommodate a colony of mice?”

His brows furrowing until they made up a long caterpillar, Randall sighed and said, “When I knew Violet, she was but twenty and a brunette. I assure

you, there were no vermin.”

Trying to imagine what the woman might have looked like two decades ago had Randolph’s brain serving up images that were entirely inappropriate. Violet Higgins was blessed with remarkable charms that were nearly always on full display given how tight her corset was tied and how low cut her modiste made her gowns. “And my sister? Would I know *her*?” Randolph hadn’t availed himself of a prostitute in an age, but the mere thought that he—or any of his fellow students—might have bedded the young woman had him glancing about in search of a chamber pot.

“Doubtful. She’s actually Richard’s twin sister,” Randall replied, referring to his third bastard son. “She has a few months left at finishing school before her come-out,” Randall stated. “I met with Violet yesterday—”

“The queen?”

“Yes. To ensure all was well. Although she was a good mother, she is more than willing to relinquish her claim to Rachel in the hopes—”

“Rachel?”

Randall rolled his eyes. “I had nothing to do with naming her or Richard,” he said in his own defense. At the rate the given names beginning with the letter R were being used in the family, there would be duplicates occurring soon enough.

“You think she can make a good match? Despite having a... a *madam* as a mother?” Randolph asked.

“I do,” his father replied. “Like Richard, she has my name. She also has a generous dowry. Which I expect you to see to if I’m not around to settle it upon the man she marries.”

An ache had begun to develop behind his temples, and Randolph couldn’t decide if it was due to the brandy or his father’s news. “Really Father, this obsession you have with your mortality is—”

“A sign of responsibility. A trait I did not adopt until I met your stepmother. A trait I made sure you had in spades.”

Sobering at hearing his father’s statement, Randolph considered what he was being asked to do—simply act in his younger brother’s stead until such time as the boy was old enough to take on the marquessate.

“I’ll see to it, of course,” he finally acquiesced.

Randall regarded his son for a moment. “In the meantime, will you be taking on the training of a timid filly?”

An image of the look on Xenobia Dunsworth’s face just after they had

kissed came to mind. He had tried to erase it from his memory during his walk from her house.

The look of wonder. The look of awe. As if he had introduced her to a pleasure she had never before experienced.

He was quite sure she would have done whatever he had asked of her just then. That's the moment when he had almost—almost—asked if she would accompany him to a bedchamber so that he might do for her what her late husband had never done.

Pleasure her until her toes curled. Until her breaths caught and her mewls turned to cries of delight. Until she begged for him to take his own pleasure inside her.

The mere thought of Xenobia begging for him had him holding his breath.

Barbara had never begged for him.

The thought brought him out of his reverie in an instant, but reminded him they were speaking of responsibility. Of promises.

Furrowing a brow, Randolph stared at his father a moment before he said, "I will see to her, yes," he murmured. "But I will not need to break her." Between married life with a best friend who sought his carnal pleasures elsewhere and societal expectations, the breaking of Xenobia Dunsworth had already been done.

Randolph had every intention of undoing the damage.

"Oh?" Randall replied, his brows rising in question.

"Just the opposite. It's high time she enjoy a more exciting life."

His father blinked. "Are you speaking of the filly? Or of Lady Dunsworth?"

"Both," Randolph replied, realizing that brandy no longer had his brain buzzing.

He was stone cold sober.

Reflecting on a Kiss

Meanwhile, back at Bradley House

Xenobia stood in her parlor for several minutes after Sir Randolph Roderick took his leave, one hand raised to her lips.

The man's kiss had been so heated—so passionate—she was sure he had left a mark in the form of a brand on her tender flesh. Her insides seemed to tumble about, in a way that had frissons dancing beneath her skin.

She could not recall a single time where she had been kissed like that. All of her husband's kisses had been chaste. Pecks on the cheek or her forehead. Quick smacks on the lips that hadn't held the passion that could be found in a pinky finger.

Surrounded as they had been by the scents of roses and lilies, of the hints of the coming Christmas holiday in the red ribbons that decorated the mantle and the bows and bells on the door handles, that moment of kissing had been truly magical.

If it were the only gift she received this season, that kiss would still make for a Happy Christmas.

Her long moments of reflection might have continued deep into the night but for the appearance of her butler.

"My lady?" her butler asked as he regarded her from the threshold, a look of concern etched on his face.

"I'm going to bed now, Chesterfield. *Sir* Randolph will return tomorrow at half-past three," she stated, emphasizing the man's title. "Please be sure to allow him entry."

The butler lowered his head. "As you wish, my lady." He bowed and disappeared beyond the door.

Xenobia didn't take her leave of the parlor just then. She made her way to the sideboard and poured a finger's worth of brandy into a crystal glass. Holding it up to the gaslight from the room's only chandelier, she stared through the fortified wine for a moment before she drank it down in just a few gulps.

She enjoyed every last drop.

The very last thing she wanted to feel was guilt on this night.

A Stepmother's Advice

The following morning at the Reading townhouse

After a few minutes in the nursery in the company of his son—the babe was awake and already garbed in a new nappy when he arrived—Randolph made his way to the breakfast parlor. He expected he would be alone this early, so he came to a halt on the threshold when he saw that Constance was already seated. A selection of foods were set before her, and she held a cup of steaming tea in one hand as she gripped a quill in the other.

“Oh, pardon me,” he said.

“Whatever for?” Constance asked, when she finally lifted her eyes to meet his.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” he replied.

“You are not. In fact, you might be saving me from finishing this insipid list,” the marchioness replied with a grin. “I’m never sure what to include on the menus. How are you this morning?”

Despite the brandies he had imbibed the night before, he felt surprisingly good, and he said so.

“Can any of your good cheer be due to your meeting with Lady Dunsworth? Did she... hire you?”

Randolph winced, fairly sure his stepmother knew there was no timid filly in the Dunsworth stable. “She did not, but I’m quite sure I will be hired should she ever actually *own* a timid filly.”

Constance blinked. “Oh, dear. Was there a... a mix up of some kind?”

Randolph regarded her with a suspicious glance. “You knew she didn’t have a filly,” he accused.

Her eyes darting to one side, Constance said, “I wasn’t completely sure, but... oh, was it terribly uncomfortable for her?”

“*Her?*” Randolph repeated as he gave her a quelling glance. He filled a plate at the sideboard and gave his drink order to a footman. “More for me, I should think. Lady Comber set me up.”

Constance very nearly beamed in delight. “And?” she encouraged.

Randolph pulled out the chair across from hers and sat down. Hard. “I’ll

be taking her for a ride in the park this afternoon.”

Looking every bit as if *she* had been the one to arrange the dalliance, Constance set down her tea and leaned forward. “Thank you. I do hope this isn’t a hardship for you. Xenobia needs this.”

“This?” he repeated, wondering if she thought he was going to be doing more than just taking the baroness for a ride in the park.

He could imagine other rides that might happen. Her riding him, for example. Astride whilst naked, her honey blonde hair flowing in waves past her shoulders.

Randolph closed his eyes, at first wishing the image hadn’t formed in his mind’s eye and then deciding he rather enjoyed it.

So did his manhood, which had decided to rise to the occasion and take up every bit of available space in his already form-fitting breeches.

He shifted in his chair and grimaced. “What do you mean by... *this*?”

“A reminder of what life can be like when it’s *lived*,” she replied. “She’s been in mourning for more than a year, and you’ve been working far too much.”

“I don’t consider my time at the stables as work, really,” he replied before he tucked into his meal.

He wondered if Lady Dunsworth was awake yet. If she was eating breakfast. And if she was enjoying her morning meal, was she doing so in her bed or in the breakfast parlor?

Perhaps she ate in her salon whilst she wrote her correspondence. He imagined she was probably diligent about writing to her late husband’s mother. To her own mother.

Which had him wondering who that might be. He had no idea what family she had been born into. Who she was before she married Baron Dunsworth, not that it mattered too much.

He remembered the dinner gown she’d been wearing. How it matched her eyes. How those eyes had stared up at him when he had finally finished their kiss.

Having left her without making mention of the kiss would only mean that his arrival for this afternoon’s ride would be awkward. Lady Dunsworth was probably mortified. In fact, he half expected to receive a note claiming she had a megrim and would be unable to join him for the ride.

That was probably the subject of the correspondence she was writing in her salon.

“I was referring to your *other* position,” Lady Reading said in a quiet voice, as if she feared being overheard.

Randolph blinked. “How...?”

“Don’t be angry with him,” she pleaded. “He wasn’t going to tell me, but I threatened to...” She gave her head a shake. “Well, never mind. Your father would never survive a torture of any kind.”

“Long tongued, is he?” When Randolph saw her brighten, he feared she had found humor in his possible double entendre. “Don’t answer that.”

“If it helps, I don’t know any details other than which department you report to.”

Randolph winced. “And if you didn’t know which department?”

She considered the query a moment. “I might have thought you were a Bow Street Runner or a... an investigator of some sort. Working for one of those agencies that people employ when they wish to learn things about someone, or when they’ve lost something of value and want it to be found.”

Well, even if she hadn’t learned he worked for the Foreign Office, his stepmother certainly had guessed the manner of his position.

“I find the work diverting,” he finally said, just as the footman returned with his coffee. He took a long drink, reveling in how much better it tasted than the dreck that was served at most of the corner coffee houses in London. “And it has allowed me to perfect my billiards game.”

“Which has your father quite vexed,” Constance complained. “You might have let him win a game last night.”

Randolph jerked his head up, surprised at her words. His father hadn’t seemed too terribly upset at having lost the night before.

He had seemed more annoyed that he barely had a chance to play.

Randolph finally allowed a grin. “I had no idea. But if he for one moment thought I was letting him win, he would put voice to a scold the likes to which I have never been subjected,” he added with an arched brow.

“You know me too well, son,” Randall said as he appeared on the threshold. He gave his wife a deep bow and then rushed to her side to kiss her on the cheek at the same moment Randolph quickly got to his feet. “As do you,” Randall whispered in his wife’s ear.

“Darling, not at the breakfast table,” she admonished him. “We have a guest.”

Despite appearing as if his attention was on his plate, Randolph used his skills at observation and watched their interplay through his lowered lashes

for signs of artifice. He found none. The two seemed genuinely in love.

Randall sighed and turned to regard his son. "Please, be seated, son. You needn't come to attention just because I've arrived for a meal."

"Yes, sir," Randolph replied as he retook his seat.

"I suppose you've already been up to the nursery?" Randall asked as he settled himself into a chair next to his wife. From the way one of his arms moved, Randolph was sure he had a hand on his marchioness' thigh.

"I have," both Randolph and Constance said in unison. She tittered. "Our son is trying very hard to talk, but I cannot for the life of me understand a single word he blabbers. Well, other than 'mum' and 'dada'."

"Nonsense. He can say 'horse' and 'pony'," Randall countered.

"Which is all he'll ever need to know," Randolph offered. His grin was wide enough so a dimple appeared in his right cheek, and Constance blinked.

"You have a dimple," she murmured in awe. "Just like your son."

Randolph quickly sobered. "I believe he inherited his from me."

"And your father," she added as she turned her attention on her husband, beaming in delight.

A footman set a plate filled with eggs and several rashers of bacon in front of Randall before he shoo'd the servant away and turned to grin at his wife. "He inherited his from me," he said before he lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back of it.

Constance blushed as she dipped her head. "Eat your breakfast, darling," she whispered.

"I will, once I learn from my son how his meeting with Lady Dunsworth went last night. I might have won a game had he stayed another quarter-hour." He turned his attention to Randolph. "Is her filly a Thoroughbred?"

Randolph straightened in his chair, his gaze briefly darting to Constance. His father's query was obviously meant to cover the fact that they had already had this discussion in the study the night before.

Constance was suddenly intent on her list, though. "No," he replied. "Just a... a timid filly in need of... some attention," he stammered. "I'm taking her out this afternoon. To the park. With one of ours. See if some company will help."

Randall arched a bushy brow. "That's capital," he claimed. "And I must say, it's a relief to know she doesn't have a contender for the Derby."

"Indeed," Randolph replied, noting how Constance had a hard time keeping a straight face. Once he left the parlor, he was sure she would tell his

father that it was Lady Dunsworth he would be taking for a ride in the park rather than her filly.

Or perhaps his stepmother would keep that little secret to herself.

Apparently she was good at keeping secrets.

A Husband Apologizes on Behalf of His Wife

A few hours later, at the Reading stables east of London

Alistair Comber pulled back on the reins of a matched pair of greys, his phaeton coming to a stuttering halt beyond the large double doors of the Reading stables. He wrapped the ribbons around the pole next to his seat and hopped down from the black equipage. All the while, his gaze stayed on the huge white stucco building trimmed in dark red that stood before him.

“Bout time you came out here,” Randolph said from where he stood next to a bay brood mare. The horse was obviously pregnant, which seemed odd to Alistair. It was far too early for horses to be dropping colts. Christmas was still a few days away, and horses didn’t usually foal until the later spring months.

“Exactly how many do you have in there?” Alistair asked as he made his way to Randolph’s side.

“There are eight in there now,” Randolph replied. He waved to the adjacent fenced pasture, a thin layer of snow providing a white blanket on which there were at least a half-dozen more horses standing about. “I’m nursing a couple of lame bays and a shire,” he added as he gave the mare a pat on the side of her neck. “And this one, who always seems to drop her foals three months before everyone else.”

“That would be because your stud—”

“Yes, I know *why*. It’s just she’s been like this since her first foal. She was in heat before any of her sisters her first year, which means she is always early,” he complained. “I have to keep her newborns in the stable for their first couple of months to make sure their ears aren’t frostbit.”

He motioned for Alistair to join him, and they made their way into the barn, new-fallen snow crunching beneath their boot heels.

“I’m so jealous,” Alistair breathed as he took in the sight of sixteen stalls, all recently cleaned. Tack was neatly hung from hooks along the front wall, and hay was stacked nearly to the ceiling along another. Above, in the loft,

was more hay. Although most of these horses were used for pulling carriages and coaches, there were a few saddles spanning a trestle.

“Don’t be. I don’t have room for the number of horses you do,” Randolph said with a grin, referring to the Harrington House stables. “What brings you all the way out here?”

Alistair jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Got a pair that needed some exercise, and I owe you a huge apology.”

Randolph furrowed a brow. “Whatever for?” He picked up a brush from a nearby table and moved to the nearest stall.

“Lady Dunsworth and her timid filly,” Alistair spat out.

Rolling his eyes, Randolph said, “There’s no need. Truly. It’s fine.” He opened the stall, where a Cleveland Bay stood.

“My wife wasted your time—”

“She didn’t. Lady Dunsworth’s brandy was most excellent,” Randolph said as he began brushing the horse. A quiet nicker followed the first stroke of the brush.

Alistair sighed. “I swear, if Julia wasn’t with child, I would have sent her to bed without dinner and...” He shook his head. “I don’t know what else I would have done.”

“You wouldn’t strike her, I hope?” Randolph asked in alarm, his arm pausing in mid-stroke. The horse’s head swayed, and his neck curved as if he seemed about to complain.

“No! Never. But she needs to understand she cannot go about playing matchmaker under false pretenses. No matter how much...” He clamped his mouth shut.

“How much... what?” Randolph prompted.

Alistair crossed his arms, his head dipping to indicate the horse. When Randolph didn’t continue with the brushing, Alistair reached over and took the tool from his hand.

“What?” Randolph repeated.

“Have you considered courting someone?” Alistair asked in a quiet voice, his attention on the horse as he drew the brush from its withers to its flank. “Your son... he needs a mother.”

Randolph blinked. “He has plenty of attention. He has a nurse, and my stepmother dotes on him almost as much as she dotes on my little brother,” he argued, hardly noticing his use of the words ‘stepmother’ and ‘brother.’

“You need a wife.”

Randolph nearly took a step back, and would have if the stall wall wasn't directly behind him. "Says who?"

Alistair paused mid-stroke, which had the bay giving a loud and long whinny of complaint. "Damnation. Do you spoil these beasts?"

"No, but they do have expectations when they're forced to stand still," Randolph remarked as he indicated the rope that tethered the bay to a pole in the corner of the stall. He smirked when he noted how the horse gave Alistair a side-eye. Randolph was sure that if he'd been able, the beast would have hit Alistair with his head—hard.

Alistair quickly resumed brushing the bay. "I had a long discussion with Julia last night. She's convinced she did the right thing, even after I scolded her."

Randolph winced. "Did she cry?"

"No," Alistair replied with a sigh. "She only seemed more... determined. That was before she..." He sighed again.

"Dismissed you from her bedchamber?" Randolph guessed. He rolled his eyes. From his experience with Barbara, he knew how a woman with child might demand a husband's attentions. Despite Barbara's growing displeasure with him, she still desired him—or at least his cock—until the last month of her pregnancy.

"Something like that," Alistair admitted. "She must have missed me, because I woke up with her in my bed this morning," he said in a quiet voice. "Although I'd like to think it was because she forgave me, I rather think it was more because the fire had gone out in her bedchamber, and she wanted to sleep somewhere warm."

Randolph tried hard to suppress his smirk. He knew all too well of nights like that.

Winter nights.

Nights like last night.

Nights like what was to come tonight.

He had a fleeting thought of Lady Dunsworth. Of how cold she might become should her fire die down before the maid had a chance to add more coal to the fireplace in the early morning hours. How warm she would be if she were tucked against his body.

How warm he would be.

Randolph cleared his throat, his gaze focusing to discover Alistair staring at him. "What?"

“Just.... think about it.”

Furrowing a brow, Randolph said, “Apparently, I’ve been doing nothing but.”

Alistair’s expression matched his own. “What are you saying?”

Randolph blew out a breath. “I’m taking Lady Dunsworth for a ride in the park this afternoon. He’s going to pull the phaeton,” he said as he indicated the horse Alistair was absently brushing.

“Oh,” Alistair replied. “Well.”

“Whatever you do, don’t tell Lady Comber,” Randolph warned. “It’s just a ride in the park. Nothing more.”

“When are you going?”

“I’m going to fetch her at half-past-three.”

“It’ll be dark by the time you return,” Alistair remarked.

“I’m going to stay in town tonight,” Randolph replied, patting a waistcoat pocket that bulged with full a purse.

“Hazard?” Alistair guessed.

“Billiards. I’m hoping to lighten the purses of a certain Frenchman and his Belgium counterpart.” He didn’t add that he had turned over his last haul to the head of the Foreign Office just two days before. A few hours after he had spotted his father leaving The Queen of Hearts.

By now, the legitimacy of the bank notes would have been determined. It was possible an agent would be dispatched as soon as this evening to arrest the two for passing counterfeit notes. With any luck, they were also the ones creating the blunt, in which case, their arrest would mean a new assignment for Randolph.

If not, then Randolph would have to discover the source of the counterfeit money.

Alistair winced at the mention of Belgium. Only a decade ago, he had spent many a cold night in the Belgium countryside—behind enemy lines—spying on Napoleon’s forces. As an earl’s son, he was an officer in the army, but he preferred his undercover work to leading troops.

“The pay must be shite,” Alistair remarked.

Randolph furrowed a brow. “Playing billiards?”

“Working for the Foreign Office,” Alistair said. “Chamberlain never did have much of a budget.”

“And how would you know?”

Alistair gave him a quelling glance. “It’s no secret. During the wars with

Napoleon, we relied on the intelligence of reporters who worked for *The Times*. They had the bluntness to send investigators to the Continent. We didn't."

Randolph's frown deepened. "How long did *you* work for Chamberlain?"

"I wasn't aware we could stop," Alistair replied with an arched brow. He gave a long sigh. "That's not true. He hasn't employed me for..." He paused mid-sentence, although he continued to absently brush the horse.

"Since you married."

Alistair gave a start. "True. I suppose I am of no use if he cannot in good conscience send me across the Channel."

"I was sent to Calais. Once," Randolph remarked. "Had to follow a shipment of wool that was used to pay for illegal liquor. Worst time ever on a ship." He feigned sea sickness by rubbing his mid-section.

"Wool?" Alistair repeated. This time he did stop brushing the horse, and the resulting complaint was long and loud. "Were you on the *Molly*?" Outfitted to look like a pirate ship, the *Molly* was actually a vessel of the Foreign Office, dispatched to intercept ships carrying smuggled goods and illegal liquor.

Randolph laughed as he pulled a carrot from his great coat pocket and offered it to the annoyed horse. "The one and only. Damn thing is still seaworthy, if you can believe it, and a more motley crew you'll never find."

"Good men, though," Alistair said. "So... this ride with Lady X—"

"Lady X?"

Alistair rolled his eyes. "Her name is Xenobia. She's actually one of Julia's cousins. They always called her Lady X. That was before she married Dunsworth, of course."

"Who was her father?" Randolph decided anything he could learn about the young matron before he took her for a ride would help with conversation. They wouldn't have the benefit of brandy to help loosen their tongues.

"Oh, you would have to ask that," Alistair complained as he moved to the other side of the horse. "Do you know how many Harrington daughters there were?"

"Five, if you're referring to the sisters of the current Earl of Mayfield."

Alistair blinked. "Oh. Well. She's the daughter of Edith, the Dowager Duchess of Pendleton."

Randolph took a moment to sort the relationship. "The Duchess of Pendleton? Xenobia is a *duke's* daughter?" he asked in disbelief.

"No," Alistair quickly replied. "Pendleton died more than a year before

Xenobia was born. At least Edith had already given him his heir.”

Wincing, Randolph knew the Dowager Duchess of Pendleton hadn't remarried, instead enjoying the very public life of a Merry Widow. With her red hair and bright green eyes, she was said to bewitch gentlemen into her bed. Given her beauty, Randolph sorted casting spells wasn't required.

But Alistair's mention of the timing of Xenobia's birth meant she was illegitimate.

“So... Dunsworth did her a favor?” Randolph murmured, referring to his marriage to Xenobia.

Alistair seemed to think on the comment for a time before he said, “I suppose. I believe her father was a captain of some sort. Alton Bradley. Not sure if he was in the army or a ship's captain. Anyway, the townhouse she lives in was once his, so that meant Dunsworth didn't have to put out any blunt for a house in town.”

“Hmm,” Randolph murmured as he considered the possible topics for conversation during their ride. She already knew he was illegitimate, although it did help that his father had publicly acknowledged him as his son. He had done so with all four of his bastards. “It could be worse, I suppose,” he said suddenly.

Alistair's head popped up from the other side of the horse. “What do you mean?”

“She could be my sister.”

His eyes darting sideways, Alistair finally allowed a guffaw. “I don't think Reading is capable of fathering a girl,” he replied.

Considering he now had five brothers, Randolph would have agreed—if his father hadn't just told him he had a sister that night before. He cleared his throat. Loudly.

Alistair raised his head from the chore he had taken on as a sort of penance for his wife's machinations and stared at Randolph. “You have a sister?”

“Rachel Roderick. Richard's twin. Apparently she's in finishing school and was a friend of Lady Dunsworth's when they were in school together.”

“How old?” Alistair asked, his eyes wide.

Randolph allowed a shrug as he did the calculation in his head. “Twenty?”

Alistair blew out the breath he'd been holding. “That's a relief,” he murmured. “No, I don't know her.”

Randolph gave him a quelling glance. “Does the name Violet Higgins ring a bell?”

“Only if you’re referring to the Queen of Hearts,” Alistair replied. “Lost more than my fair share of blunt under her former roof before she took over the Queen of Hearts. When I was younger, of course. Why do you ask?” He paused his brush strokes. “Is *she* under investigation by the Foreign Office?”

“No. She’s Rachel and Richard’s mother.”

Alistair blinked. “I cannot... I cannot even imagine her—”

“Nor can I,” Roderick said, cutting off his friend’s comment. “According to my father, she was a brunette and a beauty at one time.”

“But surely she didn’t raise the babes.”

“Not Richard,” Roderick agreed. “On the one hand, I want to meet my sister, but on the other...” He allowed the sentence to trail off as he gave his head a shake.

“Is someone providing protection?”

Randolph nodded. “Since Father’s arranged for her dowry, I rather imagine someone is.”

“You needn’t feel guilty for not wanting to make her acquaintance.”

“I’ve met all my brothers. Not nearly as awkward as I was expecting those introductions to be,” he countered.

“Do you think she lives in London?”

Randolph shrugged. “I suppose. I’m sure my father knows.”

“And your stepmother?”

Straightening, Randolph considered the query a moment. “I don’t know. Father was very keen to let her know about all of us before he asked for her hand in marriage. Perhaps he did then.”

“If he knew about her.”

“If she and Richard are twins, then surely Father would have learned about them at the same time,” Randolph argued.

“Then why not tell you before last night?”

Randolph gave his head a shake. “Why not, indeed?” he countered.

Cousins Contemplate

Meanwhile, at Bradley House

“You don’t hate me?”

Xenobia gave her cousin a quelling glance. “Of course not,” she replied as her lady’s maid pinned up her honey blonde hair into a style suitable for her carriage gown’s matching hat. She had already clipped off its longer peacock feather, sure she would impale poor Sir Randolph should she turn her head too far to the side whilst they rode on his phaeton.

“Alistair scolded me. It was awful.”

Staring at Julia’s reflection in her dressing table’s mirror, Xenobia’s eyes widened. “He didn’t...?”

“No,” Julia replied. “He wouldn’t do anything to *hurt* me, but I was so vexed, I... I told him to leave my bedchamber.”

Xenobia blinked. Given the stories Julia had put voice to over the years she had been married to Alistair, Xenobia wondered if this might have been their first tiff. “Did he?”

Julia sighed. “Yes. I had to go to his bedchamber when mine grew too cold. I blame this all on the baby, of course.”

“Julia!”

“I’m normally not like this,” Julia insisted. “But it matters not, since you’ve received an invitation to ride out of it.”

Xenobia allowed a wan grin as she watched her lady’s maid finish styling her hair. “That will be all, Sullivan,” she murmured.

The young woman dipped a curtsy and hurried from the bedchamber. Xenobia was sure she would spread the news to the other servants that her mistress was going for a ride in the park. At no point had she said with whom, nor did she intend for them to know.

There would be gossip, though, but for once, she didn’t care. She’d had quite enough of caring what others thought of her.

“You might have mentioned he is Rachel’s brother,” Xenobia whispered when she turned to regard her cousin.

Julia gave a start. “I... I didn’t think of it. Why, I haven’t thought of

Rachel in years. I haven't *seen* her in years."

"That's because she hasn't been in London since I married," Xenobia countered. "Her mother took her to the Continent. Something about attending a different finishing school until it was time for her come-out." She didn't add that she thought it was because Rachel's mother had become too well-known as a madam in London.

The Marquess of Reading had probably arranged the move.

Frowning, Julia considered the timing. "A bit old for a come-out, is she not?"

"Twenty?" Xenobia offered. "I suppose, but that's not what has me bothered." At Julia's questioning glance, she added, "Last night, when we spoke of his family, never once did Sir Randolph mention her, or ask about our friendship."

Julia allowed a shrug. "Perhaps he doesn't know."

"That he has a sister?"

Arching a brow, Julia regarded Xenobia for a moment. "Different mothers. Different classes. Sir Randolph's mother is a member of the *ton* and Rachel's mother is not," she offered.

"Do I mention her whilst on this ride? Should I ask about her?"

"Do," Julia replied. "Then you'll know if he knows about her."

Xenobia gave her cousin a quelling glance. "You're incorrigible." She might have chided Julia a moment longer but she had other concerns. Given what had happened the night before, though—just before Randolph Roderick had departed the parlor for the second time—Xenobia had spent the day in a constant state of anxiousness. She looked forward to the ride, of course, but facing Sir Randolph after his scorching kiss would have her cheeks flaming red.

In an effort to blame the coloring on her clothes, she had elected to wear a red carriage gown coupled with a darker red redingote for their ride. "How do I look?"

"You look as if you're ready for Christmas," Julia remarked.

"As long as I don't look like a gift-wrapped present," Xenobia replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sighing, Xenobia turned from her dressing table and said, "I'm not sure about Sir Randolph's intentions. I cannot help but think he's only doing this because he feels sorry for me, but he doesn't—"

"He's not doing this to score an invitation to your bed, if that's what

you're worried about," Julia insisted. "Alistair says he's too honorable for that. Says he's not one to follow in his father's footsteps when it comes to dalliances."

"You mean Sir Randolph is not a rake?" The query came out more like a statement.

"Exactly!" Julia replied, beaming in delight.

Xenobia had already surmised that Randolph wasn't angling for a tumble. Why, if he'd wanted one the night before, she probably would have been the one to lead them to her bedchamber. Let him have his way with her. If for no other reason than she was curious.

Too curious.

What would lovemaking be like with someone who wasn't your best friend?

But she hadn't yet determined his motive for the invitation to ride in the park with him. Given the weather—it was cold, but it wasn't snowing—surely they would have to be bundled up in quilts or a blanket on the bench of the phaeton.

"When was the last time you rode on a phaeton?" Julia asked.

Xenobia blinked. "The only time was when you took me to New Bond Street last year." She recalled the harrowing drive with fright. "You nearly dumped me at the corner of Oxford and New Bond," she accused.

"We did take that corner a bit fast, didn't we?" Julia replied in delight.

"We?" Xenobia chided.

"You'll have to hang onto Mr. Roderick's arm. Thread your arm through his elbow," Julia explained, a huge grin on her face. "And be sure to sit close. You'll have to, as there's very little room on a phaeton bench."

Xenobia's eyes darted sideways. "Surely I can hang onto the bench."

"Not if your hands are in a muff," Julia countered.

Inhaling deeply in an effort to calm her nerves, Xenobia was about to claim she wasn't going to take a muff when Chesterfield appeared at the door and cleared his throat.

"Yes?"

"There's a Sir Randolph to see you, my lady," Chesterfield said as he held out a calling card. "Should I let him know you are in residence?"

"You needn't tell him anything. I'll be right down." She glanced over at her visitor. "Please, Julia, don't go downstairs until after we've taken our leave."

“Oh, I won’t,” Julia replied with a shake of her head. She didn’t add that she intended to watch from a vantage overlooking the hall. “Good luck.”

Xenobia frowned at her cousin as she pinned her red felt hat into place. Then she donned her redingote and took her leave of her bedchamber while she fastened the frog closures down the front.

A Ride in the Park

Meanwhile, downstairs

Randolph knew from the moment the butler answered the door that the servant did not like him. He supposed after what had happened the night before, Chesterfield had every right to be annoyed with him. “*Sir* Randolph for Lady Dunsworth,” he said, emphasizing the ‘*sir*.’ This time, he held out his calling card.

Chesterfield took the white pasteboard, not once giving it a glance. “Wait here, *sir*. I’ll see if she’s in residence.”

Prepared to wait for at least ten minutes—Barbara had never been ready to leave at an agreed-upon time—Randolph made his way to the hall’s only piece of furniture. The scent of roses surrounded him as he glanced first at the huge arrangement of white roses in the middle, fairly sure their stems were in a punchbowl, and then at the red felt surface of the table. He knelt and studied the carved edges of the gaming table, his gaze taking in the perfectly matched seams of the inlaid wood.

The imperfectly closed drawers.

“That’s odd,” he whispered as he nudged one open. Given its small size, he expected to find it containing a deck of playing cards, or perhaps some playing chips. Instead, he boggled at the sight of money.

Twenty pound bank notes, and lots of them. The drawer was so full, it could barely be shut.

He straightened and moved to where another player might sit at the table. It took only a moment to locate a second drawer, this one filled with five-pound notes. He quickly shut it and moved to the next, finding ten-pound notes, but only a few. The next drawer held the deck of cards, and under that, a folded note. He glanced about to be sure no one was watching him as he opened the missive and began to read.

Blinking twice when he finished, he quickly refolded the letter and stuffed it back into the drawer. He was closing it and about to move to another when his attention was captured by the woman descending the stairs.

He moved to the base of the staircase and gave a deep bow. “Good

afternoon, my lady,” he said as he reached for her gloved hand. He brushed a kiss over her knuckles, his nearness to the bottom step preventing Xenobia from taking the last step down.

“Sir Randolph,” she replied. “I see my servants haven’t yet put a cloth on the table,” she added with a frown as her gaze darted to what had held his attention as she descended the stairs.

“It’s a magnificent gaming table. I shouldn’t think you would want such beautiful carving hidden,” he remarked, glad to see that she wasn’t displaying embarrassment over their kiss from the night before. He offered his arm, and she took it once she was off the last step.

“I wanted to locate the hall table that should have been there, but this was the closest the servants could find. It was in the study,” she explained. “You see, my delivery of flowers arrived for Christmas yesterday, and I’m afraid I may have ordered more than I could accommodate.”

They made their way to the front door, Chesterfield pulling it open for them. He handed Xenobia a fur muff, and she took it despite remembering Julia’s comment about how she would have to thread an arm around Sir Randolph’s elbow in order to hang on for the tight turns.

“I don’t think a house can have too many flowers, my lady,” Randolph remarked as he led them to the phaeton. “The roses in your parlor are quite lovely.”

“It’s kind of you to say,” she replied, just before her attention went to his high-perch phaeton and the horse that stood snorting in front of it. “Oh, what kind of horse is this?” Xenobia asked as she hurried to stand in front of the huge bay. “It’s far too large to be a Thoroughbred,” she added.

Randolph grinned at her comment, remembering the book she had been holding the night before. “This is Hermes. He’s a Cleveland Bay, and he’s usually paired with another the same size as he is. Unfortunately, Aries has come up lame.”

“Will he be all right?” she asked, her expression displaying her concern.

“Hopefully. I have his foreleg wrapped, and I’m holding off on exercising him for a few days,” he replied. “You can... touch him, if you’d like,” he added, continuing to grin at her enthusiasm.

He wondered how long it had been since she was last out of the house. She fairly nearly bounced with excitement, as if she’d been locked away and held hostage for a long time.

A year, he realized, remembering how long wives were expected to

mourn their dead husbands.

“How do I do it?”

Randolph moved to stand behind her, and he took one of her gloved hands in his. He guided it until her hand was above the horse’s nose. “Just smooth it straight up,” he whispered, letting go of her hand. “In the direction of how the hair grows.”

She followed his instructions, grinning when Hermes lowered his head so she could better reach the space between his ears. He nickered softly. “He looks so clean. Like he’s just had a bath.”

“He had a good brushing earlier this afternoon,” Randolph said, secretly glad she had noticed the results of Alistair’s time spent with the beast. “Let me help you up.”

Xenobia regarded the step on the side of the phaeton with widened eyes. “It’s terribly high,” she said, her gaze going up to where there was a handle she could use to help hoist herself onto the bench once she was up the step.

“Do you trust me?” Randolph asked.

She turned her gaze onto him. “I... I do.”

“Place your hands on my shoulders,” he ordered. He moved his hands to her waist and, and when she had her gloved hands in place, he lifted her up until she was mostly on the bench seat.

“This is terribly high,” she said, but her expression of delight belied the complaint.

Randolph hurried around to the other side, barely pausing to take the step up and onto the bench. He adjusted his great coat and then pulled a thick quilt from a rack behind the seat. He spread it out over their laps. “Are you warm enough?”

“I am,” she replied with a smile. “It’s rather considerate of you to bring the blanket.”

Randolph unwrapped the reins from around the short pole in front of the bench. “I wish I could claim I thought of it just for today, but I admit to keeping it here on the phaeton throughout the winter months,” he replied as he took the ribbons in one hand. “Before I let Hermes loose, I suppose I should warn you that we’ll be moving at a fast clip. You’d best hang onto me. I shouldn’t wish to lose you on one of the turns.”

Xenobia didn’t argue, but did as Julia had described, shoving her hands into the muff once her arm was securely wrapped about Randolph’s elbow. “Like this?”

“Perfect,” he replied, noting how she didn’t hesitate to secure her arm to his, or attempt to shift too far away from him on the bench. He flicked the reins, and Hermes pulled them into Curzon Street. “If you get cold, please let me know.”

Even if she’d been chilled to the bone, Xenobia wouldn’t have complained. She had never ridden so high in her entire life, and she made certain Sir Randolph knew it.

“However do you get about town?” he asked.

“Town coaches and a barouche,” she replied. “Mother never drove. I don’t think she knows how, so of course I was never allowed to learn.”

“Your mother? Does she live here in town?” He feigned not knowing anything about her family in the hopes she would share her side of what he had learned from Alistair. He felt her hold stiffen around his arm, and he dared a quick glance in her direction.

She quickly looked away from his gaze. “Only on occasion,” Xenobia replied. “I think she’s on the Continent at the moment. Somewhere in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The Dowager Duchess of Pendleton likes to spend Christmas in Rome,” she added, referring to her mother by her title. She didn’t add that her mother was probably sharing a count’s bed at night and flirting with a duke during the day.

“Having a duchess for a mother must be rather interesting,” he remarked. “And what of your father?”

Xenobia relaxed her hold on him just after they made the turn onto Park Lane. “Captain Bradley died when I was eighteen.” At his sharp glance, she added, “I don’t think he ever completely recovered from his battle wounds. He fought in the war against Napoleon, you see. He was in the army.”

“You are proud of him, I hope?”

“I am,” she affirmed. “I found him to be a very generous and amiable man. He gave me his house even before he took his last breath, along with an allowance. Made sure the title to the house was in my name, and that it could not be taken away from me should I wed.”

“The house you live in now?” Randolph asked.

“Yes.”

He frowned. “Did he think you would wed an opportunist?”

Xenobia seemed to think on the query for a time before she said, “I do not believe he thought I would marry at all, given the circumstances.”

Slowing the horse for the turn into Hyde Park—a move that would

prevent Xenobia from being pressed overmuch into his side—Randolph furrowed a brow. “Circumstances?”

Tightening her hold on her escort, Xenobia considered how to respond. She had always just assumed everyone in London knew she was an illegitimate daughter of a duchess. That her mother, known for her exploits following the death of her husband, had come to be known as the Dowager Duchess of Debauchery.

At least her time with the captain had been long enough to ensure Xenobia’s parentage. Had the duchess discovered she was with child a year or two later, Xenobia—and her mother—might not know the identity of her father.

“Like you, I am illegitimate,” she finally replied, deciding he would eventually learn more about her if she didn’t offer the information first.

“Then I am in the very best company,” Randolph replied. “And it sounds as if our fathers were both honorable in that regard.”

“Indeed,” Xenobia agreed, deciding it was safe to bring up Rachel. “Is your sister still on the Continent? I remember Rachel left London with her mother about the time I married.”

Randolph jerked his head to regard her with a raised brow. Now he wondered if his father had only told him about Rachel because he had been sure Xenobia would mention her. “You... you knew Rachel?”

Nodding, Xenobia said, “We were at finishing school together. For two years. Kindred spirits, you might say, despite the difference in our ages.”

Randolph seemed at a loss for words. “I only discovered I had a sister last night,” he admitted. “When I returned to my father’s house.”

Xenobia considered his admission. “Your father never told you?”

He shook his head. “Even though she’s Richard twin, she was raised by her mother, Violet Higgins, whilst Richard lived with someone else. Apparently, Father lost track of Violet for a time, but has since found her. He’s made arrangements for a dowry and a come-out for Rachel.”

Xenobia leaned toward him. “I am relieved for Rachel. Her mother called herself the Queen of Hearts, and Rachel said it was because she was always breaking them.”

Randolph furrowed a brow. “Violet owns the gaming hell of that name,” he murmured. “In Stafford Street. I think my father feared Rachel would follow in her mother’s footsteps.”

“Oh, she wouldn’t,” Xenobia insisted. “Rachel always knew who her

father was. Knew how important it was she remain chaste. We both knew that.”

Dipping his head, Randolph said, “Thank you for telling me about her. I look forward to meeting her knowing you are a friend.”

Xenobia allowed a heavy sigh, as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Her gaze went up as they passed beneath the Triumphal Arch and onto the King’s Private Road. “I hope you are not angry with your father for having kept her a secret.”

Randolph took a deep breath. “I wasn’t, exactly. Disappointed, perhaps, until he explained the circumstances. I cannot say I would have done it differently.” He glanced over to find her regarding him with admiration. “I rather imagine your father was better at the job,” and then he grinned at seeing how a blush deepened the color on her already rosy cheeks.

“I truly loved Captain Bradley,” Xenobia admitted. “He doted on me when my mother would take me to his house for a week or two every year,” she explained, remembering how her parents seemed to rekindle their fondness for one another during those visits. “He allowed me to go into any room, especially the library, and he said that if I were to discover a treasure buried in a box, it would be mine to keep.”

His attention captured by this last comment, Randolph asked, “And did you find one?”

Her face lit up as she giggled. “I thought so, the day I discovered a beautifully decorated pasteboard box filled with cheroots in the study. I remember him laughing because I didn’t know what they were. I didn’t know that they were the reason his wool coat always smelled the way it did.” She leaned towards him again, inhaling the scent from his coat. “Like yours.” Her lips trembled at the memory. “I always remember those weeks as if they were an adventure, because he said he didn’t want there to be any secrets between us, and I was always determined to discover what he meant.”

Randolph furrowed a brow at hearing the reference to secrets. He wondered what kind of secrets an Army captain could have, especially a wounded one. “Pray tell, when did you move into the house?”

Her eyes darted to his for the briefest of moments. “Not until I married. James... Lord Dunsworth... he didn’t have a house here in town, so my ownership of Bradley House saved him from having to let one for us.”

Bristling at the thought that Dunsworth might have married Xenobia just so he would have a place to live in London, Randolph had to bite his tongue

or risk speaking the sentiment out loud.

He was about to ask if she had siblings when she suddenly said, “But I suppose that’s why he had the blunt to let a townhouse and hire a mistress.”

Randolph directed the horse to the side of the road and slowed him to a stop. He regarded Xenobia with a look of shock. Her eyes were bright with tears.

Before he gave a thought to what he was doing, Randolph pulled his arm from her hold and then gathered her into his arms, pulling her hard against the side of his body. “Xenobia, no,” he whispered.

“I’m terribly sorry. What a horrid thing to say about the dead,” she murmured into his wool coat, once again inhaling the scent of cheroot smoke.

“It’s not horrid, my lady,” he countered as he readjusted his hold on her. “Even if it is the truth.” He held her for another moment, his gaze sweeping the area around them to determine if anyone was watching. He knew if they were seen like this, tongues would wag. “Come. Let’s go for a walk,” he said as he gave up his hold on her. He quickly stepped down from the phaeton and hurried around to lift her from the high perch.

“But... what of the phaeton?” she protested. Given the weather, no young boy hurried up to mind the gig in exchange for a coin.

“Hermes must learn patience,” Randolph replied as he secured the reins to the pole. “And we won’t go far.”

Xenobia made her way to the front of the horse, reaching up to smooth a hand over his cheek.

Randolph joined her and pulled a small apple from his coat pocket. He offered it to her. “You’ll be his friend for life—or at least the rest of the day.”

Her face once again brightening, Xenobia took the apple and offered it to the horse. She let out a gasp when it disappeared, and then laughed at the crunching sound as Hermes devoured the fruit.

Randolph held out his arm. “Shall we?”

Xenobia realized immediately why he had chosen this particular location to stop the phaeton—privacy. A crushed granite path, dusted with a layer of snow, led from the King’s Private Road north toward the east end of the Serpentine. Most of the path was lined with hedgerows and covered by a canopy of maple trees. Although their branches were mostly bare of leaves, they were coated with snow. “I’ve never been on this path during the winter,” she said in a quiet voice, almost as if she feared the snow would fall from the branches if she spoke too loudly.

“I’ve only been once,” he replied, remembering how Barbara complained about the cold and the wind off the Serpentine. “I recall it was quiet.” He slowed his steps when he spotted a park bench nestled against the bushes. “Will you sit with me?”

“Of course.”

“Even if my motives are not honorable?”

Xenobia stared up at him. “Would you think me wanton if I was more inclined to do so because of what you just said?”

A huge grin split Randolph’s face. “Possibly,” he hedged. He used a gloved hand to wipe away the dusting of snow that covered the bench. “Actually, I brought you here because of what you said a few moments ago. About your... your husband and his mistress.”

“What of him?” she asked as she took a seat.

He struggled to form his words. “I fear that now that you are out of mourning, you may embark on a lifestyle to which you are unaccustomed,” he replied as he sat down next to her. “As if you intend to seek revenge for having put up with Lord Dunsworth’s preference for a mistress.”

Xenobia inhaled sharply. “I rather doubt that,” she said, almost too quickly. “I am not my mother’s daughter, if you were inferring I would become a Merry Widow.”

He nodded his understanding. “While I am relieved to hear it, I am also torn.”

“Why?”

Randolph dipped his head, his gaze going to his clasped hands. “After last night, I thought more on your wish to have companionship. I could not help but think you referred to wanting more than just... conversation. That you were in fact speaking of taking a lover.”

About to deny his claim, Xenobia could not when his hands suddenly separated and one of his arms encircled her shoulders. His lips were on hers only a moment later, lips that were cold at first, but soon heated as he claimed her mouth.

Randolph pulled her closer, his lips leaving hers to trail featherlight kisses along her jaw to her ear. Had his hat and hers not prevented him from doing so, he would have kissed the area behind her ear and then moved his kisses down her neck.

He heard her ragged breaths and finally pulled away. “I would ask that if you are considering such a thing—”

“Such a thing?” she repeated, looking ever so addled.

“Taking a lover.”

Her eyes widened. “I... I wasn’t. At least... not before.”

“Before?”

Her eyes darted sideways. “Before you seemed to indicate you wished to be the first in a very short line.”

“A line of only one, I should hope.”

Xenobia felt a rush of excitement. “Are you that one?”

He nodded. “Despite the circumstances.”

Xenobia’s brows furrowed. “Circumstances?”

“Besides my responsibility at the Reading stables, I have a position. One that requires me to work most nights,” he stammered. “I can be your lover on Wednesday nights after dinner—”

His words were halted when she raised a gloved finger to his lips. “I cannot help but think you are offering yourself out of pity for me.” Although she was curious as to what he might do in a position that required he work at night, she didn’t ask.

He took the finger from his lips, his larger hand covering hers entirely. “Not pity,” he whispered, his slight head shake reinforcing his reply. “For if you had readily agreed, I might have thought you felt pity for *me*,” he reasoned.

“Because you are a widower?”

Randolph dipped his head. “A widower who is also the father of a babe.”

Xenobia exhaled, her mind racing with possibilities. “You could have your pick of any number of women in search of a tryst—”

“I’m not interested in a tryst, my lady.”

She furrowed a blonde brow. “An *affaire*, then?”

He shook his head. “I am not my father’s son in that regard,” he reminded her. “I thought I made that clear last night. If... *when* I take you as a lover, you will be the only one I bed.”

Xenobia blinked at the comment, but her eyes widened at how he had couched the claim.

When I take you as a lover...

As if he had already decided they were going to *be* lovers. “You promise you do not pity me?”

“I promise,” he replied. Then he remembered what he had discovered when he arrived at Bradley House that afternoon. Remembered the letter he

had found.

Did Xenobia know there were hundreds of pounds of bank notes hidden in that one piece of furniture?

If so, did she have blunt stowed away in other furnishings in Bradley House?

If she didn't, did the servants know?

He was suddenly reminded of the money his father hid for his mother to find, and his lips lifted with brief amusement.

When he noted how Xenobia stared at him, he shook off the brief reverie. "After what I discovered today, I'm of the opinion that you need a protector," Randolph added in a hoarse whisper.

Alarmed by the claim, Xenobia stared at him. "What did you discover?"

He gave his head a shake. "I'll show you when we return to Bradley House. In the meantime, would you be amenable to me acting as your protector?"

Xenobia stared at him. If Randolph declared he was her protector, then there would be gossip. "The entire *ton* will know we are lovers," she argued.

"Would you be embarrassed if they did, my lady?"

Xenobia took a moment to consider how she might feel if word got out she was carrying on with Sir Randolph. If Lady Pettigrew knew. If Lady Reading knew. If Lady Chamberlain knew. If Julia knew.

Well, Julia would be over-the-moon happy for her.

Lady Reading would be discreet. She wouldn't mention it to anyone.

Lady Chamberlain would want to know all the details, but she wouldn't divulge them to others.

Lady Pettigrew would share the news in every Mayfair parlor on which she could possibly pay a morning call in the next fortnight. Despite her penchant for gossip, though, probably no one would believe her.

"I would not be embarrassed, Sir Randolph."

"Just Randolph, if you would. Or... or Rand when we are alone," he said as he dropped his forehead to touch hers. He had doffed his top hat the moment before, wanting nothing more than to kiss her senseless.

"Rand," she repeated, her gaze on his lips. Before she could stop herself, she kissed him.

Randolph returned the kiss, his arms once again wrapping around her shoulders to pull her close. When Xenobia finally released his lips, he allowed a grin. "I give you permission to do that whenever you wish," he

murmured.

Xenobia grinned, her face reddening. “Surely only when we’re alone,” she countered.

His eyes darting sideways, Randolph allowed a chuckle. “Whenever you wish,” he repeated.

The sound of a horse whinnying in complaint had Xenobia leaning to the side. “Was that Hermes?”

Randolph grimaced. “Probably.” His subsequent curse came out as a whisper.

“Take me home, Rand. You can park the phaeton in the mews behind the townhouse, and we can warm ourselves next to a fire,” Xenobia said as she stood.

Randolph was quick to follow suit. “As you wish, my lady.”

“Xenobia,” she countered as she threaded her arm through his elbow. “Or Xena, should you be so inclined.”

Before he turned to lead them back to the King’s Private Road, Randolph regarded her with awe. “A force of Zeus?” he inquired, referring to the meaning of her name. “You deserve to be called no less than your full name,” he claimed.

Xenobia stared up at Randolph. If she’d been the least bit cold before, she was not now. “If you intend to worship me, then you best return me to Bradley House,” she suggested.

Randolph hesitated, a wince appearing. “I really wish this was a Wednesday,” he murmured. “And that I didn’t need to sleep for a few hours before leaving for St. James Street tonight.”

Although she felt a wave of disappointment, Xenobia allowed a wan grin. “Perhaps we merely spend what time we can together,” she offered. “Until you must take your leave.”

Randolph nodded before he returned his hat to his head. They made their way back to the phaeton, and he lifted her onto the phaeton bench, all the while Hermes snorted and stomped a hoof and a light snow fell around them.

Xenobia grinned as she settled herself onto the bench. She laughed as Randolph fairly launched himself onto the bench next to her. He had Hermes trotting into a tight U-turn and headed back to the Hyde Park Corner gate in only a moment.

Ten minutes later, and they were in the mews behind Bradley House.

Despite the late nights and early mornings leaving him feeling weary,

Randolph looked forward to a few hours in her company. He would probably be asleep for two of them, but at least he wouldn't wake up alone.

A Seduction Thwarted by Exhaustion

A few minutes later, in Bradley House

Xenobia led Randolph to the back door of Bradley House. “I’m of a mind to take the servants’ stairs to the second floor,” she whispered as Randolph opened the door for her. She pulled her hands from her muff to remove her gloves and then shoved them into her pockets while Randolph followed suit.

When she reached for his bare hand with hers, Randolph’s gaze went to the thin set of stairs that led to the upper floors. “Will it be warm enough in your apartments, my lady?” he queried. “I cannot help but notice, but your hand feels awfully cold.”

Xenobia couldn’t help the shiver that coursed down her spine just then. Was the man mad? She was far warmer than she would be on a hot summer day. “I rather doubt that’s possible,” she replied with a grin, almost embarrassed by what she thought they might be about to do.

Spend a few hours together.

In the afternoon.

In a bedchamber.

There was nothing about this tryst that could be considered appropriate, even if they didn’t do anything scandalous. She was on the verge of feeling ashamed of herself.

Overcome by a yawn, Randolph struggled to cover it with the hand that held his hat. “If you’re not comfortable with this—”

“It’s fine,” Xenobia interrupted as she headed to the stairs. “There’s a different bedchamber we can use. One where we won’t be disturbed.”

Xenobia lifted her skirts and made her way up the thin, wooden steps, her half boots barely making a sound. Meanwhile, she was well aware of his boots and the sounds they made directly behind her. The cadence of the slight tapping matched how fast her heart was beating.

About to reach for the door handle to the very first bedchamber along the second floor corridor, Xenobia gasped when Randolph’s hand brushed past

hers. "Allow me," he murmured as he opened the door.

Xenobia stepped in, relieved the darkened bedchamber was in good order. The heavy drapes were closed, no doubt to lessen the chill from the two windows. From the painting above the mantle and the dark blue fabrics curtaining the bed and covering the chairs in front of the fireplace, she remembered this room had been part of her father's apartments.

Randolph made his way to the room's fireplace, where a bucket of coal and kindling were on hand. He lit a fuzee, and soon the flames lit the room in a golden glow. Helping himself to a candle lamp, he lit the wick and returned it to the nightstand.

Xenobia noticed how he studied all the furnishings in the room. How his gaze darted to the clock and marble busts, to the objets d'art her father had collected. Remembering his comment about having to work at nights, she now worried that he might really be a thief, using his ties to the *ton* as a means to gain entry into lady's homes to help himself to their jewelry and other valuables.

She quickly reminded herself of who he was—the son of a marquess and a friend to Julia's husband—and she tried to relax.

Randolph turned to regard her, his expression unreadable. "Perhaps you should come sit next to the fire."

"Of course," she quickly agreed and moved to take one of the upholstered chairs. As Randolph helped her out of her redingote, she inhaled sharply when she saw that the curtains were open on the side of the bed that faced the fireplace. Had the bed linens been turned down, the expanse of white would have been an obvious invitation.

For a moment back in the park, she had wanted Randolph to accept such an invitation. Now she was nervous. Now she was trying to imagine what it would be like to be bedded by this man. What words he might murmur as her fingers slid down his chest, up his arms to wrap over his shoulders. What sounds he might make as he drove himself into her, filling her completely. What he might do when he experienced his ecstasy.

She tried to remember if there had been more to it and found her recollection of lovemaking a disappointment.

Perhaps this wasn't a good idea.

Randolph furrowed his brows as he stared at Xenobia, sure she must be having second thoughts. He was as well, but for a very different reason.

“Would you lie with me while I sleep? I can warm the bed for you,” he suggested. “I can undo your buttons, and you can join me when you’re undressed. Otherwise, I fear it will be chilly in here for a time.”

Xenobia wondered at the sudden excitement that came over her just then. Then she noticed his weariness. “What’s wrong?”

Randolph angled the adjacent chair so it almost faced the one she was in, and he took a seat. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and then reached out a hand to take one of hers. “I’ve not shared a bed with a woman since my wife’s death,” he murmured quietly. “And truth be told, at the moment, I do not have the energy to do more than remove my clothing and climb onto that bed,” he said as he motioned with his thumb. “However, I can provide a warm body against which you can nap for a time.” He paused and took a breath. “Do I have your permission to stay? Until I must leave to go to work?”

Xenobia was torn between asking him to leave and agreeing with everything he said. “You do,” she finally replied, well aware he still held onto her hand. For the first time all day, it felt warm.

Randolph sighed. “Do you require help with buttons or... or hairpins?” he asked. “I promise I won’t do anything to muss your hair.”

She shook her head. “I can manage. I’ll just go behind the...” She looked about for a dressing screen and discovered there wasn’t one. “Into the dressing room.”

And what? Undress while he did the same out here?

“Put on your favorite night rail,” he finished for her, his gaze going to the door in the corner. Then he remembered they weren’t in her bedchamber. This was probably a guest bedchamber. It was unlikely there was a night rail hanging in the dressing room. “Or a dressing gown, perhaps?” he suggested. Still holding onto her hand, he stood up and helped her to stand.

“I’ll see what I can find,” she replied as she turned her back to him.

The warmth of his fingers permeated the fabric as he undid the series of fastenings down the back of the gown. The bodice sagged forward, and when the tips of his fingers and then his entire hand settled onto her bare back to spread open the garment, Xenobia shivered. When he turned her around in his arms, he kissed her softly.

Warmth and Wonder

A few minutes later

Xenobia slipped out of her half boots and pushed the carriage gown down over her hips along with the three layers of petticoats. For the moment she wore only her chemise, stays, and stockings, she thought Randolph might be peeking around the corner of the opened door, but a quick glance into the bedchamber from her bent position showed only the high ceiling and the gilded plaster trim that rimmed the top of the wall covering.

She could hear the man undressing, although his movements were confined to the area next to the bed. Making quick work of rolling down her stockings, Xenobia plucked them from her feet and struggled out of her stays. When she pulled off her chemise, she was completely naked.

“I’m just going to get into bed,” he said, his voice kept low lest it be heard by anyone outside her door. “Perhaps you should lock the door? I shouldn’t want to frighten a maid if they come to service the room.”

Xenobia blinked. “I will,” she replied, just as she pulled on a huge dressing robe. Despite the thin silk of the banyan, she thought it a rather chaste garment.

If only her nipples weren’t suddenly so cold. As she made her way to the door, she glanced down to find their silhouettes poking into the fabric. *At least they poke out and not down*, she considered. She threw the lock on the door handle.

Her bare feet barely made any sound on the Axminster carpet, but her gasp did when she rounded the curtained bed and discovered Randolph practically filling the bed.

She hadn’t realized just how large the man was.

“Are you... comfortable?” she asked in a whisper.

His eyes were closed, and he was lying on his side, facing the fire. Facing her.

“I am,” he murmured sleepily. “This mattress is heavenly.”

Xenobia blinked. Never having slept in this particular bed, she was relieved to know her guest was comfortable. Before she moved to join him,

she was trying to decide how best to do so when he whispered, “Just back up, lie down, and I’ll pull you against me.”

Following his instructions, Xenobia still let out a squeak when his massive arm wrapped around her middle and pulled her against him. He moved back on the bed as he did so, and she was suddenly engulfed in warmth from below and behind and around her waist. The hand at the end of the arm settled against one of her breasts.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked in a whisper, his voice coming from over the top of her head.

Xenobia did her best to relax, despite how she sensed his knees had bent into the back of hers, that her bottom was resting into the bend of his body, and that his chest was at her back.

And then there was that huge hand that cupped her breast in blessed warmth.

“I am. I do hope I’m not causing you a chill.”

The bed vibrated with his chuckle. “Another few minutes, and you will be warm enough to sleep,” he promised in a whisper that was barely there.

“I apologize. This is probably not what you were expecting to be doing this afternoon,” she murmured.

Randolph’s eyes remained closed. If he hadn’t been so tired, he would have lifted his head onto a hand and attempted to make eye contact with her. “I had no expectation,” he finally replied. “So this is heavenly.”

Although she had no intention of napping, Xenobia relaxed into his hold. That afternoon’s jaunt in the fresh air had her more sleepy than she thought, and she closed her eyes. “Stay as long as you can,” she whispered.

He angled his head so his chin rested atop her coiffure. “When I awake, will you still be here?”

Xenobia inhaled softly. “I will.” She imagined the dimple appearing in his cheek, this time deeper. Curious, she turned over to face him. In the dim light from the candle lamp, she grinned as she reached out and touched it.

“You needn’t be lonely any longer,” he murmured.

For a moment, Xenobia was sure he was going to kiss her. His lips were that close. She already knew how they would feel pressed against hers—firm and commanding, delicious and demanding. “I suppose you say that to all the widows,” she whispered, gently chiding him.

He shook his head in the pillow. “Actually, I’ve never said it before.” Lowering his lips to her forehead, he pressed them against her cool skin and

held them there for a moment. When he pulled away, her face lifted. He was sure her eyes darkened, sure he saw desire.

His lips were on hers in an instant, molding to the soft pillows that had begun to form a response he effectively silenced. When she didn't protest, he deepened the kiss at the same time he tightened his hold on her.

He had never been in the company of one so beautiful.

So broken.

He knew why, of course. He almost wished the late baron was still alive so that he might pound the cur to a bloody pulp.

But then Dunsworth would still be alive, and Xenobia would still be married and unavailable for this moment.

Xenobia allowed her body to mold against the front of his, her curves filling his voids until the two appeared as one beneath the counterpane.

Her response to his kiss could only be described as hungry, especially when one of her hands lifted to the side of his head while the other gripped a shoulder. When a slight moan sounded from the back of her throat, he gently pulled away but left his forehead pressed against hers. "I apologize. I've—"

"Don't you dare," she countered, her hoarse whisper barely sounding above the crackling fire. One of her hands touched his chest, and quickly pulled away, as if it had been burned.

He furrowed a brow. "Then I shan't," he murmured, as he grasped her hand in his and placed it against his chest, holding it over hers so it couldn't escape.

"Were you... were you planning to make love to me?" she asked, her whisper sounding loud in her ears. "When you came for me today?"

"I was not," he whispered, his arms tensing in anticipation of what she might do. He lifted his head at exactly the same time the flames in the fireplace increased in intensity, and the curtained bed was suddenly bathed in bright light. For a moment, his face was lit up in a golden glow, as was his bare chest. Everything below was covered by bed linens, but it was apparent he wore little if anything.

Xenobia's eyes widened and she gasped "Are you... are you naked?"

"I am."

Settling back into the mattress, he pulled her back against the front of his body and allowed a grin when he realized she no longer felt cold. Her heart was certainly racing, though.

Despite his hardening cock, he was asleep before his head was settled into the pillow.

An Awakening

A while later

The sound of a soft snore had Xenobia slowly opening her eyes. A heavy weight around her waist had her pinned to the bed, and the warmth at her back reminded her there was a man in her bed.

A naked man.

She could feel the hard planes of his chest against her upper back, his powerful thighs against the back of hers. In between, there was something else that was hard and pressed against her bottom.

Attempting to shift her hips in order to relieve the pressure, she stilled her entire body when it instead moved beneath the mounds of her bottom and came to rest between the tops of her thighs. Only the silk of the banyan separated her quim from what she realized was his engorged member.

She was unprepared for her body's reaction.

Arousal.

Desire.

Heat flooded her lower body. The space at the top of her thighs seemed to throb with need. Almost too warm, she spread open the top of the banyan's collar, baring her shoulders.

Embarrassed but intrigued, she reached back with one arm until her hand slid onto Randolph's body. The bare skin, even warmer than her hand, was smooth. She slid her fingers down, not sure of what she was touching.

Hips? Thighs?

The arm around her waist lifted, and his hand moved to cover hers, essentially ceasing its attempt at exploration. Randolph lifted himself onto an elbow and leaned over her.

"I did not mean to scandalize you, Xenobia," he whispered, just before he lowered his lips to her bare shoulder. With the banyan open, the top edge of its collar had slipped down her arm.

Allowing a prim smile, Xenobia found she rather liked how he said *Xenobia*. She remembered the shock she had felt at learning he was naked, though. Remembered how he had simply tucked her against his body and

then fallen asleep.

“I am not in the habit of wearing anything to bed, and I could not afford to allow my shirt to wrinkle since I must wear it this evening.”

“I am a grown woman,” she countered. “I cannot believe that at my age, I have never seen a naked man, but—”

“You never saw your husband naked?” he half-asked, rising further on his elbow at the same time he bent a knee to better support his position on the bed.

Xenobia noticed how the bed linens slipped further down his body. “James always wore a nightshirt when he came to my bed.”

This bit of information had Randolph blinking. “So... you’ve never seen a man’s... member?” he whispered in disbelief.

“Only if you count the statuaries in the British Museum.”

Randolph frowned. “I do not,” he replied. “For one thing, they’re all a bit on the small side, and for another, none of them are... aroused.”

Xenobia’s eyes widened. “Is yours?”

He let out his breath in a huff. “It has been since the moment you came to bed.” He placed his hand over hers and led it down to where his erection was hidden just below the edge of the bed linens.

At first tempted to pull her hand from his, Xenobia found she didn’t want to as the warmth of his hand surrounded hers.

Once he had her hand over the engorged shaft, curiosity had her touching the smooth, warm skin that felt as if it were stretched taut over bone. His hand released hers, although his fingers still rested on her wrist.

She heard his inhalation of breath when her fingers slid down the shaft to a nest of crisp hair and then back up the other side. “It feels like velvet,” she murmured in appreciation.

Randolph had to suppress a growl when she continued to explore, and then he finally wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed. “I want nothing more than to make love to you right now,” he whispered.

Her eyes widening, Xenobia said, “I was afraid you would never offer. What do I need to—?” She let out a squeak when she found herself flat on her back and Randolph hovering over the top of her.

“You need do nothing. Just... lie back, and do not stop me.”

Xenobia gasped as she felt one of his hands slide the banyan off of one breast as his head lowered to hers. His kiss on her lips was quick but thorough before he trailed his lips down her jaw to her neck and then to her

throat.

His tongue delved into the hollow there before moving lower, to follow the contours of her collarbones and then to the top of a breast. His fingers moved to undo the banyan's tie, and soon her other breast was exposed to his hot mouth.

"Breathe, Xenobia. I should not want you to faint when I have so much more pleasure to bestow on you."

Xenobia did as she was told, which had her breasts rising, one of them right into his mouth. His lips surrounded her nipple, and his tongue laved over the hardened bud until she whimpered.

He moved his attentions to the other, spending a moment taking in the sight of her pink areola and the puckered nipple in the middle. "You have the most beautiful breasts," he murmured, just before he took possession of the nipple.

"I do?" she whispered. "You don't think them... too—"

"No," he replied before his mouth greedily continued its exploration, while his hands pushed the banyan's edges apart. The entire front of her body was exposed, her skin warm and tingling.

Xenobia felt sure he would enter her then. She bent her knees, stunned when they felt rubbery. Shaky. But his body continued to move down, his head following until it was between her thighs.

James had never done this.

She inhaled sharply. "Rand!" she managed to get out in a hoarse whisper when she realized his tongue had penetrated her body. Had begun circling her womanhood. Was making the throbbing she felt at the top of her thighs far more pronounced.

Her hands reached down, her fingers spearing his dark hair in an effort to find something to hang onto just as his lips joined his tongue in providing a pleasure that was as sweet as it was torturous.

And then the pleasure deepened and sharpened. She was blinded by white spots and left whimpering, doing her best not to scream lest she alert the entire household she was in residence.

"You taste of heaven," Randolph growled before he reappeared above her, his face a study in contrasts. Determination mixed with happiness.

And then he was inside her. Filling her with that velvet rod. Pulling it out a bit and then settling it deeper inside her.

She knew to lift her hips then. To grip his hips with her thighs, which had

him murmuring something that sounded like a cross between a blessing and a curse.

Xenobia was unprepared for what happened then. The wave of pleasure that seemed to pass through her lower body had her holding onto him more tightly, just as he was attempting to pull himself back out of her body.

He groaned and quickly pushed himself back in, which only amplified the sensations Xenobia felt.

Pleasure.

Intense pleasure, followed by rolling waves of it that seemed to continue faster as his thrusts into her quickened.

She wasn't aware she made any sounds, but her breaths were suddenly loud in her ears, as was the word, "Yes!" she didn't remember thinking.

When his body seized and he stopped his movements, his face contorted into what appeared to be pain, Xenobia knew what to expect next. She thrilled at the sensation of warmth that flooded her lower body as her hands gripped his shoulders. When his arms seemed as if they could no longer hold him up, she guided him down to her body. Wrapping her arms around his back, she allowed a sigh of contentment.

His head settled into the space above one of her shoulders, and she felt his heavy breaths on her heated skin. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you are in ecstasy?"

She inhaled and let out the breath slowly. "Having never experienced it before, I have absolutely no idea," she whispered.

He stilled in her arms and lifted his head, his gaze topped with a troubled brow. "On the one hand, I could pity you. But on the other, I am feeling rather proud of myself," he murmured.

Xenobia allowed a brilliant smile. "When we do this again, I wish to be naked. Like you," she whispered. "Does that scandalize you?"

Randolph blinked. "Why, yes, it does," he replied, as a grin brought the dimple to the base of his cheek. He leaned down and kissed her on the lips. When he pulled away, his arms seemed to lose all their strength. "Apologies, my lady, but I must..." He rolled off of her body, but managed to grasp her around the middle so that he pulled her atop one side of his body as he settled onto the bed. "Sleep."

Xenobia wondered how he could think of sleep just then. Her entire body thrummed with excitement. Thrummed with sensations she had never before experienced.

Her head ended up in the small of his shoulder, and she reveled in the warmth and feel of his pulse beneath her ear.

She placed a hand on his chest, feeling the crisp curls beneath her fingertips. One leg slid between his, and she grinned at the thought of what rested against the top of her thigh.

She thought of all the years she could have been enjoying these sensations if only James hadn't treated her as a best friend and instead had treated her as his wife.

His lover.

Would Randolph be her lover now?

She closed her eyes and thought of what it might be like to have him in her bed every night.

Just before she fell asleep, Xenobia thought of Julia. The night before, she had been ready to curse her best friend. Now she was trying to decide what gift she might buy for her as a sort of 'thank you' for having sent Randolph Roderick to her door.

An Interesting Evening Ensues

Bradley House, seven o'clock in the evening

When Randolph awoke with a start, he held his breath while he tried to determine where he was, who was clinging to one side of his body, and what time it might be.

The bed curtains surrounding him on three sides explained the darkness. The scent of a guttering candle lamp accounted for the dim light that seemed to waver to his right.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Xenobia whispered.

The events of that afternoon came flooding back, and Randolph let out the breath he’d been holding. “Why did you leave the bed?”

Xenobia, now settled against his right side, smoothed a hand over his chest. “I had to use the chamber pot,” she whispered. She didn’t add that she had really just wanted to wash her nether region and rid herself of the banyan that had been bunched up around her middle.

Randolph’s body acted as a much more efficient heat source than the fireplace, which was barely glowing from the lumps of coal Randolph had placed when he set the fire earlier.

He turned on his side to face her. “I don’t suppose you noticed the time?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Seven o’clock,” she murmured, as she smoothed her hand down his side to his hip.

“I must take my leave.” He didn’t want to move, though. Didn’t want to give up the comfortable bed and the warm, soft body that nestled against his and smelled faintly of flowers.

“I don’t want you to go, but I understand if you must. You’re welcome to return when you have completed your work for the night.”

Randolph cleared his throat. “My lady, I fear we may have already scandalized your servants—”

“Oh, I hope so. They could do with some excitement.”

Furrowing a brow, Randolph regarded his hostess for a moment until he saw she was grinning. “For a moment, I thought you were quite serious.”

“For a moment, I was, but I rather doubt they even know we’re here.” After a pause, she added, “I do not want you leaving under cover of darkness, as if we’ve... as if we’ve done something tawdry.”

Her hand had moved down to wrap around his tumescence, and he sucked in a breath as she squeezed.

“If you are not careful, I shall lay claim to you again,” he warned, as if he thought his words would have her cowering.

They only made her more bold, though, for she lifted her lips to his and kissed him.

Randolph had her up and over the top of him, forcing her to straddle him. He trailed the backs of his fingers down the front of her body, their tips setting off frissons of pleasure in their wake. When they reached her mons, he was stunned to find she was already wet, her honeyed folds opening as his thumb sought her womanhood.

The nubbin was already swollen, and when he circled it with the tip of his thumb, he thrilled at hearing her sharp intake of breath, at seeing her chest rise and her breasts quake. Desperate for his own release, he slid his thumb over her womanhood and pressed it.

He was about to apologize for the cheat. He knew her resulting pleasure was sharp and quick, almost painful, as opposed to the slow, rolling pleasure she would have felt had he taken his time with his ministrations.

Xenobia didn’t seem to mind. Her hips lifted in an overt invitation, so he entered her slowly and then pulled her down. He slid a hand up to one of her breasts, circling the nipple with a finger as he guided her hip with his other hand to slowly rise off of him. Then just as slowly, he pulled her down. Xenobia understood what to do, and she continued the slow rhythm, grinning when her hips lowered to meet each of his languid thrusts.

When a mewl sounded and she gripped the tops of his shoulders, he quickened his thrusts. She continued to meet his every upward push with a downward thrust of her hips until he felt undulations surrounding his turgid manhood. Undulations that seemed to pull him in deeper, that had him pushing harder until her mewling increased and she threw back her head and her back arched.

He used an arm to pull her down to him so that her breasts would be pressed into his chest as the intense pleasure of their joining took him.

Took her.

He knew she was in ecstasy from the way her breaths caught, from how

her lower body gripped him, how her fingernails dug into his back.

His own head, thrown back so the cords of his neck strained against his skin, was nearly buried in a pillow before the last vestiges of his orgasm finally released him.

Xenobia collapsed atop Randolph, her head ending up on one of his shoulders. When her arms wrapped around the sides of his chest and her hand smoothed over his knotted muscles, he relaxed completely and fell asleep.

Xenobia allowed a sigh of contentment as she slowly unbent her legs until she was stretched out atop him. Despite her bare back, she was warm, and her entire body felt alive. Still inside her, his member no longer throbbed, but it managed to set off little darts of pleasure as it subsided in size.

She turned her head and kissed the whorl of an ear. "Thank you," she whispered, just before she closed her eyes.

Randolph merely made a humming sound in the back of his throat and wondered if he would ever regret this night.

As for work, he had a duty to perform. With any luck, this would be the last night he would have to engage the counterfeiters. Perhaps his next assignment would not require so many nights spent in gaming hells.

Now there was some place else he preferred to be.

Pulling on his clothes and coat as quietly as he could manage, Rand moved to place a kiss on Xenobia's cheek when she said, "Give me a moment to dress, and I'll go down the front stairs. Provide a distraction whilst you go out the back," she suggested.

Randolph chuckled. "Are you quite sure you've never done this before?" he asked in a tease. He watched as she stood from the bed, goose pimples forming on her naked skin. He reached out and pulled her close for a quick kiss before allowing her to make her way to the dressing room. His gaze stayed on her retreating backside as a growl formed in his throat.

Damned counterfeiters.

He leaned down and pulled on his boots. When he stood, he was stunned to find Xenobia mostly dressed and turning her back for him to do up the buttons.

"You'll return later tonight?" she asked. "I'll be sure to leave the back door unlocked for you."

He hesitated before answering. "It all depends, Xenobia," he hedged as he

did up the buttons.

“On what?”

Randolph furrowed a brow. “I cannot say. That is—”

“Is it because what you do at night is a secret?”

“It matters not the time of the day. It’s simply the nature of my... my position,” he stammered.

She turned around to face him. “Is your position why you were knighted by the king?”

Randolph realized they had never spoken about why he had introduced himself as a ‘sir’. “Yes,” he finally admitted.

She inhaled softly as her eyes widened. “You work for the Crown.”

He dropped his forehead to hers. “One of its many offices, yes,” he said on a sigh.

“The Foreign Office?” she guessed.

He blinked.

“Are you chasing counterfeiters?” she asked on a gasp.

Giving a start, Randolph furrowed his brows. “How do...?”

“Lady Chamberlain paid a call a few days ago. She spoke of the problem. Said her husband had agents assigned to the case because there were foreigners involved.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice even more. “*Frenchmen*, she implied.”

Randolph struggled to keep an impassive expression on his face. He couldn’t decide if he should be angry or laugh at the strange circumstance in which he found himself.

“Xenobia, I must ask you to keep this a secret.”

“Who would I tell?”

He was about to mention Lady Comber, but realized Alistair’s wife was probably in the parlor with Xenobia when Lady Chamberlain mentioned the counterfeiters. “Just—”

“I won’t tell a soul,” she said with a shake of her head. “You can trust me.”

Randolph blinked, suddenly convinced that she would indeed keep his confidence. He leaned down and kissed her quite thoroughly. “I believe you,” he murmured. “Now you really must take your leave. I’ll wait for a full minute before I make my way down the back stairs.”

She nodded her understanding as she sneaked out the bedchamber door and calmly made her way to the main stairs.

A minute later and Randolph was down the servants' stairs and about to head toward the back door when he overheard one of the footmen say something about The Queen of Spades.

"We're not going anywhere if her ladyship doesn't come down for dinner soon."

"Och, we have to," another said. "I got us the last of the ten pound notes from the gaming table. 'Bout time we beat those frogs."

"I was just up in my mistress' room, and she ain't there," a female voice said. "Chesterfield says she hasn't returned from her ride in the park." Randolph sorted this last comment was made by Xenobia's lady's maid.

"She's out of mourning, and it's almost Christmas," the first footman countered. "She's pro'bly at Crocky's."

A round of laughter ensued followed by a lone comment in the voice of the lady's maid lambasting the notion that Lady Dunsworth would engage in gambling.

Randolph bristled at how the footmen talked about Xenobia. A meek and mild baroness who probably never spoke poorly of her servants or anyone else. Despite her displeasure with her late husband, she never spoke of him in anger. Instead her voice had been filled with hurt.

Once he was lord of the house, Randolph would see to it these servants were replaced.

Randolph blinked, stunned by his thought. He couldn't give it much consideration, though, when he heard the sound of Chesterfield clearing his throat. "Her ladyship is waiting in the dining room. For her dinner."

Relieved Xenobia had made her appearance, Randolph took advantage of the servants' sudden attentions to their duties and quickly made it to the back door. He slipped out, determined to find the footmen at The Queen of Spades later that night.

Buried Treasure Discovered

Meanwhile, at the front of the house

As quietly as possible, Xenobia skulked down the main stairs in the hopes she could make it to the ground floor without being noticed by a servant.

At no point had she heard the chime for dinner—she was sure it was around eight o'clock—nor had she spotted Chesterfield on the hunt for her. She supposed since he hadn't let her in the front door, he thought her still out with Sir Randolph.

When she reached the first floor, she dared a glance over the stair railing until the roses on the gaming table came into view. Also in full view was the footman, Smith. He was bent over, pulling out a drawer from the table.

Xenobia watched as he extracted what appeared to be several sheets of parchment before he quickly glanced around and then carefully closed the drawer. He stuffed the parchments into a pocket and made his way toward the back of the house.

Curious, Xenobia made her way down the last set of stairs. The hall was empty of servants—not unusual given the time of day nor the fact that she employed so few—so she moved to the table and opened the same drawer as the servant had.

Finding it empty, she furrowed a brow and dared another glance down the hall. She knelt and studied the edge of the table, stunned to discover that the inlaid wood pattern on the sides outlined a series of drawers encircling the table.

She moved to one that better hid her from the hall leading to the kitchens and pulled it open. Stunned at finding a stack of twenty pound notes, she nearly shut the drawer. Instead, she extracted one of them and absently closed the drawer as she stared at the bank note. "Bank of England" was printed at the top, and the year "1817" was shown as its date of issue.

Hearing an outburst of laughter from down the hall, she quickly hid the note in her gown's pocket and made her way to the dining room. She had just entered when Chesterfield appeared from the butler's pantry.

"My lady," he said in surprise. "Apologies. I did not know you had

returned.”

“Obviously,” she replied, deciding she owed him no explanation. “I’d like my dinner now.” When she noted the table had not been set, she added, “In here, if the footmen can be bothered to serve.”

Chesterfield’s eyes widened at hearing the rebuke in her voice. “Right away, my lady.”

Xenobia watched as the butler hurried from the room, heading back toward the kitchens. She used the time to return to the gaming table, where she opened every drawer. At first tempted to leave the bounty where it was, she instead began stuffing the bank notes into her carriage gown pockets until she had emptied out all the drawers except the one containing a deck of playing cards.

She was about to place the colorful pasteboards back into the drawer when she noticed the corner of a sheet of paper peeking out. A tug on it had it finally loosening, as if it had at one time been caught in the drawer and then bent upon the drawer’s closing.

About to unfold the parchment, she paused when she heard the sounds of footfalls moving closer. She shut the drawer. Acting as if she had just descended the stairs, she made her way into the dining room. “I’ve changed my mind,” she announced to the two footmen who were seeing to the place setting. “I’ll take my dinner in the parlor.”

“Yes, my lady,” Smith and Colburn replied in unison.

Xenobia knew that once dinner had been brought, neither one of the footmen would return to the parlor, ensuring she would be left alone. She was about to take her leave of the dining room when she paused. “Pray tell, how long did you work for my father?”

The two footmen exchanged quick glances before Smith said, “Just a year, my lady.”

“Two for me, my lady,” Colburn replied.

“Tell me, did he entertain often?”

The two showed expressions of confusion. “If you mean hosting a dinner party or the like, very rarely,” Colburn offered.

“No balls or soirées during my time. He didn’t have a hostess,” Smith chimed in.

“No... gentlemen callers?”

The two footmen blinked. “He wasn’t like *that*, my lady,” Smith said in a hoarse whisper as his head shook.

Her face coloring when she realized what he had thought she meant, Xenobia quickly added, “Men he might have hosted in his study, perhaps? Tradesmen or bankers or...?”

Colburn furrowed a brow. “Chesterfield would know more, but the captain did have an occasional caller. His solicitor, I think he was. Especially towards the end, when his wound was bothering him so much, he could hardly get down them stairs.”

Xenobia winced, remembering when her mother announced that Captain Alton Bradley was on his deathbed and they best pay a call. At the age of eighteen, Xenobia had never experienced a death in the family, so the captain’s hit her especially hard. Learning he had been generous with her in his will had been an unexpected surprise.

Now finding hundreds of pounds of bank notes in his gaming table had her astounded.

“Well, I appreciate your insights. I’ll be in the parlor.”

“Yes, my lady,” the two replied as they watched her go.

Xenobia made her way up to the first floor, determined to keep her steps unhurried. She entered the parlor and found the book on Thoroughbreds on the side table where she had left it the night before. Placing it on the card table in the back of the parlor, she opened it and pretended to read. Instead of reading the book, though, she read the note she had found in the table.

To my dearest daughter Xenobia,

If you are reading this note, you’ve no doubt come into possession of it by way of your husband—if you have one—or perhaps my solicitor. I cannot imagine you will find it where I intend to leave it.

Despite having told you that any buried treasure you might discover in the house belongs to you, I don’t recall your curiosity piqued enough that you actively searched for it. Five-hundred pounds can go a long way towards a trip to Italy or a new wardrobe, jewelry or a new coach-and-four.

Perhaps this note will ignite your curiosity, for its resting place is just the beginning of where to find the first treasure.

Hopefully before the servants do.

Treasure hunts are always the most entertaining during the holidays. Share your finds with others for the happiest of Christmases.

*Your father,
Alton Bradley*

P.S. As much as I loved her, your mother could never keep a secret, so I have not told her about this. She was always good about sharing, though—her friendship, her possessions and—perhaps too much—her body.

By now, you have already learned this about her.

Do not find fault with her over her affairs of the heart, though. One day you may discover a deep and abiding love with someone who, like you, least expects it. Return it and live a full and happy life. You deserve no less.

Xenobia reread the missive three times as tears welled in her eyes and finally streamed down her face.

Five-hundred pounds?

Had anyone else found this note before she did? Had they discovered the bank notes in the other drawers from having read the note? Or did the footman only find the bank notes by accident? Perhaps from having moved the furniture?

She moved to pull a hanky from her pocket, her hand rifling past a wad of bank notes on its way to the bottom of her pocket.

At that very moment, Colburn appeared on the parlor threshold carrying the tray with her dinner.

Afraid the notes would spill out of her pocket, Xenobia left her hand where it was and called out, "I'll take it back here, Colburn."

"Yes, my lady," the footman said as he stepped up with the tray and set it on the table. Xenobia pushed aside the book to give him more room. "Will there be anything else, my lady?" he asked as he finished pouring a glass of wine.

Xenobia shook her head but then asked, "Do you gamble?"

Colburn furrowed a brow, but then noticed the illustration of a horse in the open book. "Not on horses, my lady. Too rich for my blood."

"But do you play hazard or...?"

"Vingt-et-un," he admitted. "Not often, of course. Mayhap a few times a year."

"Where do you play?"

His eyes darting to one side, Colburn seemed hesitant to answer. "Depends on how much blunt I have."

"Say you had... fifteen pounds." She noted how his eyes widened.

"Uh... I wouldn't gamble that much, my lady. Might use half or more for a new suit of clothes or a good pair of boots. Save some, too."

"And the rest?" she asked, admiring how he responded.

"I suppose I would go to The Queen of Hearts or... or The Jack of Spades. They're both close. In St. James Street. Not as disreputable as the hells over in Cheapside." His eyes darted sideways. "Excuse the language, my lady."

"Of course. Tell me, were you planning to go gambling this evening?"

Colburn shook his head. "I wasn't. But Smith asked me to go with him. Says he recently came into some blunt. Must be burning a hole in his pocket, 'cause he's anxious to leave when our duties are done this evening."

Xenobia thought of the denominations of bank notes she had retrieved from the table.

Ones, fives, and twenties.

No tens.

Smith had removed three notes from the only drawer that she had found empty. She dared a glance at the letter from her father. Had Smith found it? If so, had he read it?

Could he even read?

The words her father had written with respect to sharing caught her eye, and she allowed her initial anger at Smith to subside. "Then both of you should change your clothes and be on your way," she said. "Do tell Smith he needs to share the thirty pounds with you he took from the gaming table in the hall. Fifteen pounds each. An early Christmas present. Do you understand?"

Colburn looked as if he might faint. "Uh, yes, my lady." He bowed and was about to take his leave when he asked, "Are you firing us, my lady?"

Xenobia shook her head. "I am not. You can thank my father for that. Besides, who will cut and bring in the evergreens for the mantle and the staircase on Christmas Eve if not you two?"

Furrowing a brow, Colburn finally nodded. "Thank you, my lady. Happy Christmas."

"To you, as well. And good luck tonight."

Colburn bowed and took his leave.

Xenobia waited a few minutes before she hurried to the parlor door,

closed it, and threw the bolt to lock it. She quickly returned to the card table, clearing away the book before she emptied her pockets of all the bank notes.

Lining them up by denomination, Xenobia counted the number of each and sat down. Hard.

Four-hundred and sixty-three pounds were neatly stacked before her, which meant that only seven pounds—besides the thirty Smith had taken earlier that evening—had gone missing. She might have laughed if she wasn't so overcome by her father's generosity.

She ate her dinner and drank the wine, quite unable to wipe the smile from her face.

A Counterfeit Crime

Meanwhile, at The Jack of Spades

“You’re late,” the dunner said as Randolph made his way into The Jack of Spades.

“I am actually here a few minutes earlier than I planned to be,” Randolph countered. “Have they arrived?”

“About fifteen minutes ago. They’ve mostly been watching the play, though.”

Frowning, Randolph realized the dunner referred to the gamblers suspected of passing counterfeit notes. “Is Frank in his office?” He opened his chronometer, confirming it wasn’t yet nine o’clock.

“He and a few others. Official looking, they was.”

Randolph inhaled sharply. Perhaps he was late. He quickly made it to Frank O’Laughlin’s office and rapped a knuckle twice on the wood door before letting himself in.

To find five men turning to stare at him.

“I apologize. I thought I was early,” he said as he closed the door behind him.

“Relax, Roderick. We’ve only just arrived a few minutes ago,” Viscount Chamberlain said from where he was ensconced in what was usually Frank’s chair.

Frank stood off to the side, his arms crossed over his chest. He was displaying an expression that suggested he wished he were somewhere else.

Chamberlain motioned to the others in the room. “These two are agents from the bank, Fields and Gabler, and this...” He indicated a burly bald man who stood nearly six inches taller than Randolph. “Is Mr. Morton. Home Office.”

“Home Office?” Randolph repeated. “Aren’t we dealing with foreigners here?”

“I asked him to join us in the event a bit of muscle might be required,” Lord Chamberlain said. “Did you happen to see if the frogs have arrived yet?”

Randolph nodded. “They’re watching the hazard tables, but the dunner at the door said they hadn’t yet played.”

“Probably waiting for you to make an appearance in the billiards room,” Frank murmured.

“I didn’t realize I would be playing this evening,” Randolph said, his attention going to the two agents from the bank. “Have the bank notes we turned in last week been examined?”

Lord Chamberlain indicated the agents had the floor. Fields opened a satchel and pulled out stacks of bank notes that had been tied with string. One after another, he set them on Frank’s desk in neat piles. It was clear from the corners that the bills had been marked so they could be pulled from play and turned over to the Bank of England to determine their authenticity. The very last stack was made up of individual one-pound bank notes.

Randolph helped himself to one of them. He stared at the date of issue—1817—and then quickly splayed the rest in the stack. All of them displayed 1817 as their date of issue. “I didn’t realize you were concerned about one-pound notes,” he remarked, sure these were from the gaming table in Xenobia’s hall. All the banking notes he’d had a chance to examine in the table’s drawers were from 1817.

“We are when they have that date,” Gabler replied.

“Why?”

Fields cleared his throat. “A particularly bad year for counterfeiting,” he stated. “We have since pulled legitimate notes bearing that year from circulation—most are too worn to be of use anyway—so when these were included in your haul from last week, we took notice.”

Randolph stiffened, remembering the letter he had found in one of the drawers of the gaming table. A note penned by Captain Bradley to his only daughter. A note that described a buried treasure of five-hundred pounds.

He had been embarrassed at reading the rest, but his opinion of her late father had risen several notches after reading the missive. Bradley made no apologies about loving a woman who would never be beholden to only him.

Neither did he make excuses.

If in the next week Xenobia made no mention of the letter, he would see to it she would discover it of her own accord.

She was more curious these days.

His attention went back to the seven one-pound bank notes and his opinion of the captain entirely changed. The thought that Bradley might have

left his daughter a treasure of counterfeit bank notes had his expression darkening. Had bile rising in his throat. Had anger replacing his usual calm manner.

So he was entirely unprepared when Fields said, “However, these are legitimate.”

Randolph blinked. “What?”

“They’re unusual to find these days, but they were issued by the Bank of England,” Fields explained.

“Something tells me there will be three ten-pound notes in play this evening,” Randolph said. “Either here or at The Queen of Spades, bearing the same date.”

“Oh, please let it be at Violet’s gaudy gold emporium,” Frank moaned in disgust. “I just want my business back.”

Randolph struggled to keep a straight face as Gabler regarded him with a frown. “What do you know, sir?”

Rolling his eyes, Randolph said, “There are hundreds of pounds of bank notes from eighteen-seventeen in a house in Curzon Street. A buried treasure, so to speak. The owner hid them for his daughter to eventually find, but one of her footmen has pilfered these—” He pointed to the one-pound bank notes —“As well as three ten-pound notes that I know of. He may have taken more in the past.”

“We’ll arrest him if he shows up this evening,” Fields said, his attention going to Mr. Morton.

Randolph considered justice would be served should the servant be caught, so he held his tongue.

“If this buried treasure could be brought to the bank and exchanged for newer notes, it would be most appreciated,” Gabler suggested.

Nodding, Randolph said, “I will see to it.” His attention went to the stacks of other denominations. “And what of those?”

Fields displayed a wince. “All counterfeit but these,” he said as he tossed a stack of five-pound notes to Frank.

The gaming hell owner caught the stack of tied bills in his hands and frowned, his attention going to the piles of ten- and twenty-pound notes. He made a sound of disbelief.

“Fear not, O’Laughlin. We will compensate you for your troubles,” Lord Chamberlain said. “In the meantime, Roderick, I do believe you need to challenge the frogs to a game of billiards. Just act surprised when they’re

escorted out the back door by Morton here, won't you?"

Randolph allowed a chuckle. "It will be my pleasure."

He left Frank's office and made his way toward the entrance. Waiting until a wave of new gamblers made their way through the front door of the gaming establishment, he merged with them to make it look as if he had just arrived.

Finding his marks was easy—they were still watching the hazard tables with looks of boredom. "Ah, you're back," he said as he clapped the Frenchman on the back. "Care for a game of billiards?"

The one from Belgium gave him a shrug that suggested he had nothing better to do while the Frenchman seemed entirely too eager. The three of them made their way to the empty billiards room.

Ten minutes later, Randolph sunk the last ball in what would have been just the first match against the Frenchman, had he and the Belgium not been removed by Mr. Morton and the bank agents.

Now Randolph was the only one left in the room.

He reached into his waistcoat pocket for his chronometer, his fingers brushing against the other object he had deposited there the night before.

Pulling it out along with the watch, he stared at it and then checked the time. He gave a sigh when he remembered what he'd been doing twenty-four hours earlier. What he'd been doing six hours earlier. What he'd been doing just three hours ago.

How was it so much could happen in only a day?

Knowing they were probably counterfeit, he left his winnings on the felt and took his leave of The Jack of Spades, intending to go across the street to The Queen of Hearts. Before he stepped from the pavement, though, he paused when he recognized one of Xenobia's servants in the company of another man. When he heard him speak, he knew it was one of the footmen he had overheard earlier that evening.

The one who had said he had taken the money from the gaming table.

"You're quite sure she's not going to fire us?"

"I swear it. She said we could each have fifteen pounds as an early Christmas present," the one he knew as Colburn claimed. "I was sure we was done when she said she knew you had taken the blunt from the table. She must have seen you do it."

"I suppose it was too good to last," the other one said. "Just think if we'd never had to move that table, we'd never have found the one-pound notes."

Despite a desire to wallop the footman before he could make his way into
The Jack of Spades, Randolph resisted the urge.
There was somewhere else he wanted to be.

A Leap of Faith in a Leap Year

Meanwhile, at Bradley House

Having consumed her dinner and two glasses of wine, Xenobia collected her treasure into a trinket box she had found on the fireplace mantle in the parlor.

She had nearly laughed out loud when she discovered five twenty-pound bank notes already in the bottom of the box. Adding the bank notes from the gaming table—all except for a single twenty-pound note—she shut the box and tucked it under her arm before she made her way to her bedchamber.

Sullivan was already there, ready to take the pins from her hair and help her into a night rail.

“I’ll warn you now. I’m not wearing my stays at the moment,” Xenobia said as she set the box on her dressing table and took a seat.

“My lady?”

“I removed them when I took a nap before dinner.”

“Oh,” Sullivan responded before she undid the buttons down the back of the carriage gown.

“Do you know if Smith and Colburn have left for a gaming hell yet?” Xenobia asked as she waited for Sullivan’s response. She wasn’t disappointed to see her lady’s maid’s look of shock reflected in the mirror.

“They’ve been gone at least an hour. Tail betwixt their legs, too, my lady, if you ask me. Like they knew what they was doing was wrong.”

Xenobia allowed a prim grin as she pulled the twenty-pound bank note from her pocket and held it up. She watched Sullivan’s reaction in the mirror and smiled. “Happy Christmas,” she said.

“For me, my lady?”

“Indeed. Just don’t tell the footmen you got more than they did,” she said in a whisper as Sullivan gingerly took the parchment from her.

“Thank you, my lady. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this much blunt in all my life.”

“Spend it wisely, but do have some fun with it, too,” Xenobia encouraged.

“I shall,” the lady’s maid replied as she quickly stuffed the bank note into

a pocket. Her expression grew curious. "Did your ride in the park go well?"

Xenobia nodded. "It did. Sir Randolph is the son of a marquess and a widower," she said, enjoying the thrill she felt at seeing Sullivan's expression. "Why, I think I shall have to propose marriage if he does not." She paused as she watched Sullivan's eyes widen. "Have I thoroughly scandalized you?"

The lady's maid stared back at her reflection and then grinned in delight. "Not at all. It's a Leap Year, my lady, so you are entirely within your right to propose marriage."

Blinking several times, Xenobia stared at Sullivan. "It is? I am?"

Sullivan angled her head to one side. "Aye. I don't think it only applies to the Scots or Irish," she replied. "Besides, it's not fair they have all the fun."

Xenobia whirled around and looked to the clock above the fireplace. "How late would a goldsmith's shop be open tonight, do you suppose?"

It was Sullivan's turn to blink. "I'm sure I wouldn't know, but I expect ten o'clock, my lady. Especially this close to Christmas."

"Have Chesterfield hail a hackney."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. I need to purchase a ring if I'm to propose marriage," Xenobia countered.

Sullivan rushed from the room, and Xenobia nearly giggled at seeing how quickly her lady's maid moved. Unfortunately, Sullivan had already undone several of the buttons down her back.

Xenobia did what she could to refasten the top buttons before she plucked a number of twenty-pound notes from the trinket box. Then she made her way to her father's bedchamber and the dressing room, where her redingote and a set of petticoats were strewn about the floor. She pulled on the garments and descended the stairs.

"You're coming with me," she said to Sullivan as she entered the vestibule.

Sullivan's delight matched her own as they made their way to the curb and into a hackney. "Rundell and Bridge, as fast as you can," she said to the startled driver.

"Yes, my lady," he replied when he saw the bank note she held up. His expression turned to one of delight. "Because it's Christmas? Or a Leap Year?" he asked with a roll of his eyes.

"How about both?"

She and Sullivan climbed into the equipage, giggling as it raced toward Ludgate Hill. "I do hope we're not too late," she said as they bounced along Oxford Street.

"This close to Christmas? Of course they will be open, my lady," Sullivan replied, pulling her cape closed. "Have you something in mind for your son of a marquess?"

Xenobia took a steadying breath. "A gold band, certainly. Perhaps they have one with a small gemstone. A sapphire, mayhap?"

"Do you know what size to buy?"

Blinking, Xenobia remembered how his hand had held her breast. How his fingers had fondled her. "Large?" she guessed.

Sullivan giggled. "They may require a more exact measurement."

Xenobia couldn't help but laugh at the comment. "Perhaps they already know," she murmured.

When the hackney slowed and stuttered to a halt in front of the goldsmith's shop, Xenobia could barely wait for the driver to step down from his bench and open the door.

"Will you wait for us, please?"

"My lady, you gave me enough blunt to drive around London five times," he replied. "I'll be right here when you've completed your shopping."

Xenobia was about to kiss him, but she thought better of it and instead made her way into the shop.

Despite the hour, the gift shop was brightly lit. She made her way to the back, past the array of oddities and bright gilt gifts. Several gentlemen had the attention of an older man, a jeweler who held two trays of rings for their perusal. Her attention went to a glass case where larger rings were on display.

"My lady? Is there something in particular I might show you?"

Xenobia looked up to find a young man regarding her with a curious expression.

"I wish to propose marriage," she blurted. "I need a ring for a man who has rather large fingers."

"Ah. Leap Year," he replied happily. He pulled a tray of gold bands from the glass case and placed it in front of her. "Haven't had a query like this for several months," he added as he pulled another tray of silver bands from the case. "Are you looking for a particular gemstone?"

Xenobia blinked. "He's the son of a marquess," she replied.

"Oh," the young man responded, his 'oh' sounding in three syllables. "A

sapphire, then. Mayhap with a diamond or two or three?”

Frowning, Xenobia examined the tray of gold rings while Sullivan busied herself admiring the array of gold and silver gifts on display in the rest of the shop.

Taking a deep breath, Xenobia imagined Randolph’s typical day. His mornings were spent in the stables with horses. He drove in the park in the afternoons to exercise horses. His evenings were spent in pursuit of threats to the Crown.

With those images in mind, she surveyed the gold offerings and grinned when she found a simple gold band with a single square gemstone. “Might I see that one?” she asked as she pointed to it.

The shopkeeper plucked it from its black velvet bed and handed it to her. Xenobia examined its size, sliding it onto her thumb to discover it was too large. “This one, yes,” she murmured. “How much?” she asked as she pulled a wad of bank notes from her carriage gown.

“One-and-twenty pounds, my lady,” the young man said as he studied a tiny slip of paper still embedded in the black velvet. “One sapphire and two diamonds in gold.”

Xenobia grinned as she peeled off the bank notes and handed them to the startled shopkeeper. “Do you have a box for it?”

“Of course, my lady,” he replied. He disappeared and then returned with the ring encased in a black velvet box. “I hope he says yes, my lady.”

Her eyes widening in alarm, Xenobia said, “Me, too.”

She turned to find Sullivan holding a silver candlestick in one hand. “What’s this?”

“My Christmas gift from you, my lady,” Sullivan replied happily. “I’ve always wanted one of my own for my quarters. An ornate one, like this.”

Xenobia resisted the urge to wince at seeing the gaudy candlestick. “Do you have enough money to buy it?”

Her lady’s maid nodded. “Oh, more than enough.” The servant moved to the counter to pay for her find, and once they had their purchases in hand, they hurried out to the hackney. “Bradley House, as quickly as you can,” Xenobia said as they climbed in.

A half-hour later, they were giggling as they made their way past a startled Chesterfield and up the stairs.

Meanwhile, Randolph Roderick was making his way into the back door of Bradley House.

Two Hearts of a Single Mind

A moment later

Sullivan sighed as she undid Xenobia's gown and helped her out of it. "Thank you again for the generous gift, my lady."

Xenobia's smile widened. She couldn't seem to stop smiling from all that had happened this day. "You're welcome. Do help yourself to a taper from the stores. I rather imagine you'd like to put your candlestick to use this evening."

"Oh, not until Christmas, my lady."

"Saving it, are you?" Xenobia teased.

"Something like that." Sullivan held open a night rail, and Xenobia pulled it on followed by her dressing gown. "Given the late hour, I expect I shall wish to sleep late on the morrow," she said. "Why don't you do the same, and I'll ring when I'm ready to dress?"

Sullivan looked uncertain for a moment but finally dipped a curtsy. "Very well, my lady."

Xenobia watched the servant take her leave, counted to twenty, stuffed the ring box into a pocket in her dressing gown, and then sneaked out of her bedchamber. She hurried to the end of the hall and paused before pushing down the door handle of the bedchamber she and Randolph had shared. Just the memory of what they had done had her excited. Had her hoping they might do it again.

She grinned in delight when she discovered Randolph already in the room and untying his cravat. "I'm so glad you've come," she whispered as she rushed to him.

Randolph captured her in his arms and kissed her. When he finally loosened his hold on her, he regarded her with a grin. "Careful, my lady, or I will expect a similar greeting from you every night," he warned in a teasing voice.

"I would be happy to comply." Her smile faltered as she lost some of her resolve, remembering just then the shopkeeper's last words. "Do tell me about your night. Did it go well?"

Randolph's expression changed as he nodded. "Very well, actually. As it happens, most of the bank notes I turned over to the investigators last week were indeed counterfeit. The culprits have been arrested, though, which means I have a few days before I gain a new assignment."

Xenobia's eyes widened. "That's good news, is it not?"

He pulled her into a hug. "It is," he agreed. "There's a small matter of about five-hundred pounds that still needs to be resolved, but it's nothing urgent," he added when he remembered the bank's representatives requesting that her buried treasure be exchanged for newer bank notes.

"What is it?" she asked, her curiosity piqued at the mention of five-hundred pounds.

"Nothing that can't wait until morning," he murmured as he held her. "Did you have a good evening?"

"I did, although it's been very strange. In a good way." Although his query was the perfect prompt for Xenobia to put voice to a marriage proposal, she hesitated. "Please don't think me any more wanton than you probably already do, but I'd like for you to know that you are welcome here at Bradley House. Any night—any day—should you wish," she said as she waved a hand to indicate the bedchamber. "This can be yours if you'd like."

Randolph regarded her with a quizzical expression before he once again pulled her into a hug. "Whether or not I accept your offer will depend on whether or not you're here."

Her eyes darted sideways as a grin slowly appeared. "I wouldn't wish to be anywhere else," she whispered, rather enjoying how his hands slid across her back and down and over the curves of her bottom.

When his hand smoothed over the slick fabric of her satin dressing gown to her hip, it brushed over the ring box she had stuffed into her pocket. Xenobia felt the box bump against her thigh, and she inhaled softly.

"What do you have there?" he asked as his hand molded over the cubical shape.

"Your Christmas gift," she blurted.

Randolph blinked. "This is unexpected. When did you—?"

"Tonight. I went to Rundell and Bridge with Sullivan." She pulled it from her pocket and held it up. "You can open it now, if you'd like."

His gaze settled on the black velvet box. "You're sure you do not wish for me to wait until Christmas morn?"

"Oh, open it now, please. I'll be terribly vexed if you don't."

Randolph allowed a chuckle at seeing her anxious expression. "All right."

Before he had the lid opened, though, Xenobia said, "Since this is a Leap Year, I wish to exercise my right to ask for a man's hand in marriage. Your hand," she said. "I think we suit rather well. And not just because..." Her attention turned to the bed and then back to him. "Well, you are an excellent lover."

His eyes darting between the gold ring and her wide eyes, Randolph was left speechless.

"Well, do you... do you like it?" she asked, her moment of courage quickly passing.

Randolph blinked. "I do. Very much," he replied.

When he didn't remove the ring from the box, Xenobia said, "If you're concerned about a dowry—"

"I am not."

"—I come with a house and a small fortune that seems to grow if I merely open drawers and boxes."

Randolph blinked. "The gaming table?"

She blinked. "You knew?"

Randolph furrowed a brow. "I was going to tell you tonight. I discovered it quite by accident while I was admiring the table this afternoon," he admitted.

Xenobia's attention went to a jewel box on the tall bureau. She hurried over and opened it. "See what I mean?" she asked as she pulled a wad of bank notes from the box. "It seems there is buried treasure all around. I just never bothered to look."

"1817?" Randolph guessed as he moved to examine the notes she held.

Her attention went to the top bank note. "How did you know?"

"According to the men from the bank, these have been removed from circulation, which is why the seven one-pound notes one of your footmen lost at The Jack of Spades last month were flagged as possibly counterfeit."

"That would have been Smith," Xenobia remarked. "While you were making your way out the back door tonight, I spotted him lifting thirty pounds from the table."

Randolph made a sound of disgust. "Yet you didn't fire the cur," he accused.

"How did you know?"

"I eavesdropped on a conversation he was having with the other footman."

When they were about to go in The Jack of Spades. You were terribly generous.”

“Even so, I think they both know they’re on report,” she replied. “Anyway, I’ll allow you to deal with them however you wish once you’re master of the house,” she said as she reached over and plucked the ring from its bed of velvet. “Which can only happen if you agree to marry me.”

Randolph had to suppress a chuckle. “What’s become of the timid filly I met only one day ago?”

Xenobia inhaled softly. “Did you prefer her?”

He shook his head. “I pitied her,” he remarked.

“And now?”

“I don’t. In fact, I’m rather charmed by what she’s become. I cannot imagine it’s only because she’s discovered a small fortune, though.”

“All that fresh air and a couple of tumbles might have helped,” she whispered, her cheeks blooming with color.

“Ah, I shall keep that in mind,” he teased before he turned his attention to the ring.

Xenobia set aside the bank notes and then took his free hand in hers. Once she had the band slid onto his fourth finger as far as it would go, she frowned at how snug it fit. “Oh, dear,” she whispered, her hands gripping his. “I insisted it had to be large—”

“It’s fine, Xenobia,” Randolph murmured in awe. “And very elegant.”

“You haven’t given me an answer.”

Randolph dropped the ring box onto the chair next to where he stood and used that hand to search in a waistcoat pocket for the ring his father had given him the night before. “I had a plan for this evening, my Lady X, and it had nothing to do with Christmas,” he said as he held up the garnet and diamond ring. “But it seems you have beaten me to it.”

Xenobia stared at the ring. “For me? Rand!”

“Will you marry me?”

She nodded as she squeezed the hand she still held. “Yes. Yes, of course,” she replied as she very nearly bounced on the balls of her feet. Offering her right hand, she watched as he slid the gold ring onto her fourth finger. “A garnet,” she breathed. “And are those diamonds? Oh this is the most perfect Christmas gift.”

Randolph chuckled. “I’d like to think it’s our hearts joined as one,” he murmured, remembering he had thought the symbolism entirely different

when his father had handed the ring to him last night. Then he had been reminded of the flowers in Xenobia's parlor, imagining it a rose with leaves on either side

Xenobia inhaled. "And the diamonds are us?"

"And everyone with whom we are close."

"Your side might require more diamonds," Xenobia teased.

He regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Speaking of my side, there's someone you must meet before we—"

"Your son, I hope. I've only ever held him the one time, and that was when he was just a tiny babe."

"You've held my son?" Randolph asked in surprise.

Xenobia nodded. "I was invited to Lady Reading's parlor for tea last year, just before Dunsworth died. When she spoke of Charles, I asked if she might show me the nursery."

"Which she was glad to do, I suppose."

"Her second son had just started walking, and the oldest had just been breeched."

"He's already being tutored," Randolph murmured as he slid the flat of a hand down Xenobia's front. "Although I admit to fright at what might happen should we have a babe—"

"I want as many as I can have."

"You wont mind if they're all boys?"

Xenobia giggled in delight. "You're forgetting you have a sister," she chided.

"Well then, shall we see to a sibling for Charlie?"

"Are you sure you're not too tired?" She doffed her dressing gown and moved to undo the buttons of his waistcoat.

Randolph's expression darkened. "I find I'm wide awake."

Xenobia grinned, remembering how he had fallen asleep after they made love earlier that evening. Three times. "Not for long," she teased as she pushed the waistcoat from his shoulders and started undoing the buttons on his fly.

"Minx."

To his credit, Randolph was awake for at least half an hour.

Epilogue

A month later

Squealing in delight, Xenobia stepped down from a Reading town coach, her arms filled with a white-gowned Charlie. She rushed to where Rachel Roderick stood in front of a townhouse in Westminster. “You look so elegant,” she said as she hugged her friend and now sister-by-marriage.

“And you look far too happy to be married to one of my brothers,” Rachel chided. Her attention was on Charlie, though, as she poked a finger into his dimple.

“I heard that,” Randolph said as he stepped down from the coach, grinning when he heard Charlie’s squeal of delight.

Rachel was quick to join him, giving him a brief hug. “I do love being an aunt, so thank you for bringing him.”

Randolph gave her a quelling glance. “As if my wife would have left him behind.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have, either,” Rachel replied. “Remember, I didn’t have any siblings growing up.”

He and Rachel had only just met on Christmas Day, and the two were still hesitant around one another. Xenobia hoped today’s visit would help the two grow closer.

“I do hope the house is working for you,” Randolph said as he offered his arms to both women.

They made their way up the front step and into the townhouse he had called home for several years. Now that he was master of Bradley House, he had insisted Rachel take up residence in the Westminster townhouse.

“I do like having my own home,” Rachel said as she led them to the parlor. “I don’t have a need for many servants, but I do have a chaperone, of course.”

“Has a modiste started a wardrobe for you?” Xenobia asked.

Rachel nodded. “Mother insisted, and Father is paying the bill, so some poor seamstresses are stitching up a storm this very moment. Have you ordered anything for the Season?”

Xenobia shook her head. "I wore widow's weeds for a year, so I have an entire wardrobe I've barely begun to wear."

"But is it still fashionable?"

"It will be fine," Xenobia insisted, waving off the idea of employing a modiste. "I expect you'll be married before the end of the Season," she added, changing the subject. "There are only two months before the first ball."

"Possibly," Rachel hedged. Despite having a marquess for a father, having a madam for a mother meant an advantageous match would be harder to come by. "But if I do not, I shall only be more determined to return to the Continent. I dearly love to travel." She gave Xenobia a cup of tea.

"We may join you," Xenobia said. "My treasury continues to grow."

"Where from now?" Rachel asked as she served tea to her brother.

"I found the latest bank notes under a marble bust, and only because Charlie nearly toppled the caryatid on which it was sitting. He's learned to walk."

Randolph cleared his throat. "Then I discovered a stash in a false bottom of a drawer in the desk in the study," he said as he helped himself to a biscuit. "The bank was sure all the notes from eighteen-seventeen were accounted for, but we just keep finding more."

"I take it you're not spending it all in one place?"

Xenobia shook her head. "Except for a few items for Charlie, we haven't yet spent any of it."

Rachel looked to her brother for confirmation of Xenobia's claim. He gave a shrug. "I've married a cheap woman," Randolph said in his most deadpan manner.

Rachel burst out laughing at the same moment Xenobia leaned over and said, "Don't you dare tell him!"

"Tell me what?" Randolph asked, his eyes darting between the two women.

Despite Xenobia's insistence that she not say anything, Rachel whispered, "She's a spendthrift, Rand. A cheapskate. A penny pincher."

"Rachel," Xenobia whined in protest.

"And now you know her little secret."

Randolph held out the hand which sported his sapphire and diamond wedding band. He considered what he had learned about it when he had shopped for a Christmas gift for Xenobia, and merely raised a brow.

She certainly wasn't a spendthrift when it came to him.

About Linda Rae Sande

A former technical writer and author of twenty-six historical romances, Linda Rae Sande enjoys researching the Regency era and ancient Greece.

A fan of action-adventure movies, she can frequently be found at the local cinema. Although she no longer has any tropical fish, she follows the San Jose Sharks and makes her home in Cody, Wyoming.

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The Marquess is Mine

by Tamara Gill



Prologue

*St. Albans Abbey, Kent
1815, Summer*

"Get off her, you tyrant!"

Young women of a particular age were wont to become romantic. It was no different for Lady Sarah Farley, youngest child of the late Duke of St. Albans, at the impressionable age of fourteen. With those words uttered to her eldest brother, Henry, by her younger brother's best friend, it was the exact moment that she fell in love with the boy.

Lord Giles Longe, Marquess Gordan. Her hero.

Henry stepped back from trying to take Sarah's self-portrait she was finishing. A sketch her father had started and one of the last things he had done with her before he passed the previous year. "This is my house, Gordan, and I can do whatever I want. I'm the duke. You're nothing but a child who should know when to speak to his betters."

Her hero scoffed, pulling Sarah to stand behind him. "I'll try to remember my manners the next time I'm before one."

Sarah looked between Lord Gordan and Henry and didn't miss the hatred they felt. It was so palatable that she could almost taste it. Lord Gordan, Giles to his friends, was two years younger than her elder brother, the duke, and already at nose level. Her brother's eyes were narrow and unkind, Giles was the opposite, wide and clear and filled with a compassionate light.

Her favorite brother, Hugh, had invited Giles to spend the summer with them, and he had arrived only yesterday. Sarah could not remember having been more excited about having house guests. With her father's passing, they had been in mourning a year, but this summer, her mama had allowed Hugh to invite his school friend. The moment she had spied the devilishly handsome gentleman alighting from his carriage from the attic window, her heart had moved.

For a boy of eighteen years, the same as Hugh, he moved with grace and ability. He was tall but did not look awkward in his frame. Oh no, already his shoulders were wide, strong, and gave a hint to a rakehell in the making.

Every gentleman Sarah thought handsome was destined to turn into a rake. She sighed, glancing down at his hand that remained on her wrist, holding her away from Henry. Such lovely, strong hands too. Perfectly shaped for holding one against one's heart.

In only a few short years, she would be off to London, to have her first Season, and then men like Lord Gordan would court her, flirt, and wish to marry her. As a duke's daughter, she would have ample to choose from. Not that she needed to accept any who bowed before her, for her heart had been moved by Giles and would forever belong to him.

"Are you unharmed?" he asked, leaning down to be closer to her shorter height. Henry told her a duke's daughter did not need a self-portrait. That as duke's daughter, they could hire a painter for such menial work. No sister to a duke should be sketching so.

Henry was a fool.

Sarah was well aware of what was expected of her in society when her time came to enter it. Until then, she would not allow him to take the things that meant more to her than life itself. The drawing her father started being one. Her father would never have allowed Henry to treat her with such disrespect, and neither would Hugh, who stood behind her, glaring at their elder sibling.

"Leave her alone, Henry, or I'll bloody your nose like I did last week."

Henry sneered at the three of them. "I'll cut you off, you two, you'll be left with nothing if you do not do as I say. Now get outside and play like children if that is how you're going to behave, with your stupid sketches and silly school friends who come to stay."

"Gladly," Hugh said, gesturing for Sarah and Giles to join him. "Come on, we'll do as the duke says. Let him have his lofty ideals and solitude, we can have better fun outdoors anyway."

Sarah followed, but not before Henry took one last swipe for her drawing. This time he clutched it, and laughing, ran over to the roaring fire, and threw it onto the flames. Sarah screamed, reaching for the parchment, but Giles grabbed her, hoisting her back from the flames that wrapped about the image and consumed it.

"Sarah, no, you'll hurt yourself."

A sob wrenched up from somewhere deep inside, and she lent a scream. Tears streamed down her cheeks as her sketch darkened and burned before her eyes.

"You bastard." The sound of a fist hitting flesh rent the air, and Sarah turned to see Henry's legs go flying over the settee, his own cries of pain muffling the sound of her sobs. "How could you do that to Sarah?"

Henry stood, his footing a little unsteady as he pinched his bloody nose, trying to stem the bleeding. "Easily, she's a baby and needs to grow up, and mark my words, Hugh, should you hit me again it'll be the last time."

"Touch anything of Sarah's again or her, and it'll be your last day on earth," Hugh said, pulling her into his arms and helping her from the room. Sarah sobbed against her brother's chest, and no matter how they tried to make her happy, distract her with ideas of finishing the fort her father had started to build last year, fishing or swimming, she would not be moved.

Today she needed time to mourn her loss. Her father's drawing. Their drawing. "I think I shall go upstairs to my room. I do not feel like going outdoors just now."

Her brother and Giles walked her to her door and waited as she stepped into her suite, her sanctuary. Hugh walked off, but Giles watched her as she turned to shut and lock the world away.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah."

She shrugged, wiping away more tears as they fell. "Henry has always been a selfish beast. Today he merely proved it before someone outside our family."

Giles reached out, lifting her chin to meet her eye. His thumb slid across her cheek, wiping away the tears that fell unheeded. She hiccupped, the lump in her throat hard to swallow past.

"I do not like to see you cry."

His dark, stormy eyes were filled with concern, and she reached up, touching his hand. "I will be well again, my lord."

Lord Gordan did not look convinced, and yet at her brother's command to join him, he reluctantly stepped back. "When you're ready, join us outdoors. Although the summer has not started off well for you, Hugh and I will make it fun and one to remember."

She nodded, not quite convinced that would be the case, but willing to try. "Of course." She rallied a smile, wanting him to believe she was well again, even if her heart ached for her loss.

"While I'm here, His Grace will not touch you or anything you own."

Her heart gave a decided flip at his words. Hugh's friend was not only handsome, but he was also honorable. He strode off down the hall, and she

watched him go, bedazzled a little by his sweetness.

Sarah could not wait to have her first Season. What a pity she had four more years to wait. The thought discouraged her all over again.

Chapter 1

*St. Albans Abbey
December 20, 1829*

There were two things in life that Lady Sarah Farley, sister to the duke of St. Albans disliked more than anything else in the world. Entertaining Marquess Gordan, or Giles as she'd once called him, and seeing Marquess Gordan in her home.

When they had been friends.

The sight of the beast across the ballroom floor where the Christmas house party her brother Hugh and his new wife, Molly, were hosting was not to be borne. Or the fact that he hadn't even gazed in her direction for the past hour.

Beast.

Was she still as invisible as she'd always been with this man? Romantically at least. It hadn't always been so between them, they had been friends once. A long time ago, but no longer. Ass, not man, she corrected, sipping her champagne and glaring at him over the rim of her glass. Why her brother Hugh had invited him in the first place confounded her. She'd begged him not to, had told Molly the reasons why the marquess should not attend. Well, at least the ones she could admit to publicly, and yet, the fiend had arrived and was strutting about the room as if he owned it.

Peacock.

"Please do not be angry with Hugh, my dear. Lord Gordan was an old friend and one he has missed. Having him here will help in clearing your brother's name in the eyes of the *ton*."

"People already know the truth, no point in bringing back the old guard simply to please them more. Hugh has other friends. Lord Gordan does not need to be reimagined into the fold." Sarah wasn't sure she could stomach much more of these so-called friends returning into her brother's life after distancing themselves from him when he needed their support most.

She had never believed her elder brother Henry's claims, or that of her late mother that Hugh had been the one to ruin Miss Laura Cox, an heiress,

several years before. Henry had always been selfish, a well-seasoned liar, and someone who could not be trusted. The favored son, eldest and the Duke of St. Albans, it was not surprising that their younger brother was asked to take the fall, the shame that Henry could not face himself.

"You really do not like Lord Gordan do you, my dear? Is there something you wish to tell me? Other than your more benign reasons you have already noted as to why he should not be here?" Molly asked her, taking her hand to make her look at her sister-in-law.

Sarah shook her head, not wishing for anyone to know her shame. Her regret. "No, I merely do not agree with some of these men showing up here and pretending that they are long-lost friends. That Hugh's displacement half a world away was not of their doing. They may have forgotten, but I have not. I missed years of being with Hugh because of this catty society. I will not forgive them."

Molly leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Hugh loves you so very much, and so do I. We do not want you to be unhappy. It is Christmas, after all. Forget about those gentlemen who now scramble about Hugh's feet and look to others for amusement and flirtation. Focus on ones who did not turn their back on your brother. There are many eligible men here for the month-long house party. Surely there are others who may take your fancy."

Sarah sighed, wishing that were the case. It was not. There had only ever been one man whom she'd longed for. Had wanted with such rebellious disregard that she'd acted on that impulse many years before and lived to regret her actions.

How dare the cad even show up here. He ought to be horsewhipped, and by her. This idea was tempting, and if she put on a warm enough cloak, she could fetch a whip from the stables and do exactly what she envisioned.

How had she been so stupid and irresponsible all those years ago? After her brother's banishment from England, one would think one would learn to be careful. To follow the rules society placed upon their young heads and not step out of line.

Not Sarah. She had thrown herself at his lordship during her first Season. As the wealthy daughter of a duke and now a sister to one, she had thought herself invincible. A woman whom any man would gladly fall at her feet and then sweep her off those said feet and marry her.

Lord Gordan had not, and it was not until she had kissed him on the darkened terrace, practically threw herself against him, pushing him up

against the ivy trellis that she realized her mistake.

He'd not kissed her back.

In fact, he'd set her from him, gave her a proper verbal scolding that even to this day made her ears burn, and had stormed back indoors to her elder brother's ball and had barely spoken to her since.

Not that she cared if she ever spoke to the man again. He did not deserve her regard or friendship, even if their icy exchanges were solely due to Sarah's lack of manners.

"I will forget about Lord Gordan and enjoy the house party. I promise I shall enjoy our Christmas together." Sarah smiled as Molly thanked her before rejoining her husband, Hugh. When his wife was close enough, Hugh wrapped an arm about her side and pulled her against him, keeping her close.

Sarah's heart twisted a little in her chest. How lucky Molly was to be loved and adored as much as her brother loved and cherished her. Their love and Molly's trust in Hugh gave her hope that she would one day find a grand love that would make her skin prickle and her body thrum.

Well, she had found that love until he up and proposed to someone else. She spied Lord Gordan coming toward her with determined steps, and she steeled herself for the forthcoming confrontation.

"Lady Sarah, how very festive you look this evening in your red-and-green gown. Anyone would think it was Christmas." His deep baritone made goose bumps rise on her skin, and she cursed his ability to make her not herself, even after all these years, and the time they'd been enemies and not friends.

Sarah bit back a scathing retort, mentioning that his sarcasm and lack of praise on her gown were not missed. But, because she promised her sister-in-law not minutes before to behave, Sarah smiled up at Lord Gordan and threw him a halfhearted smile. "How very astute you are, my lord. That schooling you partook in at Cambridge really has paid off that you're able to understand my color choices at this time of year."

He raised one brow, his lips thinning into a straight line. Lips that she knew to this day were as soft as butter, and made her feet curl up in her silk slippers. She licked her lips, wondering if hers had been as supple. Possibly not, she was forever chewing them, and she rode her horse a great deal. The air and sunlight did little good for one's skin, when one had too much of them.

"My parents were most proud of my academic record," he quipped,

coming to stand at her side. "I have not seen you in town these past few seasons. Have you grown bored with London society? I do miss your impulsive kisses very much," he whispered, leaning down to ensure privacy.

Sarah gaped at his lordship. How dare he bring up her oversight? "It is not the act of a gentleman to bring up the foolish mistakes that a lady may have made in her youth. I have little doubt that my actions that night were brought on by my champagne sampling for the first time."

"Really?" he asked, cocking one brow. "And here I was thinking that your molesting of me was solely due to my charm and good looks. How very disheartening to know the truth."

Sarah ground her teeth, little amused by his teasing of her. "My memory, if correct, was that you did not like my kisses and told me so very abruptly to my face. I see no point in our conversing now." There, that ought to do it. He would leave now, and she could go on brooding, glaring at everyone who now thought her brother a respectable duke when only a year or so ago would not mention his name in polite society.

"We do not have to converse." He threw her a wicked grin, and once more she was lost for words.

Was he flirting with her?

The rogue!

He ought not. It would not get him anywhere. She had long given up any hope she may have had with his lordship. Sarah made a point of trying to find someone in the crowd. "I believe Lady Rackliffe is here this evening. Are you sure you do not wish to commence your love affair with her again? She's a widow now. Maybe this time she'll turn up for your wedding." Sarah chuckled, sipping her mulled wine and enjoying the fact that her words had shut the cocky marquess up.

He took a sip of his whiskey, staring out at the dancers before them. For a country Christmas party, Molly had invited many of their friends. Her closest four friends now congregated about Molly, and they laughed and talked as if they had not seen each other in years and not merely weeks.

Sarah wished she had friends like Molly. She'd been neglected as much as Hugh had been by their mother. However, her father had always been loving, but unfortunately, he passed when she was young. She was so thankful that Hugh was now home in England, although they would be returning to Rome sometime next year. They planned on traveling between their two houses, and Sarah had promised to go with them next year to see Rome and Naples.

"By my calculations, you are eight and twenty, my lady. I thought by now that you would have been married. Why ever have you not? No lord in London good enough for Lady Sarah Farley?"

She glanced at him. How dare he mention her name or turn the question back onto her?

"Spying on me, Lord Gordan? I did not know you were so very observant to my every move."

He scoffed beside her, sipping his whiskey. "You do hold yourself in high esteem. I was merely keeping watch on my friend's sibling while he was out of the country."

"Of course you were, my lord."

A shadow flickered in his eyes before he blinked, and it was gone. Did he remember how very close they once were? That he had been one of her best friends in the world? Or so she understood. All lies, of course. He'd not cared about her at all. Had only ever seen her as Hugh's younger sister and someone to protect, but never love.

Those summers seemed so long ago now. So much had happened between them that there was no way they would ever get back the friendship they lost.

"I hope that I did not teach you to be so cold and aloof as you are. Why, before I came over here to speak to you, you were busy scowling at everyone." He reached out with his thumb and smoothed the frown line between her brows. "What has you so out of sorts, Lady Sarah?"

The moment his skin touched hers, the breath in her lungs hitched. She slapped away his hand, but not before reading the awareness that flared in his eyes. He'd felt it too, the reaction they had always had to each other. Their first kiss was proof of that, no matter what Lord Gordan professed otherwise. She was certain it had affected him as much as her, no matter his anger over the embrace may have said otherwise.

A question lingered in her mind over what would happen should they act upon those feelings now. Would things progress differently between them? She could have sworn when she'd kissed him all those years ago, for a moment, he'd kissed her back. Having never kissed anyone before, she had never been certain if she had imagined his reaction or not, fleeting as it was.

Her body ached with want for him, for his lips to touch hers. From the age of eighteen, she knew her infatuation with Lord Gordan was more than just a young girl's fancy. She'd wanted him to be hers, and he did not want the

same.

He had wanted Lady Rackliffe, Lady Edith Beadle then, an earl's daughter and sweet on Lord Gordan. Or so he believed.

Fool that he was, that had turned out not to be the case.

"Do not touch me, Lord Gordan. You forget yourself."

He bowed, seemingly sorry for his lapse in manners. "Apologies." He looked contrite, as if he had indeed lost his faculties for a moment. "It shall not happen again."

"I should hope not." She sipped her wine, noting that he didn't move away, but kept beside her, quiet and still. "Was there anything else that you wanted from me, my lord?"

A muscle worked in his jaw before he said, "You did not answer my question. Why are you so incensed this evening?"

She ground her teeth, hating that the one man she did not want to know her secret would ask such a question. Truth be told, he made her angry. His denial of her. His pushing her away. His severing their friendship the moment Hugh had left England.

"I'm not angry, my lord, merely weary of a gentleman like you who believes a woman should always look happy and jovial. I do not need to smile and simper just to please those about me. I'm a daughter of a duke, a sister to one, and have my own inheritance. If I wish to stand at the side of a ballroom and glare at those I do not think worthy of my family's hospitality, I shall do so."

His eyes widened before he glanced back at the dancers. "Are you saying that I'm not welcome here, my lady?"

She shrugged, feigning nonchalance when in truth, her heart beat loud in her chest. Giles had always been welcome at the Abbey, and most of all, by her. To say otherwise now would hurt him, but the slighted, angry debutante inside her growled at his denial of her. The injury he'd caused her heart that had never truly healed. "Hugh is happy for your company, that is enough, is it not?"

He scoffed. "I suppose it will have to do."

Sarah watched him stalk off, anger thrumming across his wide shoulders. A little piece of pleasure rolled through her that she'd hurt his feelings while, in turn, her heart ached at his leaving.

Her eyes met those of her brother across the room, and she smiled, feigning pleasure. He threw her a dubious look that spoke of a future

conversation between them over her antics with Lord Gordan. She sighed. A month more of this would be a chore.

Chapter 2

Giles stormed from the ballroom and ran directly into the path of Lady Rackliffe. He inwardly groaned at his apparent good luck this evening. First, his run-in with Sarah and now Edith, his ex-betrothed. She stared up at him, all innocent as if butter would not melt in her mouth. A marvel, really, considering she had failed to arrive at church on their wedding day, preferring another over him.

The blonde goddess, Lady Rackliffe, was indeed a muse for men's fantasies. Large, voluptuous breasts, long, golden locks, and cool, blue eyes that slanted a little and gave her a wicked, enticing appearance that had once drawn him like a moth to a candle flame.

Not anymore. Now he looked upon her with the knowledge of what a spiteful, using minx she was.

Sarah floated through his mind, she too had long, blonde locks, but of a warmer hue, as if the sun had kissed her curls. Her eyes were a dark shade of green that he'd often thought the Scottish Highlands would be jealous of.

His body clenched, and he repudiated the idea that Sarah hated him. He deserved her wrath, just like the woman before him deserved his after she had jilted him, thrown him over for a much older, richer peer.

An ancient relic who had conveniently died within twelve months of their marriage, leaving her an heiress.

"Giles, darling. How wonderful to see you again. We should talk while we're at the house party. It has been too long."

He picked up her hands as they snaked their way up the folds of his jacket to wrap about his neck. He did not want her touching him any more than she had wanted to marry him.

"I would like that, Lady Rackliffe, but tomorrow perhaps. I seek my rest this evening. A long day of travel has wearied me." Not to mention the fact that Sarah's dislike of his attendance here hurt more than he cared to know. He wanted to be friends with her again. To be as close as they once were. Her hurried and spontaneous kissing of him during her first Season seemed to have put paid to their association. He cringed, hating himself for telling her off like a spoiled child.

She had not deserved his retort. He ought to tell her why he'd reacted so. Why he'd pushed her away and told her in no uncertain terms how inappropriate her kiss had been.

"Shall we meet somewhere, Giles? St. Albans Abbey has a beautiful, secluded conservatory, I understand. We may catch up there if you wish. After luncheon?"

He nodded, distracted, and having forgotten Lady Rackliffe was before him. "Of course. Tomorrow. Good evening, my lady."

Giles went to start up the stairs, but she halted him, clutching the lapels of his jacket with more force than he thought her capable of. "Are you not going to kiss me goodbye? Surely we're past such formal goodbyes, are we not?"

Giles recoiled at the idea of kissing her, but leaned down, kissing each of her cheeks.

A clearing of one's throat sounded behind him. He whirled about to see Sarah passing him by, starting up the stairs. She made a *tsk tsk tsk* sound. "Behave, dear guests. There is no mistletoe above you to excuse away your display of affection for one another."

Sarah's words were said lightly, playfully even, but Giles could see the anger and disgust that stared at him through her eyes. Lady Rackliffe appeared immune to Sarah's veiled criticism of their goodnight kiss.

She tittered before him, smiling up at Sarah. "Lady Sarah, so good to see you again. Where have you been for the last few years? We had thought that you ran off to the continent to live with your brother, so long have we not seen you."

Sarah halted halfway up the stairs, turning to meet Edith's amused visage. "If only, my lady. If only," she said, before continuing on and disappearing along the corridor upstairs.

Edith's smile slipped, and Giles bowed, seeing his moment to escape. "If you'll excuse me, Lady Rackliffe. I really must obtain some sleep."

Distantly he heard Sarah's slippared footsteps upstairs. His need to talk to her again paramount. He did not want her thinking there was anything between himself and Lady Rackliffe, as there was not.

"Of course, goodnight, my lord."

"Goodnight." Giles took the stairs two at a time and made his way toward the family apartments in the Abbey. The building was old, a medieval-like structure more than a modern Georgian home. Still, the Duchess of St. Albans had done a lot to it in the short time she had been married to Hugh,

and the house was warm, homey, and once again had a feeling of peace and tranquility he had only ever known it to have when Hugh and Sarah's father was alive.

He turned the corner and spied Sarah almost at her bedroom door. Increasing his pace, he reached her room, just as she went to open it. He clasped the handle, slamming it shut. She spun about, the action placing him hard against her, his breathing ragged.

He swallowed the pleasant feel of her against his chest, her bright-green eyes staring up at him with shock. She blinked, and the contempt was there again, mocking and hating him as it had for years.

"Are you quite done rubbing up against me, Lord Gordan? I should not have to tell you twice in one night to remember who I am."

He stepped back, missing the feel of her the moment he did so. "I needed to explain that what you saw just before was not what it appeared."

Sarah raised her brow. Again, her derisive laugh grated on his nerves. "Really? You do realize, Lord Gordan that I'm eight and twenty and have long learned that when I see gentleman kissing ex-lovers, that one can only assume the ex should be excluded."

"I'm not sleeping with Lady Rackliffe."

She shrugged, her hand reaching behind her to open the door. "I couldn't care less about what you do."

He slammed the door closed again, pressing against her. Of course, he should not, but damn it, she spiked his anger and patience. "Is that true?" He leaned down, taking in the sweet scent of her hair, floral with a hint of rose. Damn, she smelled as good as she felt in his arms. Her hands fluttered to his chest, the pressure to push him away there, but not forceful.

"Has been for a very long time, my lord. Are you so dense you need me to remind you?"

He flinched, grinding his teeth. A smug look passed over her face, and rage tumbled through his blood. She did not care what he did? Well, he'd test that theory.

Seizing her face in his hands, he leaned down and kissed her.

And he was lost.

Chapter 3

The moment Giles's lips touched hers, Sarah knew the horrendous, catastrophic error it was. Not that she did not like having one of the most eligible, attractive, and rich men in all of England kissing her as if his life depended on it, but because a small, traitorous part of her loved it.

Damn him and his mouth that moved over hers, coaxed and teased her senses until her wits were scattered.

For appearance's sake, Sarah pushed at his chest. It was no use. He was steadfast in his preposterous notion of taking her lips and proving his asinine point. Even so, when his tongue slipped across her lips, she sighed, opening to him without realizing the devastation her acquiescence would mean.

He deepened the kiss, and no more was it delicate and beckoning, but hard, demanding. Made that special place between her thighs ache and clench. She pushed her legs together, trying to sate her need. Her hands ran along the lapels of his coat, his breathing ragged, she could feel each breath, the air going into his strong lungs, his chest firm and corded.

He would look so delicious without his clothing. Women had tittered about seeing him just so—the ones who had been fortunate enough to warm his bed. The idea of anyone seeing Giles unclothed so had sent such a shot of jealousy through her that she'd avoided society and all news of him for years, practically becoming a recluse.

That had to change now. With her brother back, the man kissing her to a jelly pool at his feet would be about her often, whether at St. Albans Abbey or town.

Their kiss was madness. Anyone could happen upon them, her family, a servant, her brother! The idea of being forced to marry Lord Gordan was like a cold bucket of water poured over her muddled head, and with all the strength she possessed, Sarah pushed him away.

"Enough," she said, her heart beating fast in her chest. He stumbled back, his eyes heavy and dilated, and she'd seen that look before. He'd looked at Lady Rackliffe so before their engagement.

She ground her teeth, hating that men could be so changeable. "You should not have done that, my lord."

"I have done many things that I regret, but that kiss, Lady Sarah is not one of them."

His words sent heat spearing across her face, and she took a calming breath, hating the fact that after all these years apart, he could still make her blush.

"If you wish to enjoy your time here in Kent, may I suggest that your attention be better spent elsewhere? I am not looking for a husband, nor do I like men who kiss me only minutes after being caught kissing someone else."

He flinched, a muscle working at his temple. "Do be serious. You cannot mean my kiss with Lady Rackliffe."

Sarah raised her brow, staring at him. He shuffled on his feet, glaring at her. "I kissed her cheeks, not her lips, Sarah. If you had seen me," he said, stepping close again, "with my tongue down her throat, there may be a point to your concern." His breath was hot against her ear and she shivered, closing her eyes so as not to see his delectable self.

"It was you that I kissed without heed or caution. I want to kiss you again." His eyes met hers, and she read the longing in them. Her body ached for fulfillment. She was eight and twenty, after all. Like all people, she had needs, and those needs were becoming more and more powerful. Harder to ignore with each year that passed.

Having Lord Gordan tempt her in such a way was unfair, and she knew that she would not get an ounce of sleep tonight.

"Let me kiss you again," he pleaded, his lips brushing hers, but not demanding anything more. "You savored it. Admit it."

"Goodnight, my lord," she said, opening her door and all but throwing herself into her room lest she do exactly as he begged. Her eyes met his as she shut the door, and what she saw there sent heat and expectation down her spine.

Determination on Lord Gordan's visage would be hard to deny. It was any wonder he was a renowned rakehell for who could refuse sin when offered to you in a rich, titled, handsome marquess package that was his lordship?

One could not.

The following morning Sarah broke her fast in her room, preferring not to dine with all the other guests. No doubt, Hugh and Molly would ask her about her absence later, but she could not sit across the table and see him.

Giles...

She may never be able to meet his gaze again after allowing him liberties last evening that she should not. Sarah sat before her dressing table, her maid pinning up the last of her curls, and she stared at her features, her lips that had been kissed most ardently, even now they tingled in remembrance. The shadows beneath her eyes told her the effect Lord Gordan had on her. Her sleep had been restless, her body not able to settle and rest.

She pursed her lips. Lord Gordan had done that to her, and he probably damn well knew he would. All she could hope was that he, too, had a sleepless night and resembled hell also.

He did not.

Sarah ran into his lordship, striding in from the back of the house a little after leaving her room. His boots were wet with melting snow, some of which was still sticking to his shoes. His tan breeches hugged his athletic thighs, and her mouth dried at the sight. Her eyes devoured his every article of clothing, the perfectly tied Napoleon cravat, and his top hat held loosely in one hand. His tan coat and white waistcoat giving him the air of a country gentleman, innocent and able. He may be able, but innocent was the opposite of what Giles was.

He glanced up, skidding to a stop. He met her inspection, and something inside her crumbled just as it had when she was fifteen.

Sarah had a name for the emotion that coursed through her blood back then. It had been love, innocent and adoring, but now it was laced with so many more conflicting sentiments—desire one of them. Anger, most definitely, but passion above all.

This month-long house party just became a whole lot longer.

Chapter 4

Giles skidded to a stop, seeing Sarah watching him. He'd missed her at breakfast, having observed that she was not at the table, he'd eaten quickly and gone for a ride before the mid-morning breeze picked up and made it too bitter to go outside.

He'd needed a good, brisk ride this morning, if only to wake himself up. After his kiss with Sarah, his sleep had been deprived most severely.

He'd tossed and turned and thought about taking himself in hand to alleviate the need that coursed through his blood.

The idea of Sarah in his bed would not abate, and it was a problem he needed to face.

He was a friend to her brother, but also one of town's most notorious rakes. All thanks to Lady Rackliffe, but the idea of taking Edith or anyone else to his bed left a sour taste in his mouth.

The only woman he wanted beneath him, on top of him, before him and every way else he could think of was Sarah.

It was a damnable, vexing notion since he'd only kissed her last night to prove that she did, in fact, care what he did, a mistake he realized the moment their lips touched. He'd most certainly proved a point, however, one that he was a fool. He would long for her until he kissed her again if she would allow him to.

"Lord Gordan, good morning. I hope you had a pleasant ride."

Her benign chatter did not mislead him, and he crossed his arms, taking in her pretty, plum gown with a gold thread about the seams. His eyes dipped to her abundant cleavage, and he wrenched his gaze upward before she caught him ogling. "I did, thank you for asking, Lady Sarah. Pray, tell me, how did you sleep last night? I hope it was to your satisfaction?"

Two could play this game of mundane conversation, and he would win. He rarely lost with anything—innocuous chatter with women he wanted in his bed no different.

She pursed her lips, and he knew she saw through his question. "I slept very well, thank you."

He raised his brow. "Actually, I lie. I managed very little rest at all. Do

you have any idea as to why that could be so?"

Her inspection of him was thorough, her gaze skimming from his neck to his shoulders, taking in his crossed arms, to his abdomen and beyond.

What on earth was she looking at?

He glanced at himself, and seeing nothing untoward, frowned. "Is there something the matter with my clothing, my lady?"

She seemed to shake herself from her musings. "Not at all, my lord."

"So you're just admiring the view then?" he teased, catching her eye that dipped once again to his cravat. Her cheeks bloomed a pretty pink, and she moved past him, heading toward the back of the house.

He followed, the reasons as to why foreign to him. All he did know was that he didn't want their conversation to end and nor did he like that she could dismiss him so easily after their kiss the night before.

To Giles, that kiss had meant everything, changed everything in his life, and what he wanted.

Sarah, to be exact.

She used to care for him a lot. There had been a time when they would partake in many outings and adventures at this very estate.

Sarah entered a music room, a grand piano and harp occupying a corner each. Chairs sat about the instruments. Giles paused at the room's threshold, having not been in here for many years, not since Sarah's father had played for them all one Christmas a lifetime ago.

Sarah moved between the two instruments and sat on a padded window seat that overlooked the now-frozen-over lake, the snow falling heavily outdoors.

"You'll catch your chill sitting there."

She glanced at him as if she'd forgotten his presence. He ground his teeth. How could she be immune to him? Women never were, and once she had not been either. She had thrown herself at him, had, from what he could presume, wished for marriage.

Of course, he did not expect her to be pining for him all these years later, but they could surely be friends. From that footing, love could grow, he was sure of it.

Giles strode over, coming to a stop before her. He waited for her to look up, needed to see her clear, green eyes and make her understand that he was in earnest. That she was different from his past lovers. That with Sarah, he wanted a future as well as a past.

"I apologize for kissing you last evening without your consent. I'm sorry that I did not kiss you back when we kissed all those years ago, but surely, with all that our lives have been intertwined, we can be friends. I want to be in your life, Sarah. Not as a lover, or childhood friend, but as a man you can come to, one who'll support your opinions and ideas just as I used to. When you told me of them, that is." He took her hand, squeezing it a little. "Please tell me we can be so again. I have missed you."

Sarah regarded Giles. She pushed down the hope that bloomed in her soul at his words. He wished to be friends. Then where had he been all these years? She'd certainly been right here at St. Albans Abbey. He was the one who had not visited, not reached out to see if she was well.

Which she had not been.

Not with a brother like Henry whom she had been left with after Hugh fled England. Her brother had been dismissive, short-tempered, and scandalous.

Whenever he'd held house parties, she had to retreat to the dowager house if only to protect herself from his wayward, bastard friends. Not that she'd always been safe even there.

She shuddered at the memory of Lord Fairchild and his pursuit of her, his inappropriate words, and eventually his insistence that she allow him to kiss her. Sarah had fled to Bath without a backward glance and had not seen Henry until the day she laid him to rest. A carriage accident brought on by more reckless behavior.

"A little late now, do you not think, to take an interest in my life. Where have you been the last ten years, my lord?" Sarah reached over to a nearby chair and picked up a shawl left there for her use. "When Henry had thrown house parties, I always hoped that you would attend so that we may move on from my inappropriate kiss, but you never did. You never called in on your way home to Willowood Hall. Nor did you write. I think you're a hypocrite, so why would I want to be your friend?"

Giles flinched at her words, but what did he expect? Turning up at a Christmas house party held by her brother did not mean all was forgiven. Not by her at least. She could not excuse his actions at leaving her alone.

"You gave me the cut direct the remainder of the 1819 Season," he accused.

"You scolded me at the beginning of that Season after I kissed you. Why

would I follow you about like a little lost puppy looking for attention? I may have been young and naive, Lord Gordan, but I'm not a fool. I know when I'm not wanted."

"I did want you. You were all that I did want," he admitted.

Sarah shook her head, not believing his words, not wanting to see the yearning on Giles's face. Denying him what her own torturous body craved was almost impossible with him looking at her so. To believe the truth to his words would only cause heartache for her in the future. There was nothing between them, had not been for an eon. It was time they stopped this silly game they were playing. The Christmas festivities had addled both their minds and was teasing them with impossible dreams.

Giles sat beside her, and she shuffled over a little. "No you did not. You would have kissed me back, married me instead of offering to Lady Rackliffe. You may have missed our friendship, but you were merely missing a woman you saw more like your sister than anything of a deeper, emotional level."

"I never saw you as a sister, and I do want you. It may have taken me ten years to say the words, but I'm saying them now."

"You need to halt your silly declaration." Sarah went to stand, and he pulled her back down on the window seat beside him.

"It's not trivial, it's true. Our kiss last evening was proof of how much I want you, surely you felt what can be between us. Give me a chance."

Sarah swallowed, her heart and mind a firestorm of debate. Of course, she felt what they could have, from the tips of her ears to the ends of her toes she'd felt the fire that had coursed through her blood at his touch. If she gave him a chance to court her, what did that mean? Would it lead anywhere? She had thought him truthful and honorable during her first Season, and how wrong she had been then. There was just as much chance now that he was fooling her yet again, playing her like the instruments that sat about them.

Even so, the flash of determination in his eyes gave her pause. Perhaps Giles was sincere, and this Christmas, she may get what her heart truly longed for.

Was she brave enough to risk her heart a second time? "Very well," she said, pulling her hand free from his. "I will give you a chance to prove you are sincere, Lord Gordan, but mark my words, this is your final time. I will not be gifting another."

His wicked smile somersaulted butterflies in her stomach, and she had a

moment of panic at what she'd unleashed. "I will not need any more chances, Sarah. I will not make the same mistake twice."

Chapter 5

The following day Sarah's attention was fixated on Giles as he spoke with her sister-in-law, Molly before the hearth in the front parlor. The snow had continued to fall, forcing Molly, as the hostess, to come up with varied and fun ways to pass the time inside.

They played card games, billiards, charades, and danced. Even so, how Giles would woo her to his favor was something Sarah was looking forward to.

No matter what she had said to his face, she had missed her old friend, and the fun they used to have. She looked forward to seeing this other side that only the privileged few managed to observe—his seductive, courting side.

Whatever would he do to convince her his heart was hers to steer?

"You're grinning like a fool. What are you up to, Sarah?"

She started at the sound of her brother's voice, jumping back a little to stop spilling her mulled wine on her light-green gown. "Nothing at all. Why would I be up to anything?"

"Because you are, and I know it."

Sarah chuckled, not wanting anyone, least of all her brother, to know that she was getting reacquainted with Giles. The last thing she needed was to become the latest tidbit of gossip for London's *ton*. They had used their family enough for that.

"It is Christmas, Hugh. Everyone is more jovial at this time of year," she said, leaning up and kissing his cheek. How different it was to last year's Christmas where she had spent it alone here at the Abbey. Henry having decided to stay in town instead of returning home. He should have come home, had he done so he may not have died only a few weeks into the new year.

Her Christmas luncheon had been a sad affair, with only herself at the table, the memory of chewing her food while tears streamed down her face was not one recollection she wished to keep.

"Sarah?" Hugh said, taking her hand and pulling her close. "What happened to your smile?"

She rallied, squeezing his hand, and smiling for good effect. Her isolation was not Hugh's fault, and he did not need the guilt plaguing him over her sad life up to the point of his return.

He was here now, she was happy, and as much as she did not wish to be bombarded with Londoners for the Christmas season, she was glad the house was at least full, with lots of laughter and fun. No worries of the guests behaving inappropriately or trying to persuade her to a rendezvous.

Of course, except for Giles, but a stolen kiss or two between two people who were courting wasn't so very bad.

"All is well, brother. I'm just so very happy you're home. I have missed you at this time of year."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I missed you too. Promise me we shall never spend another Christmas apart."

"I can promise you that," she said, smiling. Her brother was called to another group of guests, and Sarah let him go. This afternoon Molly had organized a snowman competition, if the snow stopped falling that was. Sarah was looking forward to winning and going outside. They had spent too many days indoors as it was.

A tinkling sounded, and Sarah turned to see Molly calling everyone's attention with a small, golden bell.

"The snow has eased, and so I think that if we're to have this snowman building competition, we should do so now. So please, everyone, go and change into your warmest coats and boots and meet me and His Grace on the terrace where we shall notify you of your teammate."

Sarah did as she was bade, and within the hour, everyone assembled before the terrace doors. Over her green morning gown she had thrown on a fur jacket and scarf, and kid-leather gloves. Sturdy leather boots and a hat finished off her outfit.

"There will be a prize, of course," Molly continued. "Ten pounds and the honor of opening the Christmas ball with a waltz with a partner of your choice. As to whom you will be building your snowman with, the following guests, please team up."

Sarah listened as Molly named the guests. Those who were married were kept together while those unattached were paired.

"Lady Sarah Farley and Lord Gordan, please pair up."

Sarah shivered at the thought of being near him again and turned to seek him out. A hand slid across her back and down her arm. His fingers clasped

hers, placing her hand on his arm.

She shot him a glance, having not known he was so near.

"Your muff is most complimentary."

Heat suffused her cheeks, and she stared at him, nonplussed. "From the tone of your voice, I cannot help but think you're saying something inappropriate, my lord."

His wicked grin undid her stoic sensibilities and proved her point. "That's because I am being immodest."

Sarah shook her head, turned back to her sister-in-law, and listened to the other guests still being paired. At the announcement that Lady Rackliffe was matched with the eligible earl, Lord Ambrose, Sarah took in her reaction. The earl had entered society the same year as them. He was a handsome gentleman and kind, and his pleasure at being paired with Lady Rackliffe was obvious.

Her displeasure, too, was most evident.

"We only have a limited time, a half hour at most before we need to return indoors, so I wish you well and good luck on your snowmen."

Two footmen opened the terrace doors and let the guests file outside. Sarah waited for the rush to subside before stepping outdoors. Chilly air made her catch her breath, and she pulled her scarf higher about her neck to stop the chill. Giles was beside her, his long greatcoat and highly polished riding boots made him appear taller than normal, wider across the shoulders and altogether too handsome in his beaver hat and leather gloves.

Sarah rallied her thoughts away from his handsome self and concentrated on the task at hand. "We must win this," she said, piling snow together into a ball. "I will not lose this competition, especially at my own home."

"And I shall not let you lose, Lady Sarah."

They worked together, piling snow up and up, rounding off the snowman's belly before moving on to his head. Some of the guests had already finished, their smaller men in no way grand enough to win, while others seemed too keen to rush and not compact the snow well enough, leaving it to crumble when the head was positioned.

Not theirs, however. Their snowman was strong, almost half Sarah's height and better than anyone else's she was sure.

"You will have to make yours bigger, Lady Sarah, if you wish to beat me," Lady Rackliffe shouted, laughing at her own words.

Sarah growled at the sight of her ladyship's tall snowman, compact and

just as good as theirs. "Go and fetch some sticks for his arms and nose. I'll collect the stones for his eyes and mouth."

Giles nodded, running off to do her bidding. For a moment, she lost herself watching him trudge through the snow. Was the man destined to look perfect in any life situation he found himself? He was taller than most men she knew, and always, in her opinion, the most handsome. The thought that he wanted her above anyone else left her breathless, her heart pounding like it had the night she kissed him. With his golden locks, and devilish, wicked mouth he'd intoxicated her from the moment she'd first set eyes on him at the susceptible age of fourteen.

A snowball flew past, and the resulting scream when the snowball found its mark reminded her of her task. She ran over to a nearby garden, searched as best she could under the dormant rose bushes for small rocks. Finding only a few small pebbles, she ran back to the snowman, placing them on his mouth and face. Molly called out that they only had ten minutes left, and Sarah took stock of the other entrants they were up against.

Lord Ambrose took off his scarf and wrapped it about the snowman, and Sarah frowned. They would have to do something similar if they wanted to win. Giles returned with his sticks, thin ones that suited the arms and nose well.

Sarah stepped up next to Giles and slid the scarf from his neck. A lazy, tempting smile tweaked his lips as he stood there, allowing her to de-clothe him. Her skin prickled in awareness before she rose on her toes and, holding his shoulders for support, slipped his hat off as well.

"You're awfully close, my lady. Are you trying to tempt me out here in the freezing air? Because it's warming my blood to no end."

Unable not to, she chuckled, shaking her head at his words. It wasn't any wonder women fell at this rogue's feet. He was amusing and wicked and reminded her of the fun-loving young man who had enchanted her all those years ago.

"If you kissed me out here before everyone, you would have to marry me."

He wiggled his brows, and she smiled. "Is that so very bad? I could think of worse fates."

Lady Rackliffe caught her attention by taking the jacket off Lord Ambrose as well, telling him without question that it must be so for them to win.

Giles heard her ladyship's words and cringed. "Please tell me I'm not going to have to part with my coat as well, my lady. I do believe winning at that cost is too high."

He turned back, and she sighed, agreeing with his lordship even though she would have taken his jacket should he have offered.

"Very well, I will not disrobe you entirely."

Giles watched her for a moment, his eyes full of mirth. He was so very good-looking. How fortunate he was to be blessed with such angelic features that left a woman's heart to flutter.

Molly called time, and her sister-in-law and brother walked about the group of snowmen before declaring Lady Rackliffe the winner.

Her ladyship jumped in glee, clapping her hands and laughing at the announcement before coming over to Sarah and Giles. Sarah took in the sway of her ladyship's hips, her overly bright smile, and knew it for what it was. She was determined to make Lord Gordan hers once more. The heavy-lidded gaze that promised whatever Giles wanted was clear for all to see.

"Lord Gordan, I must ask if you would be willing to open the Christmas ball with me. It has been so very long since we waltzed together. Too long," she whispered for only Giles to hear. Sarah heard her words too, the idea of anyone in Giles's arms but herself making her temper soar.

Giles looked about those who strolled past, heading back indoors before meeting Sarah's eyes. He stuttered his answer, and Sarah took pity on him. "I'm sure Lord Gordan would be honored, my lady. Shall we return inside? It is starting to get quite brisk outdoors."

Sarah turned without seeing if they followed, but she could hear the crunch of their shoes in the snow that told her they did. Sarah ground her teeth, having wanted to dance the waltz with Giles herself.

She continued through the drawing room, determined to find their butler, who would be acting as the major-domo for the ball. This year, the St. Albans Christmas ball would have two waltzes, not one.

Chapter 6

Giles escaped the house party later that afternoon. He stepped out the servant's back door, pulling his greatcoat closed, the brisk, afternoon air as cold as an arctic blast. He started toward the stables with quickened steps, noting the stable doors were closed. He let himself inside via a smaller side door, grateful to be out of the inclement weather.

The air inside the stables was a lot warmer, the building so well made that not a cold draft or freezing drop of rain penetrated the space.

A cooing and light, feminine chatter caught his attention, and frowning, he moved forward along the stalls, looking into each one to see who was there. Warmth speared through his blood at the sight of Sarah brushing her mount, her hands running along the flank of the sixteen-hand chestnut after each stroke of her brush.

The sight of her hands stroking the animal's flesh should not tempt him, but it did. From the moment she'd kissed him in London all those years ago, he'd thought of little else. Every woman he'd ever bedded, flirted with at entertainments, sated his lust with, all bore a striking resemblance to Sarah, and he knew the reason why.

He'd wanted her above everyone else from the moment their lips had touched.

His father, a proud and strict gentleman, would not allow his courtship of her due to her being Lord Hugh Farley's sibling. He'd been told in terms that brooked little argument that Lady Sarah was not suitable for the Gordan family, no matter her rank, and for him to look elsewhere unless he wanted to live life penniless.

He should have called his father's bluff, tested him on his words, and offered to Sarah anyway. He may have become poor as a result, but there was one thing his father could not take from him, and that was the title he would eventually inherit. Sarah herself was not without funds. They would have survived. A foolish mistake and one he would regret always.

Giles leaned over the stable door, content to watch her coo to her horse and enjoy her solitary time away. He wished he'd stood up to his father and told him that the rumors against Hugh were unfounded and possibly untrue,

which they were proven to be in the end. That Lady Sarah was innocent of any slight.

That his sire had persuaded him to offer to Edith, now Lady Rackliffe, and he had, was an action that even he would find hard to excuse.

When Sarah had kissed him, but a day after his betrothal, he'd been so livid, not at Sarah, but himself for choosing the wrong woman. He'd lashed out, punished Sarah with words that had been untrue. Hurt the one woman he had wanted simply because he could not change the error of his ways.

He did not deserve her now, not after making her wait all this time, but he could not leave her be. A fire burned in his soul, and it was only Sarah who could extinguish it.

He wanted her.

Giles cleared his throat. "We missed you after luncheon. I did not know that you were hiding out here in the stables, or I would have joined you sooner."

Sarah walked about the back of her horse, pushing the mare across a little so she could brush the opposite side. "You should know that I often escape out here. The staff has been allowed the day to join their families for the festive season, and so I'm checking on the horses instead. They'll be back later this evening, but I needed to brush Opie in any case."

Giles watched her work the brush over the horse's back, the mare calm, her head lowered and her eyes barely open. "You're putting your horse to sleep."

Sarah chuckled, and the sound did odd things to him. He wanted to hear her laugh, her jovial voice, for the rest of his life. If he could persuade her to love him as he hoped she once had, their lives could be perfect.

"She relishes a good brush." Sarah slipped under the horse's neck, coming to stand before him. "What are you doing out here, my lord? I thought you would be too busy with Lady Rackliffe following you about every minute of every day to escape to the stables."

Was that jealousy he heard in her tone? He narrowed his eyes, shrugging. "Lady Rackliffe is happily situated indoors. I wanted to find you."

Sarah reached over the wooden door, sliding the lock across to let herself out. "Her ladyship will be most unhappy to have lost the company of her preferred."

"I'm not her preferred."

She laughed again. This time, he did not miss her mocking tone. "Oh, yes,

you are. She's quite determined to secure you. However will you evade her charms? From what I remember, you were quite taken with them once before."

Giles helped her shut the stable door before bolting it closed. "That was a long time ago. She's not whom I want."

A light blush stole across her cheeks before she stepped around him, evading his eyes and his company. Giles followed her to the back of the stables to where a large pile of hay was stacked and strewn over the floor.

She turned, lifting her chin and once again was a duke's daughter, proud and confident. "What are you doing out in the stables, my lord? Are you going to help me give the horses some feed, or did you come out to go for a ride? I do not want to hold you up in any way."

He had intended going for a ride, but the idea was no longer so tempting. Not with Sarah keeping him company. "I will help, most gladly." Giles helped her load biscuits of hay for each horse, check their water and stalls for any steaming piles. After filling the last of the horse's water, he turned to find Sarah sitting on the hay, watching him, her eyes bright with amusement.

"You're laughing at me, why is that?" he asked, washing his hands in a small bowl, before striding over to her.

She grinned. "No reason. I just like seeing you like this. It reminds me of how we used to be when doing things together. Do you remember?"

"I do." He flopped down next to her, leaning back to look up at the wooden rafters above them, the hay acting as a barrier against the cold. Giles had to admit that right at this moment, his blood was heated. No doubt due to the fact he was with Sarah and quite alone at that. "There was nothing better than to explore the wilderness about the estate. I keep meaning to visit the fort out in the woods."

"It's still there." She leaned back next to him, her attention also on the roof.

Giles took the opportunity to watch her, taking in the pretty sweep of her nose, full lips, and faultless skin. He'd dreamed about her so often, but having her near, hearing her voice was so much better than any fantasy.

"I believe the sword you and Hugh carved is also. In the summer, I still use the fort. It's a wonderful place to read and not be disturbed."

"Your father was a clever man. I never doubted that it was not still standing."

She smiled at him, and his stomach clenched. She was so very close. He

wanted to lean across the small space that separated them and kiss her. To do so would be dangerous, considering their current status, but even so, the pull to have her in his arms was overwhelming.

He clenched his fists into the straw at his sides, forcing himself to court her slowly and not keep molesting her with every chance offered.

"He was, wasn't he?" She turned, studying him a moment. "How long are we going to lie here, my lord?"

Giles frowned, meeting her gaze. "Stay here? Did you wish to return to the house? We can, if that is your wish."

"No," she said, chuckling. "I meant to say, how long are we going to lie here before you kiss me, Giles? That is what I'd like to know."

Chapter 7

Sarah was well aware she was playing with fire. Lord Gordan was a reputed rake. A man made for pleasure and fun. Not a gentleman easily brought to heel.

Not that she wished to control him, but she could not bear to hear of any liaisons he had should they continue along this path of courtship. His absence from her life had been severing. To be married and know that one's husband was unfaithful would be unbearable.

Even so, lying beside him in the hay, watching as his eyes darkened with wicked intent, she couldn't help but throw herself into the wild. For so many years, she'd not lived as she ought to have, no more would she wither away, secluded in Kent or Bath.

With an elder brother who hosted scandalous parties and cared little for restraint and her other sibling abroad under a shadow of scandal, she had hidden away, not wanting to be any further embarrassment or fodder for town gossip.

Sarah had managed and accepted her lot in life as well as anyone could in her position. But having Giles's dark-blue eyes all but devour her person as he closed the space between them, she knew to her very core that she was in trouble.

That allowing him such liberties would forever change her and her steadfast denial of her feelings for him that she had long bottled away, corked, and shelved.

His lips brushed hers, warm and soft, and a frisson of need coursed through her blood. He lifted his hand, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. "You're so beautiful. You may not believe me, but I've wanted you for so long. I attended each Season in town only to be disappointed when I heard you were not attending."

Sarah clasped his nape, sliding her hand up into his soft, golden locks. She steeled herself not to be carried away by his words. Their friendship had been distant for so long. It would take time for her to adjust to his enlightenment of what they could have. To trust him as she once had.

"Why did you never attend one of Henry's house parties then, or call at

the Abbey? You knew I was here. You knew I was alone."

Pain crossed his features as she waited for his answer. "I wanted to come and see you. So much, Sarah, but my father kept me busy elsewhere and always demanded I attend the Season and stay in town."

"Had you been able to see me, what would you have said?" *Or done?* The question hovered on her lips and between them. She wanted to know would he have acted sooner. Defied his father for her had he seen her face-to-face. It was a lot harder to deny one's feelings when standing before the person one cared for.

"I should have done what I've wanted to for so long." He kissed her again, urging her to lie on the straw. She adjusted her position as little prickly stalks jabbed through the jacket over her gown. The feel of his tongue begging entry made her gasp, and he delved into her mouth. Warmth settled between her thighs, and she squeezed her legs a little, trying to stem her need. How was it that this man, an enemy only a week before, could make her so willing in his arms?

The kiss turned heated, his demands raw and hard, and unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. Her senses reeled, her breath hitched. She relished Giles like this. A little wild and without restraint. Sarah clasped the lapels of his jacket, holding him against her. His hand slid down her waist, his clever fingers sliding across to tease the undersides of her breasts, but no farther. Frustration made her whimper, and she pushed against him, wanting his hand to move, to kneed her aching flesh.

With each breath she took, her gown scraped against her nipples, spiking pleasure and want. She craved the feel of his hands upon her person. It didn't matter as to where so long as he gave her what she wanted.

His manhood settled against her core, and she whimpered, a spike of pleasure making her wet. Even with the abundance of skirts and multiple petticoats and two layers of stockings, Sarah could feel the substantial size of him. His hardness tempted her to squirm and rub up against him like a house cat looking for a good scratch.

She gasped, breaking the kiss, needing to calm her racing heart. Giles did not stop his assault. Oh no, he kissed his way down her neck, his tongue and teeth teasing her earlobe. The heavenly sensation wrought her senses to flee, and she lay back, welcoming him to do more, to take her if he wished, just so long as the delicious sensations coursing across her body right at that moment never ended.

"You're so beautiful, Sarah." Giles breathed in the sweet-smelling scent of roses her skin always held. He would forever love the pretty, petaled flower for the reminder of her.

His body roared with need, his cock hard and primed. Sarah's legs wrapped tightly about his waist as he rocked into her, sliding his cock against her cunny. Oh god, it felt good. Too good to stop even though they could be walked in on at any moment.

He was a rutting bastard to tease her, in a stable no less, but he could not halt. Did not want to pause the delicious heat that coursed down his spine and threaded into his groin. His balls tightened, release all but imminent.

Her fingers scored down his back through his greatcoat. Her little mewls of need told him he could make her come this way. The light flush on her cheeks and eyes heavy-lidded with passion were all he needed to know she was at the point of no return.

Giles slowed his undulation against her, needing to drag out their interlude. She moaned, closing her eyes, and the sight of her enjoyment almost undid his control.

"You approve, my darling?" he whispered against her ear, licking it for good measure and eliciting a gasp from her kissable lips.

"Yes," she sighed, pushing against him and meeting his every stroke.

He bit down on the inside of his mouth, stemming his release. He could not continue to tease for much longer, not unless he wanted to walk back into the house with a stain at the front of his pants.

"You make me want so much, Sarah."

"You make me need too," she said, her words a whispered sigh of delight.

Giles reached down, lifting her leg higher on his hip. The urge to hoist up her gown, rip open his falls and fuck her, here in the stable, overwhelmed his senses. His control strained to a snapping point.

The sound of men's voices sounded outside the stable walls. The thought of being caught in such a situation doused his desire like sand on hot coals, and Giles wrenched up off Sarah, pulling her to stand as he did so.

Confusion clouded her sweet face, and he quickly checked her gown, removing the pieces of hay that he could see were stuck in her hair. She didn't help, merely stared at him, her eyes wide and heavy-lidded with unsated desire. He grinned, knowing he'd discombobulated her to the point of silence.

Giles dragged them before one of the horse's stalls, putting space between them. He leaned over the door, making it seem as if they were discussing the

horse stabled inside. The stable doors slid open and in walked three men, one of whom Giles recognized as the head stableman.

"Good afternoon, my lord, Lady Sarah," Bruce, the eldest and most superior of the three, said, tipping his hat.

"Good afternoon," Sarah said, stepping away from Giles and heading for the door. "I hope you enjoyed your afternoon with your families. Did they savor the hams we sent over?"

Bruce pulled his cap off his head, holding it before him, a wide, genuine smile playing about his mouth. "It was most extravagant, my lady. We thank you and His Grace for your kindness."

Giles watched as Sarah reached out, clasping the older man's arm in affection. "You are most welcome, and it was our pleasure."

She left them then, and Giles remembered that he had come out for a ride, but no longer wanted to. Watching Lady Sarah saunter out of sight, he could not think of anyone he'd prefer to ride at this very moment other than her.

He bid the workers a good afternoon and set out after her, determined to finish what they had started.

Chapter 8

Sarah did not make it very far into the house when she was dragged into the drawing room to have her likeness sketched by Lady Sebastian, who was renowned for her lifelike drawings of people using crayons.

Molly came to sit beside her, chattering of the house party and their plans over the coming days. Her closest friends were seated about them, watching as Sarah had her likeness drawn, they too busy with ideas for the new duchess.

Sarah absently listened as they gossiped and laughed about the past Season and the new one to come. What milestones their children had achieved and the Christmas Ball here at the Abbey, which was coming up.

None of the conversation points drew Sarah in. Nothing would, she was sure. After what she had experienced in the stables with Giles, she doubted she would ever be so again.

Who knew that a man could create a riot of sensations throughout her body, make her want to throw away her well-behaved self and see what else Giles could make her feel?

He was utterly a master at seduction, and she'd been only too ready for a tryst in the hay like some housemaid too free with her favors.

Sarah glanced up and met the eyes of the Duchess of Carlisle. She schooled her features, not liking the knowing tilt of the duchess's lips. Heat suffused her face. Why was Her Grace looking at her so? Did she know something about her venture with Giles only a short time ago?

Impossible, and yet, something told Sarah Her Grace was more perceptive than the others and saw something different in her.

"Oh my, Lady Sarah, the sketch is positively breathtaking. You look most beautiful and natural in this image," Marchioness Ryley said, standing behind Lady Sebastian as she continued to draw.

Molly walked about the easel and took in the image, her attention snapping to Sarah, a contemplative look in her eye. Oh no, not her sister-in-law too!

"Very interesting indeed. I think you shall like the likeness, Sarah," Molly said, smiling at her.

Lady Sebastian set down the crayon she was using and surveyed her drawing with pride. "I think it captures Lady Sarah honestly." Her ladyship picked up the parchment, handing it to Sarah. "Here you are, my dear, you may do with this drawing as you wish."

Sarah took the sketch and studied it, a croak of distress lodging in her throat at what she saw. Did she truly look to others as Lady Sebastian had expressed her?

Her cheeks were flush with color, her hair not as pristine as some of the other ladies present, and why would it be after a romp in the hay? Her lips were a deep shade of pink, and swollen. She bit her lip, her body remembering the passionate embrace and wanting more. Her eyes held a faraway expression as if she were still in Lord Gordan's arms.

Where she belonged...

Sarah lifted her hand to her cheek, feeling the heat from her blush on her fingers. Oh, dear Lord. Did Molly suspect? Duchess Carlisle certainly did, she feared.

"Thank you," she said, standing and starting for the door. "I'm most grateful and will cherish it always."

Sarah fled the room, not bothering with an explanation as to why. She smiled in welcome to the few gentlemen who milled about the foyer, some of them heading toward the drawing room. No doubt, they had been playing billiards or taking part in the gaming room that Hugh had set up for the duration of the house party.

Her room's safety beckoned, a place where she could hide the drawing from anyone else having to see. What would they think if they knew the truth? That Lady Sebastian had captured her every thought, her every desire, and crushing need that coursed through her blood still, after being with Giles in the stable.

She was almost to her room when a gentleman who came out of the servants' stairs stopped her dead in her tracks. Giles moved into the passage, unaware of her rushing to her room. He glanced up, pleasure filling his features and leaving her breathless once again.

"Sarah." He came up to her and, checking they were alone, lifted a sprig of mistletoe above her head. He leaned down and stole a kiss. "I missed you now."

He stood back, his gaze latching on to the drawing. "May I see it?" he asked.

Sarah swallowed the nerves that tumbled about her belly at having this attractive, eligible lord, hers to do with as she pleased, before her again. "It's a silly sketch, nothing to mind." Sarah did not want him to see it, or anyone else. If Giles saw the expression on her face, reminiscing about her escapades with his lordship, he would know her secret.

That no matter what she said otherwise, no matter how much of a wall she built up around herself when it came to the man before her, he merely needed to clap his hands, and she came to attention.

Silly little fool that she was, she could not help herself. She wanted him. Had wanted Giles for years and wished that he'd been her knight in shining armor, the man who rode to St. Albans Abbey and saved her from her self-isolated fate.

He had not. No one had. Her brother Henry had made sure of that with his scandalous escapades in town after Hugh left.

He tipped his head to the side. "Let me see it, Sarah. I will not show anyone." He reached for the drawing, and she jerked it away.

"Did you draw it yourself?" he asked after a moment.

"No." She shook her head, her cheeks flaming. "I need to freshen up."

He grinned, knowing full well why she needed to bathe and dress for dinner. "Please let me see?"

He spoke in a soothing, cajoling voice, and she sighed, holding the sketch out to him. Not able to deny him anything, it would seem, for very long. "Very well, but do not say a word about it. I need no commentary on the likeness."

Giles took the parchment, holding up the sketch to take in the image. His mouth dried at the sight of Sarah, the distant light in her eyes, the knowing, wicked grin on her swollen lips.

He cleared his throat. "When was this drawn?"

Sarah crossed her arms over her chest. "Lady Sebastian was doing them in the drawing room just now."

The image of Sarah made his gut clench. Never had he thought an artist could capture a moment in someone's life so well, but Lady Sebastian certainly had. Sarah looked every bit a woman who had been thoroughly ravished. A woman who also enjoyed every lascivious, sinful moment of it.

He licked his lips, remembering their tryst in the stable. "May I keep it?" He would treasure it until the time came that he could have another one done

of Sarah when she was his wife, and he was beside her.

"You cannot." She snatched it out of his hand, placing it behind her back. "What if someone sees you with it? They will ask questions."

He shrugged, nonplussed. "So what if they do?"

Sarah checked the passage for guests before rounding on him. "People will suspect if you have the drawing that there is something between us."

"There is something between us," he said, leaning down and whispering against her lips. He met her startled eyes, winking. "I want there to be something between us, Sarah. After what happened in the stables, I thought you would understand that more than any other."

"Ho, Gordan, I have been looking for you."

Sarah gasped, stepping back as if she were threatened by hot coals, her back coming up hard against the door.

Giles turned, smiling at Hugh, who strode toward them. "Albans, I too was just coming to find you," he lied, having had no intention. Truth be told, he was about to prove that he wanted Sarah in his life in every possible way that he could.

In his room. Alone, if she were willing.

"Come, man, we're about to start a game of billiards, and I need you to make up the numbers. All the other fellows are too busy cozying up to the ladies in the drawing room."

Giles nodded. "Of course," he said, bowing quickly to Sarah, before starting down the hall.

Hugh lingered, looking at the drawing that Sarah clutched behind her back. "I see you had your likeness sketched, Sarah. May I see it?" Hugh held out his hand, and Giles watched as Sarah stared at his appendage as if it were some crazed body part.

"No, I'm sorry. I will see you at dinner," she said, rushing into her room and shutting the door with a decided slam.

Hugh turned to stare at Giles, a frown between his brow. "Whatever is wrong with her, do you suppose?" Hugh approached Giles as he moved toward the stairs, knowing it was better to answer this question than Sarah, who seemed to be struggling with whatever was happening between them.

Affection. Enjoyment. Pleasure...

"I believe she is tired. I ran into her earlier at the stables. Maybe she needs a rest before dinner this evening."

"Yes, perhaps you're right." Hugh sighed. "Sisters, I will have to get used

to having one again after all this time. Even so, I shall check in on her tonight to ensure she is well."

Giles didn't reply, not wanting to give Hugh any reason to suspect him of anything. Not yet, at least. He needed to win over Sarah before he won over his friend. "Tell me, who are we playing against?"

"Ah, Whitstone, and Duncannon. Both of whom believe we require a good trouncing."

Giles scoffed. "We shall see about that." He never liked to lose, not in a game of billiards or life. By the end of the Christmas house party, he too would win Sarah's heart.

Just as he had it ten years before.

Chapter 9

The following evening Sarah stood before the roaring hearth in the ballroom where some spontaneous dancing had been organized. The ladies took turns in playing the pianoforte for those who wished to dance while others had a turn about the room.

The room smelled of pine, one of the three Christmas trees at St. Albans Abbey stood in the corner of the room without decoration, the tradition of decorating the tree to happen Christmas eve.

A portion of the yule log burned in the grate. Sarah took in the many merry guests, conceding that it wasn't so bad to have all the guests stay at the estate. Over the few days that they had been here, they had been both kind and welcoming, not bringing up her time away or the reasons that occurred.

Hugh and Molly seemed to be enjoying themselves as well, and she couldn't help but wonder if they would return to Rome as much as they had stated they would. Certainly, they seemed very well placed here in Kent, with their new baby and marriage.

Sarah sipped her milk punch, her attention snapping to the door when Giles entered, Lady Rackliffe beside him, looking as pleased as she always did when around his lordship.

A prickle of annoyance threaded through her at the sight of them together. They made a handsome pair, both light-haired, attractive, and titled, should a marriage happen between them, they would be a highly placed couple in society.

So would you, should you marry Lord Gordan.

Sarah did not move, merely watched as Lady Rackliffe leaned up to whisper something in Giles's ear. He nodded before striding away.

Her hold on her crystal flute tightened before she took a calming breath, reminding herself that Giles had asked her to trust him, let him court her, not Lady Rackliffe. He would not play her the fool.

Her brother strode over to her, and she schooled her features, not wanting him to know anything about her muddled thoughts on Giles. "Sarah, my dear, I'm glad to catch you on your own. I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. You seemed a little distressed when I came upon you with Lord Gordan."

Sarah shook her head, wrapping her arm around Hugh's. "Nothing at all is wrong. I was merely tired after attending my horse in the stables. How did your billiards game go? I hope you won, as you wished to."

He smiled down at her, his eyes bright with happiness. "Of course. Whitstone was all talk when it came to his ability." Hugh chuckled. "Are you enjoying yourself? We have not left you alone too often, I hope. I do want our first Christmas together again to be a pleasant one."

"Not at all. Surprisingly, despite my earlier concerns, I have enjoyed myself immensely. Everyone has been kind and not bold enough to bring up Henry and what he did. Have you found the same?"

He nodded, his face clouding a moment at the reminder of Henry and what he had done to Miss Cox and Hugh, especially. "I have. Molly seems to be the most accomplished hostess too. How lucky we are," he said, smiling down at her, the love he had for his wife shining in his eyes.

"Molly is simply the best choice you have ever made. If I have not said before, Hugh, I am so very happy for you both."

"Thank you, Sarah. Your words mean a lot to me." Hugh gestured to the dancers. "I hope you're going to partake in a jig or waltz this evening. The most handsome sister in attendance should not be a wallflower."

"Perhaps I will." She grinned, hoping that Giles would move over to where she stood and ask her.

Hugh studied her a moment, a small frown between his brows. "You have been spending some time with Lord Gordan these past few days. Each time I look up, you're together partaking in conversation. Is there something that I should be aware of between you two?"

Heat rushed to her face, and she prayed he did not notice. "What? No, nothing is happening between his lordship and myself. We're friends, just as we once were."

"If I recall correctly, you had a falling out just after I left. Lord Gordan wrote to me and told me of his disappointment."

"What? He wrote to you and told you? What did he say?"

Hugh stared at her as if she had lost her mind, which, if she found out that Giles had told Hugh of her kissing him, she may very well do.

"That you disagreed over a trivial matter, and you refused to speak to him. That is all he said."

Sarah sighed, swallowing her fear and mortification that what she had done to Giles others may know about. And not just anyone, but her brother.

"That is all in the past now. I have moved on from that difference of opinion."

Hugh's lips lifted into a half smile. "I am glad for it, for I do believe Lord Gordan likes you, Sarah. More than you possibly know."

Oh no, she knew how much Giles liked her, and she had enjoyed every second of him showing her so yesterday in the stables. Even now, her body yearned for his touch, his kiss, his breathy gasps against her ear when he'd undulated against her flesh.

"We're friends. Of course, he admires me." She sipped her punch to stop from having to say any more.

"I'm not blind, sister. I have seen the way he watches you, waits for you when you're not present. He thinks that I do not discern, but I do."

Sarah made the mistake of being caught in her brother's penetrating stare. She bit her lip, thinking it best not to say anything at all lest she blurt out her fear that she was falling in love with the marquess. If it were not love, it most certainly was already lust.

"He does not look at me so. You're too overcome with Christmas festivity to see clearly," she teased.

He chuckled, the sound mocking. "I'm not blind, no matter what you may think. I ask for one thing if there is anything between you. Do not cause a scandal by doing anything untoward. There are many eyes on our family, thanks to Henry. We must not allow the *ton* to have any further fodder to use against us."

Sarah nodded, shamed by her brother's words. Had anyone come across her and Giles yesterday in the stables, she would have been ruined. Her family once again the main talking point of gossip in town. She would have been dragged down the aisle to become Lord Gordan's wife before she could explain what she was about.

Not that being his wife was ever so bad. There had been a time that she'd wanted that above anything else, but he had chosen another. That that other person happened to be at this house party was merely an inconvenience. Even so, it did not change the fact that he was now courting her, not anyone else.

If she behaved, waited to see where her newfound friendship with Giles led, maybe they would be married before the next Season. "I will not do anything that could cause you or Molly harm. I promise," she said to her brother, just as a shadow fell before them both.

Sarah glanced up, her stomach fluttering, and she knew who was before

them before observing him for herself.

"Lord Gordan," she said, dipping into a curtsy. "I hope you've come to our little impromptu dance ready to escort many a young woman onto the boards."

His eyes bored into her, the heat that she could see swirling in his blue orbs sent a frisson of desire to pool at her core. The man before her was determined to throw her life into a delightful turmoil.

"I am, Lady Sarah." He held out his hand. "Will you do me the honor?"

Sarah looked up at her brother, and the knowing look he bestowed upon her told her all she needed to know. Her brother had seen and approved. All that was left was for her to decide if she also did.

Sarah placed her hand atop of Giles's arm. He covered her hand immediately with his own, leading her onto the dance floor. "What is the next dance, do you know?"

The strains of a waltz started, and he grinned, a devilishly wicked light in his eyes. "I never leave anything to chance, my lady. Now, come here," he said, pulling her into his arms.

Sarah went willingly. At this time, should he ask her of anything, she was sure she would do it.

Even say yes to this handsome marquess.

Chapter 10

Giles made sure he danced with every woman present at the impromptu ball that the Duke of St. Albans had organized. The Christmas ball was still a week away, but with the need to keep those in attendance happy and occupied, a small dance did not hurt any of the plans.

The main Christmas ball would have the families of the nobility who lived close by in attendance, a much grander and more formal affair.

He had danced with Sarah twice already and knew he should not ask again. His interest would be noted and would only bring more eyes watching them.

He didn't need that annoyance. He wanted to spend as much time as he could with Sarah without everyone watching their every move. He needed to make her trust that he was in earnest. Explain to her, when the time was right, why he'd not thrown Lady Rackliffe aside when Sarah had kissed him.

That his betrothed had thrown him over had been a welcome reprieve from a choice he had not wanted to make in the first place.

Nothing stood in his way of having Sarah as his wife now. As much as he loved and missed his parents, they were no longer living, and he could choose whomever he wished.

The night was coming to an end, and he bid those about him goodnight, having already done so with Sarah before she took a turn about the floor with her brother.

Giles left the ballroom, heading for the servant's stairs over that of the main staircase. It came out just beside his suite of rooms, and there was less of a chance of him being accosted by Lady Rackliffe, who appeared determined to take up as much of his time as she could.

He pushed through the servant's stairwell door into the passage near his room, the paneled door unsuspecting to anyone walking up the corridor. A feminine gasp sounded, and he closed the door quickly to see Sarah looking at him as if he'd accosted her.

"Apologies, Sarah. I did not think any of the family were headed to bed as yet."

She clasped her chest, her eyes wide with fright. "You startled me, that is

all. I wasn't expecting anyone to barrel through. What are you doing using the servant's stairs again?"

He glanced down the hall to ensure they were alone. "Avoiding Lady Rackliffe. She's quite determined to catch me under a bough of mistletoe."

Sarah's delightful mouth twisted into a mulish line. Was she jealous? Did she not like the thought of someone else vying for his attention? He could well understand the sentiment. He, too, did not want to think of Sarah being with anyone else but him. It had only been by chance that he'd stood by all the years to take over the title that she had not married.

Had he been a man, stood up to his father and demanded he was marrying whomever he liked, they could have possibly been married for several years by now.

But he had not. He'd been a coward. Had allowed his father's prejudice and threats to keep him away from her. Thank bloody Christ that he did not have that issue any longer.

He was a bastard to think that way, to be now able to court Sarah meant that his father was gone. Even so, his sire had been wrong to demand such from him. He would not do it to his son when the time came.

"Lady Rackliffe does seem determined. Now that she is a widow, you do not wish to try your advantage at winning her heart a second time?"

"Hell no," he said, his tone more severe than he'd meant to project.

Sarah started at his words, staring at him. "She will be disappointed," she said after a time.

Giles stepped closer to her, placing but a hairsbreadth between them. "Let her be. She is not the woman I want, as you well know."

Sarah's eyes twinkled with a knowing light, and his body yearned to pull her against him. Kiss her soundly until they were both sated.

"Did you enjoy dancing this evening? You were quite the popular gentleman."

"I aim to please." Giles reached out, the urge to touch her sweet face overwhelming. Her skin was soft and warm, and he ran his thumb along her jaw, swiping it over her bottom lip. Her lips opened on a sigh, and his body hardened. "I want to please you."

Sarah shivered at his words. She wanted him to please her, too, in all ways. Thoughts of being with him as they were yesterday afternoon flittered through her mind, made her body yearn and ache.

His stormy, blue eyes darkened, enticing and wicked as ever. She had been so very angry at him for so long, how was it that a mere kiss, a sweet word, and roguish touch could make her let go of what had happened between them?

Because you were old friends, you loved him once.

All true of course, she had loved him, had been his friend, until he tried to marry a woman even Sarah could have told him would not make him happy. Sarah had long believed it was only she who could make him so, and now, after all these years apart, it would seem she was correct in that estimation.

What was she to do about it?

"Please me as you did yesterday in the stable? I do believe that was teasing, not pleasing, my lord." Her naughty words were unlike anything she'd ever spoken before. But she could not stop herself. Her body was not her own. Not anymore. She wanted the man before her to finish what he had started in the hay.

A growl emitted from him, and her breath hitched. "You're playing with fire, Sarah. Do not tempt me. I'm already at my limit when it comes to you."

She raised her brow, wanting to stir him more. See where their interlude could end. "Really? So if I were to step closer to you..." Sarah did as she suggested, her body close against his, her breasts grazing his chest. Her nipples pebbled, and moisture pooled at her core when his hardness settled into the dip of her stomach.

Sarah bit her lip, reaching up to drape her arms about his shoulders. "Your tolerance would snap?"

"Fuck, yes, it would." He picked her up, walked two steps, and pushed her up against the paneled wall. His mouth settled over hers, deep and commanding, taking her lips with a punishing edge.

Sarah clasped his shoulders, let go of her inhibitions, and drank from his desire. Let it spark hers to a flame. His hands slid down her back, clutching at her dress as if to rip it from her person.

Desire and need thrummed through his actions, his strong hands shaking against her body told her without words what she did to him. He hoisted one of her legs against his hip at the same time he ground against her, reminiscent of yesterday.

Oh yes...

They moaned, and with a nip to her lip, Giles pulled back, staring at her as if he were unsure, uncertain of what they were doing. Sarah knew exactly

what they were about, and she wasn't going to let him end this interlude before he finished what they had started.

"I shouldn't be doing this, Sarah. Not until we're married."

The word marriage acted like a balm against any fears she may have held. Sarah kissed him quickly, a light brushing of lips. "Make love to me, Giles. I do not want to go to bed alone."

He leaned his forehead against hers, his eyes pools of uncertainty and need.

"We cannot," he gasped as she rubbed against him, using him to soothe the ache between her legs.

Sarah pushed him away with one hand before sauntering toward his bedroom door. "Yes, we can, and you will. I've never heard the Marquess of Graham being a man who did not satisfy. Do not start now. Not with me."

Chapter 11

Giles followed Sarah into his room, shutting and locking the door to ensure they were not disturbed. She was a goddess, her gold silk gown with gauze shimmering over the fabric gave her an air of decadence and privilege, of beauty that was both outside and in.

She sat on the edge of his bed, her wicked, come-hither look she threw him threatening to buckle his knees.

Giles strode over to her, wrenching his cravat and jacket off, dropping them to the floor without a second thought. Within a few moments, he stood before her with nothing but his breeches, his bare feet refusing to move from the soft Aubusson rug.

"I'll need help with my gown," she said, leaning over and giving him her back.

He drank in the sight of her straight spine, her swanlike neck, and sun-kissed hair pulled up into a decorative motif.

Thoughts of pushing her onto her hands, racking up her gown, and taking her from behind bombarded his mind. Giles pushed down his baser, harsher needs. Sarah was a maid, her first time with him could not be so, but one day. Soon, he promised himself. They would enjoy other ways of being together.

Giles made short work of the small, decorative buttons down her back. He slipped the gown down her arms, taking the opportunity to kiss her slight shoulders, the tops of her arms. She smelled divine, of flowers and a unique scent that was wholly Sarah.

Goose bumps rose on her skin, and he quickly pulled at the ties of her corset. Undressing Sarah was akin to unwrapping a gift. Having Sarah, such as she now was, willing in his arms and his, was the best Yuletide present he could have possessed. Her gown pooled at her waist, and Giles ripped her shift over her head, her corset next, discarding it somewhere about the foot of the bed.

She stood, and her dress fell to the floor. Giles took her into his arms, tumbling them down onto the soft linen. They bounced, and she chuckled, the throaty tenor of her voice hardened his cock.

He pulled back to admire the view of her before him. Her cheeks were

flushed, her breasts full and heavy, all but begged for his touch. His mouth watered and, unable to deny himself a moment longer, he gave in to the desire thrumming through his blood like a raging torrent.

Giles licked her beaded nipple before taking her into his mouth. She moaned, her fingers spiking into his hair, and he kissed and paid homage to her breast while his other hand kneaded and teased the other.

"Oh, yes," she sighed. "You have no notion of how long I've wanted you this way."

He inwardly cursed all the missed opportunities, the years they were not together so. He'd wanted Sarah for as long as he could remember, and from this day forward, he would not be separated from her again.

Nothing would deny him her hand.

"Marry me." Giles kissed his way down her chest to her stomach, paying homage to the little freckle that sat beside her naval. He went farther, running his hand down the inside of her leg before touching the wet heat between her thighs.

He felt her start at his touch, and he looked up along her body, meeting the question in her hooded gaze.

"Lie back. I want to show you what we can have."

She bit her lip, sending desire straight to his cock. He pushed down his own needs, promising himself his turn would come. Soon, she would be his, and they would be one.

Giles kissed the inside of her thigh, breathing deep the sweet, musky scent of her mons. She undulated beneath him, and he held her legs apart, wanting to see her wet, pink lips that were his to enjoy.

He licked her swollen nubbin, and she gasped, her hands no longer pushing at his shoulders, but wrapping into his hair, holding him in place.

A dark, hungry need tore through him. He licked along her cunny, kissing and lathing her honeyed flesh to a fever. He made sure to stroke and frustrate her nubbin, running his thumb between her lips and tantalizing her where they would soon be joined.

She mewled, gasping with each of his tongue's strokes. His balls tightened, his cock heavy and erect, his release taunting deep in his gut.

"Yes, Giles. Ohhh, please, more."

He'd give her as much as she liked. He slipped one finger into her scorching heat. Her body tightened, contracted about him, and it took all of his self-control not to wrench up, placing his aching cock at her entrance and

take her.

Soon. Soon, they would be one.

She lifted her bottom off the bed, undulating against his mouth, and he knew she was close. Without fear or shame, she rode his face, took pleasure from him, and never would his life be the same.

He would marry the woman beneath him. From this day forward, he could not live without her. How he had survived all the years was beyond him.

He kissed her fully, lathing her to a writhing frenzied, begging lover before he suckled on her clitoris, and she gasped, moaning as her release spiraled through her.

An overwhelming sense of power thrummed through his veins as he milked her of her pleasure. With ragged breath, and only when he was sure she was satisfied, did he move.

He came up over her, wrapping her legs about his hips. She watched him, her eyes pools of satiated desire and expectation. A small quirk tilted her lips. He placed himself at her entrance, meeting her eyes.

Sarah reached up, wrapping her arms about his neck, and he thrust into her, taking her virginity, and finally, they were one.

Lady Sarah Farley was his.

Sarah had thought Giles taking her would hurt. How very wrong she was. After his wickedly clever mouth had brought her to such pleasure that even now she could not catch her breath, his intrusion into her body only brought more pleasure.

With each thrust, it teased, thrummed, and reignited the climax she had just experienced.

She wanted him deeper, harder, faster. With a wantonness that she did not know she possessed, she spread her legs wider, hooked them higher on his back, and gave herself over to him.

To pleasure.

"Sarah," he gasped against her lips. "I've wanted you for so long."

"And I you." She held him against her, needing him to take her. To give her the soul-shattering pleasure he'd just bestowed. Once would never be enough. She needed more. Now.

"Take me," she panted. He did not disappoint. He thrust hard and deep. The sound of their flesh meeting, of creating pleasure echoed throughout the

room and was music to her ears.

He kissed her, and she took the opportunity to run her hands down his back. Sweat-slicked skin met her fingers as she ran them down the taut, flexing muscles beside his spine. His bottom thrust against her and she clasped him there, enjoying the feel of him within her, taking her.

She would never get enough of this man.

The pleasure his mouth wrought teased her yet again, and she rose to meet his every move, and then she was there, spiraling out of control. Pleasure rocked through her, more pronounced, coarser, and overwhelming her soul.

"Giles," she cried.

He moaned, taking her, their bodies a burst of needs and wants, of receiving and giving.

"Sarah," he panted against her lips, kissing her softly. "Please tell me you will marry me now?"

She grinned, snuggling into the crook of his arm when he rolled to his side, pulling her up against him. She lay one leg over him, idly playing with his chest, which rose and fell in quick pants.

"Yes," she said, looking up and meeting his gaze. "I will marry you." And finally, he would be hers. Always.

Chapter 12

Sarah stuck her head out into the darkened passage just before dawn, glancing up and down to ensure no one was about. The servants would be up soon, and if she were to sneak back to her bedroom without being seen, now was her chance.

She turned, taking one last glimpse of Giles as he slept in the bed they'd shared. He lay on his back, his arm sprawled out over her pillow where she'd rested. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and regretfully, she turned, slipping into the hall and closing the door behind her, taking care not to make any loud noises.

"Good morning, sister."

Sarah squealed, slapping a hand over her mouth before she woke any of the other guests. Footsteps sounded in the room she'd just emerged from, and the door wrenched open.

Giles stood at the threshold, hastily tied breeches his only attire, his chest, one she'd never tire of looking upon flexing with each breath. The moonlight from the window at the end of the hall, the only illuminating light.

"What is wrong?" Giles's words faded at the sight of Hugh glaring at them both.

Her brother pushed Sarah out the way and, with a sickening crunch, his fist connected with Giles's nose.

Sarah gasped, watched as Giles flayed backward before he fell with a crashing thud on the floor. Sarah kneeled at Giles' side, checking him as best she could. He pinched the bridge of his nose, blood seeped between his fingers and onto his lips, staining his teeth. He held up a hand, stilling her brother from doing any more damage.

"I suppose I deserved your wrath, but I'll not be hit a second time," Giles said, letting Sarah help him to stand.

Hugh shut the door to the bedroom, enclosing all three of them in the room. "What the hell do you think you're doing with my sister?"

Hugh glared at them both, his eyes wild with temper. Never had Sarah seen Hugh so incensed and shame threaded through her that she'd caused him such distress. If this were to get out to the other guests what she had done

with Giles, the scandal would be all the *ton* would talk of next Season. Marriage or not.

That Hugh had asked her not to cause a scandal was the veriest dishonor.

"I asked Sarah to marry me, and she has agreed. I would never touch her had she said no."

Sarah raised her brow, unsure that was true. She was certain that if she wished it, she could have seduced Giles before last night.

"Is this true, Sarah?" her brother asked, pinning her to her spot, the anger and disappointment shimmering in his eyes, eliminating any ire she felt at being caught. At receiving a thorough set down from her brother over her conduct.

"Giles has asked for me to be his wife, and I want that in return." She met Giles's gaze, her heart taking a little leap at the warmth and adoration she read in his blue orbs.

"How long have you been behaving in this manner?" Her brother shook his head. "I should have guessed yesterday when I caught you both upstairs, looking as guilty as you do now."

"Excuse me, Hugh, but I'm not a child. I'm eight and twenty and quite capable of making my own decisions."

Her brother pointed his finger at her nose. "You can make decisions, Sarah, but this one is what I specifically asked you not to."

"No one needs to know. You're the only person who has seen me this morning. If we leave now, announce the betrothal in the morning, all will be well."

Hugh glared at them both, his balled fists flexing at his sides. "I ought to call you out, Gordan." His jaw clenched, and he took a deep breath. "But I suppose since you're to be my brother-in-law by choice not by my decree, I shall let you live."

Sarah sighed, and Giles reached over to take her hand. She stared at the blood that marked his chest and face. Sarah moved over to the pitcher of water and bowl in his room, poured some water and rinsed out a washcloth.

"Here," she said, handing it to Giles. He gave her his thanks and set it against his nose, wincing a little as he did so.

"I'm sorry you had to find out about Sarah and me in this way, Hugh, but I love her. I want her to be my wife. I promise that later today, I was coming to ask you for your permission to make her my wife."

Hugh rubbed a hand through his hair, the dark circles under his eyes

telling Sarah her brother was weary.

"We are sorry, Hugh. Please don't be angry. I want this time to be a happy one." It had been so very long since she'd been so content.

He stared at them both without a word before he nodded, once. "Very well. I give you my consent, and I do wish you both very happy. You can be married as soon as we can gain a special license." Her brother met her gaze, some of the anger dispelling from his dark orbs. "Congratulations, Sarah."

She went into his arms, holding him tight. "Thank you, Hugh, for being so understanding."

"Yes, well," he said, relenting and pulling her tight in his arms. "You may not have gone about this the way that I asked, but it is done now. All will be well, I'm sure." He set her back and started for the door. He paused, turning to watch them both. "Come, Sarah. I will escort you to your room."

Sarah met Giles's eyes, and he nodded, winking at her. She smiled, bidding him goodbye, her words but a whisper, and followed her brother from the room.

He didn't say anything to her as they made their way back to her room. He opened her bedroom door, pushing it wide. "In you go, dear sister. Do not let me catch you out and about the house again. Not until you're a married woman. Do I make myself clear?"

She swallowed her retort, wanting to remind him that he wasn't so very well-behaved when Molly was in Rome. Sarah was privy to how they came together, so her brother's high-handedness was a little galling.

Even so, she would do as he bade because, in the end, she would marry Giles. The sacrifice would be worth the wait. "Perfectly clear, brother. I shall do as you ask."

He watched until the door to her room closed. Once more alone, she ran over to her bed, slipping under the soft sheets and heavy blankets. She smiled, contentment thrumming through her veins. She was engaged to Giles, Marquess Gordan. Excitement somersaulted her stomach, and the day could not start soon enough. She wanted to shout it from the rooftops that they would be married. Her husband and she his wife.

How well that sounded to her ears. A dream that finally came true.

Chapter 13

Before dinner the same day, Sarah sat beside Giles in the drawing room, an overwhelming sense of happiness consuming her as her brother announced that she and Giles were engaged.

Congratulations sounded loud in the room. An array of guests came up to them to wish them very happy.

Sarah laughed, thanked each one in turn. Giles pulled her into his side, watching her with an expression that made her stomach twist into delicious knots. "I hope you're happy, my lady?" he asked, his eyes dark pools of an emotion she hoped would be voiced again soon. She wanted to hear him say that he loved her as much as she had always loved him.

"So happy," she said, meaning it more than anything she'd ever said before in her life.

Dinner that evening was a boisterous, excitable evening. Everyone seemed to be in a rush to speak, drink wine, celebrate the Christmas season, and Sarah and Giles's betrothal, which only added to the celebrations.

The after-dinner drinks were no different. Sarah sat on a settee watching as Molly and Hugh toasted her and Giles yet again, her brother's wide smile and laughing eyes telling all in attendance how very pleased he was for his sister. Even if this morning, he'd been so very mad.

Sarah caught the eye of Lady Rackliffe, who excused herself from her small social circle and strolled over to Sarah.

The forthcoming conversation, as awkward as it would be, had to be had. Lady Rackliffe was, after all, once betrothed to Giles. No doubt, the woman would, at the very least, have to remind Sarah that she was asked first, no matter what the outcome had been for them both.

"Lady Sarah, may I say how very happy I am for you and Lord Gordan? You shall be very happy, I'm sure," she said, sitting next to her and sipping her wine.

"Thank you, my lady. That is very kind of you to say." Sarah almost rolled her eyes at the banality of their conversation. Even so, she did not wish to extend their little tête-a-tête any more than she had to. They had never been friends in the past. Certainly, Lady Rackliffe thought herself above most

within society, even within her own circle of friends.

"I must say the news of your betrothal to Giles has shocked me. I did not even know there was anything representing affection between you both. From knowing Giles all these years, how he lived his life in London, I'm surprised you accepted him so quickly."

Sarah stiffened her back, refusing to let this woman's words deflate her agreeable mood. "Lord Gordan," she said, reminding Lady Rackliffe that she no longer had the right to use his given name. She threw that away the moment she threw his lordship over for Lord Rackliffe. "He is an honorable man. I have little concern about his life before me. I think him the best of men and one who'll make me extremely happy."

The idea of days and nights in his company, to wake up in his arms, have his children, sent a thrill through her she'd not felt since the moment she closed the space between them and kissed him on a moonlit terrace in London ten years before.

Lady Rackliffe's mouth pinched into a displeased line. "Oh, I'm sure he will not stray, my dear. But," she said, biting her lip, "it does seem odd that his morals would allow this change of heart. You know why, do you not, he never offered for your hand during your first Season. Why no one offered."

Sarah was not sure she wanted to know, certainly not from this viperous, gossiping snake.

"I do not know, no." Nor did she wish to be privy to the details. What was in the past as far as she was concerned needed to stay there. If she were to endure the *ton* and re-enter society, she had to be able to let go of their wrongdoing to her brother and move forward without hate in her heart.

Lady Rackliffe chuckled a high-pitched cackle that made her ears hurt. "The scandal, of course," she whispered, making sure no one else could hear. "Giles's father was friends with your late mama. He did not approve of the scandal Lord Hugh had bestowed on the family. Of course, even knowing the truth as we do now that it was the duke, and oldest brother Henry who was at fault, the late Lord Gordan did not know that.

"He saw his good friend, the duchess heartbroken that her son had acted in such a way and refused to counter a friendship between Giles and Hugh. Had demanded Giles remove himself from your family and cease all contact. Of course, he did. Giles was always a good son to his parents. He set off to London, courted me, and asked for my hand before the first week of the Season had ended."

Sarah swallowed past the lump in her throat at Lady Rackliffe's words. Was this true? Had Giles thrown them aside like trash to appease his father? She took a sip of wine, needing at that very moment more fortification than this. A hard whiskey or brandy would do very well to dull the ache in her chest.

"You are mistaken, my lady. Giles would not have forgone a lifelong friendship with my family regarding a scandal that was of the duke's making."

Lady Rackliffe shrugged, smirking. "Well, did he visit Lord Farley when he lived in Rome? Did Lord Gordan travel down to Kent and visit you here at the Abbey? I think the fact that he did not is proof enough, no?"

Sarah fought to breathe. She looked up and met the contemplative stare of Giles. Not wanting to confront him here, she threw him a wobbly smile. He grinned back at her, and her heart broke in her chest.

He'd believed the lie? Had towed his father's line and thrown them out with the scandal. Had ceased his friendship with Hugh and her due to not wishing to dirty his name by the association.

How could he have done such a thing? She and Hugh were innocent of the crime. Certainly, she had nothing to do with what her mother and elder brother had concocted to hide.

All the years she never saw or heard from him came rushing back, the pain his absence had caused in her heart. The past week with him here at the Abbey, she had allowed him to make her forget his wrongdoing.

She was a fool to have let his pretty face and words trick her into disregarding the truth that now having been told was blatantly obvious.

"Lord Gordan was busy elsewhere, that is all." It was all Sarah could say in defense of Lady Rackliffe's words. What else could she say at hearing such a devastating truth about the man she had agreed to marry?

"I know that you held a tendre for Giles during our first Season, and you must know that I did not mean to steal him from you. Our family was not going through a troubled time as your own, and the late marquess thought I was the better match for Giles. He agreed, of course, and offered for my hand. I hope you weren't too heartbroken, my dear, for look at you now. You have won him in the end."

Lady Rackliffe's tone was lathed with sarcasm and hate, each word dripping with scorn. Sarah met her ladyship's gaze, her own narrowing in inspection.

"Which begs the question as to why you would throw him over for the ancient and decrepit Lord Rackliffe? I know that if I had the choice between Lord Gordan and Lord Rackliffe, I certainly would not have picked a gentleman who was old enough to be my great grandfather." Sarah downed her wine in one swallow. "You must have loved him a great deal to have married a gentleman fifty years your senior." Sarah waved her empty crystal glass before Lady Rackliffe's face. "If you'll excuse me, I need another glass of wine. A lot more celebrating to be had."

Sarah stood and, without a backward glance at the gaping Lady Rackliffe, joined Giles, who was speaking to the Duke and Duchess of Whitstone.

Tonight was not the time, Sarah reminded herself. Later, she would sneak to Giles's room and ask him the truth. Only then would she know what she would do and what her future would encompass.

Chapter 14

Sarah paced her bedroom late that evening, the skirts of her pink silk shift and dressing gown billowing about her legs. The house the past hour had been quiet. Was Giles in his room? Or was he still downstairs with her brother and celebrating the impending wedding? An event that she was not certain would take place, not now that she knew why he'd abandoned them all those years ago.

A light scratch sounded on her door, and her pacing ceased. She flew to the door, cracking it open a little to see who was there. Giles's handsome, smiling visage greeted her, and she stepped back, letting him in. He smiled at her, reaching for her the moment she shut and locked the door. Sarah stepped back, holding up her hand. "We need to talk. Before anything else is settled between us."

He frowned, his face a mask of confusion. "Very well. What is it that you wish to discuss?"

Sarah walked over to the settee before her fire and sat. Giles joined her, taking her hand. She didn't pull away as she should. Instead, she allowed the small gesture, if only to will herself to what she must ask.

"I spoke with Lady Rackliffe tonight, and she explained your betrothal to her with a little more clarity."

"Really." His brows drew farther together still, his eyes narrowing. "What did she say?"

"Did you push me away the night I kissed you because of the scandal that was ripping my family apart?"

He ran a hand over his jaw, and Sarah could see he was choosing his words carefully. An inkling of fear rippled through her. So there was truth to Lady Rackliffe's words.

"When you kissed me, I wasn't prepared for what that kiss would mean."

Sarah frowned, knowing only too well what that kiss meant to her at least. It had changed her world, made her realize to the very core of her soul that she wanted him, and no one else. For all the years she'd pined for him, longed for him to look her way had not been an impossible dream. Had it meant anything to Giles? Or had she been nothing but an annoyance, a walking

scandal that he did not want to be associated with?

"What do you even mean by that?"

He gestured between them. "Your kiss unraveled the world that I convinced myself I wanted. I was betrothed to Edith for only one day and could not cry off. I was trapped, furious at myself that I had chosen the wrong woman."

She met his gaze, wishing that were true, but it was not all of his truth. There were parts of his story he was keeping from her. "Did your father command you cease your friendship with our family over what Hugh was accused of? Even though you of all people, one of our closest friends, should have known Hugh could not be guilty of such a crime."

He was silent a moment, a muscle working in his jaw. He stood, striding to the mantel, leaning on it as he considered the roaring flames in the hearth. "My father was not an easy man, Sarah. Certainly was not one whom a son would go up against." He turned, meeting her gaze, and the fear that lurked in his eyes made her stomach churn. She hated to see him so fearful of the truth. Only someone guilty of the crime, understood the ramifications, would be troubled. "My father demanded me to marry Edith, or he would cut me off. Leave me to rot, I believe, were his words."

"Your father was my mother's friend for years. How could he hate her son so much as to demand this of you?" To be so cruel did not make sense. The late marquess could not have been so blind and wicked.

"They remained friends, even though he ensured the association did not sully his son and only heir. When Edith did not show up at the church for our wedding, my father's fight to tell me what to do seemed to dissipate from that point onward. He became an old man overnight, and within three years was gone."

"What about all the other years you stayed away?" She shook her head, fisting her hands in her lap. "Why? If I meant so very much to you, why did you let me rot in Kent? Left me under the protection of a brother who gave no security at all."

"I thought you shunned me. I did not think that you wanted anything further to do with me after the way I treated you after our kiss."

"I did not like you at all, that is true, but if you came to me then, explained why you had acted as you did, it would not have been so bad, but now..." Sarah stood, coming before him. "I could not have meant any great deal to you if you stayed away. You believed the scandal, didn't you? You

knew Henry was a rogue, hell-bent on causing and living a debauched life, and still, you believed Hugh was guilty of the crime against Miss Cox."

"I did not believe that of Hugh. Never." He clasped her hands, squeezing them. "Please, Sarah, you must understand."

"No, I do not need to understand anything. I do not need to believe you at all." She tore her hands away, putting distance between them. "You lied to me, and worse is that your ex-betrothed threw the truth in my face." How many others in the *ton* would laugh at her for being so blind? Had Lady Rackliffe told her knowledge regarding Giles and Sarah to everyone at the house party? Were they laughing at her behind her back?

Humiliation tore through her and anger thrummed in her veins that the *ton* was once again laughing at her family. Snickering and speaking about them behind their backs.

He stared down at her, a shadow crossing his eyes. "I did not tell Lady Rackliffe anything. If she knew anything at all, it was at my father's doing."

"You've made a fool of me, Giles, and I won't stand for it. I promised myself years ago that I would never allow the *ton* to laugh and criticize my family. I have not, to this day, missed the society that I once graced. I cannot marry a man who believed Hugh was guilty. A man who allowed his father to dictate whom he should marry all because of a lie. Did you try to contact Hugh at all when he was in Rome?"

Giles dropped his hands at his sides, his face paling. "I did not."

Sarah shook her head, not believing what she was hearing. How had she not seen the reason why Giles had cut them off? It was not simply because she'd thrown herself at him, and he did not feel the same way. It was because he'd been told to stay away, to remove his oldest friends from his life. Do as he was told or else.

"I cannot marry you, Giles."

Sarah started for the door, needing him to leave. A hand clamped about her arm, wrenching her back. "You're crying off from our understanding? Even though I love you as much as you love me?"

His declaration sent a frisson of pleasure to course through her, but she pushed it down, stomped on it until it was no more. Her heart ached in her chest, her throat tight with unshed tears. She would not give in to emotion. She'd learned a long time ago to remain calm, don't show a response to situations that could cause her pain or give others power over her. "I will not marry a man who treated my family so poorly. Did you know how I suffered

here in England without Hugh? Without you?"

The pitying look he bestowed on her fired her temper. She paced before him, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. "Henry was awful after he schemed his way out of ruining Miss Cox. He threw parties here, lived for nothing but debauchery and strife. I had no one. Society shunned me, so I stayed here, hiding like some felon who had committed a crime. His friends would come from town, the gentleman I had danced with during my first Season. I soon learned to be wary. They were wont to follow Henry's etiquette. Whenever my brother came to stay, I fled to the dowager house."

He took a step toward her, and she put out her hand, stopping him. "I do not need your comfort."

"I did not know, Sarah. I would have come had I known. I'm sorry."

"Everyone knew what Henry was like, you more than anyone else, but you chose to stay away. I was not important enough to you that you would come and visit like you had when we were younger. I allowed myself to be swept up in your attention to me the past week. Allowed your sweet words and even sweeter kisses to taint my recollection of the past. How fortunate Lady Rackliffe reminded me of my failing."

A muscle worked in his jaw, and she looked toward the fire, not wanting to see the sheen of unshed tears in his eyes. "I made a mistake, do not punish us both for the rest of our lives by doing this, Sarah."

"Leave," she said, her voice cold and emotionless, just as her soul was right at this very moment. He'd left her before. Surely she would survive if he left her again.

"This is a mistake." Giles started for the door, pausing at her side a moment. Sarah willed him to leave. To go now. If he stopped, if he pulled her into his arms, she wasn't certain she would be so strong to deny him.

Sarah did not respond, merely listened as her door opened and closed quietly behind the one man in the world she did love and who, for the second time in her short life, had broken her heart.

Chapter 15

The following morning Giles waited in the Duke of St. Albans' study, needing to speak to him before the day commenced. His gut churned, his eyes itched with a lack of sleep. Would Hugh aid him in winning Sarah back, or tell him to bugger off after hearing why he'd distanced himself for so many years from Hugh's family?

The duke strode into the room, his steps slowing when he saw him seated before his desk. "Gordan?" He came the rest of the way into the room, slipping his tall frame into his leather-back chair. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" His Grace asked, smiling.

Giles wondered how long the comradeship would last, considering he'd lied to the duke's sister, and Hugh also. Giles could only hope his old school friend would let the past be. They had all made mistakes, granted this was one of the biggest that Giles had made. And one he wanted to right before he lost the only woman he'd ever loved.

Something about the knowing depths of the duke's gaze told him he may have already heard why he wished to see him this morning.

"St. Albans," he said, nodding in welcome. "I need to speak to you quite urgently. It's important."

"I believe it is." His Grace narrowed his eyes, leaning back in his chair. "Sarah did not appear to be the incandescent happy bride of the evening before at breakfast. Have you quarreled?"

Giles cleared his throat. *You could say that.* "Sarah no longer wishes to marry me, and after what I'm about to tell you, I would not be surprised if you wish for me to leave the Christmas festivities."

The duke raised his brow, throwing him a contemplative inspection. "Well, that does sound ominous. What happened?" he asked.

Giles told him of his engagement to Edith. How the union came about at the behest of his father. How his father had wanted to distance his only son and heir from Hugh, his closest friend after the scandal, citing bad influence and being tainted by association. The kiss Sarah bestowed on him at a London ball and his reaction to the said kiss. He told Hugh all of his shame, his regrets, and mistakes.

A muscle worked on Hugh's jaw, his eyes narrowed, but he didn't utter a word. Giles met Hugh's eyes, hard, dark pools he could not read, and he waited for the demand to leave to be spoken. For him to declare he ought to let Sarah go and find another woman to marry.

Instead, the reaction Hugh gave him was not the one he expected.

He laughed. So hard, in fact, his eyes watered.

"Well, you have made a mess of things, have you not?" Hugh stood, striding over to a decanter of whiskey, pouring two good portions into crystal glasses. He came over to him, handing him one. "Drink. If you are to win my sister back, you'll need your fortification."

Giles did as Hugh bade him, the burn of the amber liquid down his throat reminding him he was alive and being so, there was the opportunity, the possibility, to win Sarah back.

"You're not angry?" Giles asked, unsure how he could not be so. "I ceased a lifetime of friendship simply due to what my father and the *ton* believed to be true. I should not have. I knew you better than anyone, I should have guessed that Henry was behind your downfall."

Hugh waved his concerns aside. "Henry and my mother were to blame. Not you. Nor are you responsible for your father's reaction to the scandal that rocked my family. Sarah should understand this."

Giles had hoped that she would, but it was not so. "I should not have allowed my father to dictate my life. I lied to her, and she knows that I did. In her opinion, I chose to follow the *ton*, let their response, and opinions guide me away from my friendship with you both. I did not go to her after my father's death as I should have. She cannot forgive me."

Hugh sighed, leaning forward and crossing his hands on the desk. "Why did you not repair the friendship after the marquess's death?"

Giles cringed, wishing he had. "I had not seen Sarah for some years by then, and our parting did not give me the sense that she wished to know if I were alive or dead."

Disappointment lurked in Hugh's gaze, and Giles knew that particular point was his downfall. Why he could lose her. He should have gone to her immediately. Begged for forgiveness and made her remember how very much they liked each other. "I know," he groaned. "You do not have to say it. I know I bugged up."

Hugh nodded. "On that point, yes, you did, but we've all made mistakes. I more than most. I should not have allowed my family to push me from the

only home I had, and yet I did. I took their financial support, moved to Rome, and started a new life. All the while, I let an innocent woman suffer in England at the hands of my brother's treatment."

Giles did not know what to say to such a declaration. Since Hugh's return, they had not discussed the scandal or outcomes of the time but had been happy to put it all behind them. Move forward, pick up the friendship where they once were, and forget the duke's brother and his mistreatment of those he was supposed to love.

"Sarah dislikes the *ton* and their treatment of her and me. While I understand why she's reacted in such a way, I also know that she will be thinking clearer in a couple of days. Do not give up on her, Giles. I've known that since we were boys on the brink of becoming men, there was a special bond between you two. I would like nothing more than to welcome you into our family, to become my brother. I always saw you like one, more than the actual blood brother I was saddled with."

Giles took a calming breath. The duke's comforting words went a long way in dispelling the gnawing worry he'd been plagued with ever since Sarah told him their understanding was no more.

"She does not want to marry me. How do I win her back? I have waited years to be with her. I cannot lose her now."

Hugh threw him a pitying look. Giles knew he was pitiful at this very moment, but panic threatened to seize him at the mere thought of walking away. Of hearing months or years from now that Sarah had married another. Loved another. He would not let it happen. She loved him, not anyone else. He simply had to remind her of that fact.

"Let me talk to her, Giles. As her brother and the one person she trusts most in the world, let me see if I can get her to see another point of view."

While Giles doubted it would be successful, he would try anything not to lose her. "Thank you, Hugh. I cannot thank you enough for this kindness."

Hugh stood, coming around the desk to clasp his shoulder. "While I cannot promise success, I will do all that I can. As you know, my sister can be quite stubborn with independent thought, that is hard to sway at times."

Giles chuckled, knowing how true that was. It was one of the reasons he loved her as much as he did. She was no wilting flower, his love. "She is a rare beauty." And he would win her back, losing her simply was not an option.

Chapter 16

Sarah sat in the duke and duchess's private parlor, not for use by the other guests at the house party. She sat on the settee facing the fire, waiting for her family to join her.

She had requested they come to see her, to hear of her change of circumstance, where it regarded Giles.

The thought of him made her skin chill, and she rubbed her arms, pulling the woolen shawl about her shoulders, her light-green gown not warm enough on this cold day.

She had not seen him at breakfast this morning, had not reveled in his company, his wicked glances across the table and lively conversation.

How could he have pushed her away and discarded her when she needed him the most? His actions were unforgivable.

Molly and Hugh strode into the room. Molly came over to her, kissing her cheeks in turn, before sitting beside her. Hugh stood before the fire, warming his hands.

"Sarah, I must say that I'm pleased you asked to speak to me, for there is a matter we need to discuss."

"There is? What was it that you wanted to talk to me about?" She had not mentioned anything to anyone about her and Giles's parting ways. Had she been too sharp with one of the guests? Lady Rackliffe, perhaps, who had a way of getting under her skin.

Hugh turned, facing them, his hands clasped behind his back. Molly took Sarah's hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. "What is wrong? You're both starting to frighten me."

"Be assured there is nothing wrong, but I have spoken to Giles this morning. He has told me everything that happened between you."

Molly threw her a look full of pity, and Sarah sighed. Not wanting anyone to pity her for standing up for what she believed. If Giles truly loved her, he would have fought for her. Came to her the moment his father had passed. He did not.

"No matter what your choice, we're here for you, Sarah."

Sarah thanked her kind sister-in-law, but turned back to her brother. "He

spoke to you? I hope you made it clear that his actions toward you and our family were unacceptable. Hurtful and not those of a friend. Which, I had to remind him of the fact, he was supposed to be."

Her brother's lips thinned into a displeased line. "Come, Sarah, you know it is not always as easy as that. I am proof of such, am I not? What mother and Henry forced me into was perhaps a time when I should have shown the remnants of a backbone, but I did not. An act that I will forever regret, but one that I did to save what little was left of my life. Giles kept his distance as per his father's decree. Such action may well be displeasing. It is hard to deny one's sire when they threaten you."

"He's an only child, Hugh. He could have refused, and there would be nothing the late marquess could have done. He may have lost the access to funds, but what is that when you have stood by your morals? Your friends?" *People who loved you.*

"That is unfair, Sarah. Not everything is so black and white. There are portions of gray in life."

"If he liked us so very much, why did he not come to see me after his father had passed? Why wait until you returned from Rome? Why not write to you and keep your friendship a secret?"

"You know why, he told you himself. While we men may pine for a woman who has captured our heart, realize that we're only living a half life when we're not with those we love," Hugh said, looking to Molly, his face softening with affection for his wife. "It does not mean we do not have pride. And Giles did write to me, Whitstone too. They never abandoned me to my exile completely." Hugh paused, a frown between his brow. "Can you remember the last words you spoke to Giles on the night you kissed him at the London ball?"

Sarah gasped, heat blooming on her cheeks at the fact that her brother knew of her kissing Giles and their following argument.

She thought back to that night. She could still smell the freshly cut grass, the flowering roses, and the ivy prickle against her back as she tried to hide in the greenery.

"I told him I did not wish to see him again. That our friendship was at an end, and nothing would persuade me to think otherwise on the matter." She swallowed the lump that wedged in her throat. Giles had looked devastated at her words, as if she had ripped his heart out and thrown it into the gardens.

"How can you stand it, Hugh, what the *ton* did to us, not Henry and

Mama, but you and me? We're the ones who paid the price for their deception other than Miss Cox," she said, whispering sorry to Molly, who was the young woman's cousin. "They shunned us, talked about us, and did not hide the fact that we had fallen from a great social height. I do not care what they thought. I do not. I could let the *ton* go hang and not glance back, but Hugh, Giles was one of those whispers. He agreed with their views, left us alone and without friends. How can you forgive that? How do you expect me to marry such a man?"

Hugh came and sat beside her, taking her other hand. "He never spoke of us. I'm certain of that. He merely went about his own business and got on with things without us to keep his father happy. I suppose when the marquess passed, Giles thought too much time had gone by for there ever to be forgiveness between you and him. But there can be. You can be happy, Sarah, if you let the past go. Truly let it go and stop it from festering inside of you." Hugh winked at Molly, and out of Sarah's peripheral eye, she could see her sister-in-law grinning. "You can love and live as you've only dreamed. I want that for you too. You're my sister, let us not let Henry and Mama ruin our future and our past. They do not deserve the power."

Sarah sniffed, swiping her damp cheeks at her brother's wise words.

Could she forgive Giles? Did she want to have a future with him after knowing all that she did? Sarah only had to think about that fact a moment or two before realizing the truth. Yes, of course, she did. She wanted him in all ways, even if he had acted a total fool and almost lost her forever.

She stood, striding for the door.

"Where are you going?" Molly asked, standing.

Sarah wrenched the door open and stopped, turning to face her family. "To catch myself a marquess before he does something foolish once more, like ask Lady Rackliffe for her hand again, and I lose him forever."

Hugh chuckled, pulling Molly down beside him. "Close the door on your way out, sister."

Sarah rolled her eyes at her brother's wickedness with his wife, only too glad not to be privy to their love. They were worse than anyone she'd ever met, and she too wanted the same.

With Giles.

Chapter 17

Giles stood looking out his bedroom window, watching as the carriage came around from the stable. Behind him, his valet packed his belongings in his trunks. A maid came out from the house's front door, handing warming bricks to his driver, who placed them on the carriage floor.

It would be a cold trip back to London, but it was one he must take. He could not stay here any longer, not with Sarah wishing for him to leave.

He clutched the back of his neck, rolling his shoulders to dispel the tension that plagued him after their last words. He had tried to make her see his position, right or wrong, he had obeyed his sire and, to his detriment, had lost Sarah in the process.

That they could be together now caused frustration and impatience to run through his veins. If only she put the past behind her, stopped allowing others' actions to guide their lives, they could be happy together. Have a life, a marriage.

"Excuse me, my lord. We're all packed. I shall have the trunks carried down and will meet you at the carriage."

"Thank you, John," Giles said, turning from the window, unwilling to leave the Abbey without one last chance of winning Sarah's trust and love.

He beat his valet out of the room, striding toward Sarah's bedroom door when he spotted her all but running down the corridor. His steps slowed, and he schooled his features, unsure of what, if anything, seeing her running in the direction of his room meant.

He stopped, bowed. "Lady Sarah." His eyes devoured every morsel of her, her fitting, complementary gown that showed off her figure to its full advantage. A body he had savored, enjoyed, and worshiped only two nights before. The light-green muslin with pretty darker-green flowers embroidered on it, making her eyes seem fiercely olive.

"Giles," she breathed, fighting to catch her breath.

That she used his given name and not his title sent a frisson of hope to course through his blood. Had she changed her mind? Had Hugh talked her 'round to forgive him? Or was she merely coming to ensure he did, in fact, leave?

Two footmen entered his room behind him, and within a moment, walked out into the passage, carrying one of his trunks.

Her face fell, along with her shoulders. "You're leaving?"

He nodded. "I think it is best, yes."

She watched him a moment, and he could see she was choosing her words carefully. He wanted to take her into his arms, pull her close, and tell her that he was sorry. That he'd never meant to hurt her. That he was simply obeying a father that he never wished to disappoint.

Sarah clamped her hands before her, raising her chin. "We need to talk." She clasped his hand, pulling him down the hall and toward where the picture gallery ran. He'd not been in this part of the house for many years, and following Sarah as quick as he was, didn't allow him to take in the most recent painting of her that Hugh had commissioned.

They stopped at the end of the long hall, the bank of windows overlooking the side of the house's gardens, allowing light to flood the space.

Giles looked back to where they had come from and noted how very alone they were in this part of the house.

"I do not want you to leave, Giles." She stepped against him until the hem of her gown slipped across his hessian boots. "I was wrong to judge you as harshly as I did. While I will not forget or forgive what society did to my brother and myself, I will forgive you. I love you, and I'm sorry for blaming you for all my anger. I will never do so again."

Giles reached for her, pulling her against him, breathing deep the sweet smell of berries from her hair. "You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who is sorry, Sarah. I should have declared to my father that I would be friends and love whomever I pleased. Love whomever I wanted. It was one of the reasons why I was so angry with you the night you kissed me. I knew the moment I had you in my arms that we would never be. That through my foolishness, allowing others to dictate my actions and life that the one woman I did want beside me for the rest of my life would not be you. I had offered to Edith, and it was too late. I lashed out, blamed you for my own failings. Please forgive me."

Sarah reached up, running her hands over his jaw. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and he wiped them away with his thumbs when they fell. "No tears. No more looking back. Walk beside me now, into our future. Will you marry me, please? I cannot live another day without you in my life." Never had he ever said anything so true or had wanted anything so

desperately in his life.

She was his everything, and from this day forward, if she said yes, his sole purpose in life was making her incandescently happy.

"I will marry you, yes. Now please tell me you will stay. I cannot be without a dance partner for the Christmas ball."

"Wild horses could not drag me away from you." Giles leaned down, stealing a kiss, reveling in the feel of her again in his arms.

He did not let her go for a very long time...

Epilogue

They were married Christmas morning under a steady fall of snow. The small church that sat on the St. Albans estate was full of local gentry and those who stayed at the Abbey for the Christmas festivities. The ball that night a time to celebrate the nuptials of Sarah and Giles and Yuletide.

She stood beside Giles, her arm wrapped about his as they watched some of the guests take part in a waltz.

Warmth blossomed in her chest, and Sarah was sure her heart might burst with happiness at being married to her one and only love. She glanced up at him, caught him watching her, and her stomach flipped deliciously.

"You look like you're scheming something, my lord."

He chuckled, a deep rumble that spiked her need of him. It had been so very long since they had come together, Giles wishing to wait until they were married, and Sarah had to admit she was well past ready to have him in her bed once again.

"I'm simply happy." He paused, leaning down to whisper in her ear, "And looking forward to having you in my bed this evening."

Heat bloomed on her cheeks, and she could not stop a grin from forming on her lips. "Maybe we could slip away? No one will pay any heed to us, leaving early. I should think it would be expected."

A wicked light entered his eye, and he took her hand, pulling her along through the guests as they made their way out a side door that would take them toward the back of the house and near the servant's stairs.

Instead of going up the stairs, however, Giles turned them down a small passage. He moved them toward the conservatory and one of Sarah's favorite places at the estate.

The smell of summer bombarded her senses, roses and foliage of earth along with the trickle of water from the large, circular fountain.

The room was warmer than other parts of the house, as it had a constant source of heat from the two large fires that burned beside the wide glass doors leading into the room during winter.

Giles shut the doors, the snip of the lock echoing about the space.

Sarah turned and watched as he gestured to the space. "The first night that

you kissed me in London was warm, and although we cannot sneak outside and kiss against the ivy, I can kiss you properly here, in a room reminiscent of that time."

Her heart lurched, and she went to him, wrapping her arms about his neck. "A new beginning, since you made such a mess of things ten years ago," she teased, chuckling.

Giles growled, hoisting her up against his side. "Kiss me, Sarah, and see if you're rid of me."

Sarah did as he asked, and finally, the marquess was hers, and in no way would she lose him again.

"Merry Christmas, my love," he said, pulling but a breath away from her.

Tears welled in her eyes at how happy she was. How happy he made her feel. "Merry Christmas."

About Tamara Gill

Tamara Gill is an Australian author who grew up in an old mining town in country South Australia, where her love of history was founded. Tamara loves to write romance in an array of genres, including regency, medieval, and time travel.

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A Yuletide Miracle

by Laurel O'Donnell



A huge thank you to my editors, Brynn in Santa Cruz and Erica at Quillfire.

BEWARE!

*If he faintly meowed outside
The misfortune was soon to happen.
Everyone knows that he fed on men,
But mice he would not eat.*

Icelandic poem

Prologue

*Grandmore Castle
Snowmount, England
1379*

The bonfire crackled, and its light cast long shadows over the stone castle walls and barren dirt of the inner ward. Stars twinkled high overhead in the sky. A small group of children sat in a circle with their gazes locked raptly on a thin boy with a stained brown tunic and sandy brown hair.

“I swear,” the boy’s voice echoed through the dark. “I *saw* it.” He held up his curved fingers and snarled. “Sharp claws and fangs the size of my fist.” He balled his hand, lifting it for all to see. “Drool coming from its lips and black eyes.”

Bastian, the oldest boy in the group, waved dismissively at him and shook his head of shoulder-length black hair. “You’re making it up.”

“It came last Yuletide, just after I fell asleep,” the boy whispered secretively, leaning forward toward the other children. “It was just like my da said. I didn’t finish my chores, so the Yule Cat came to eat me!”

Bastian crossed his arms, and his lips twisted with disbelief. “Then why are you still alive?” he asked with doubt.

“I ran into my house and hid. The next day when I went outside, there were three long gouges in the snow.”

An icy wind whipped through the strands of Thora’s hair, and she pulled her cloak closed tighter as a shiver snaked up her spine. The small bonfire snapped and hissed. Thora didn’t like the stories about the Yule Cat or the troll woman who came with him on the eve of the Yule. The Yule was a special time of celebration and feasting, a happy time after which the days got longer. A Yule log was burned on the eve of the Yule. She was looking forward to that later tonight. She glanced around the familiar setting of the inner ward, half expecting the black Yule Cat to jump down from the tall castle walls and eat her. Thankfully, the walkways at the top of the walls remained empty; the candlemaker’s shop windows were darkened and empty; the courtyard was vacant.

To her ten-summer-old self, Milo's story of the Yule Cat was very believable. She looked at the other children in the circle to see if the tale bothered them as much as it did her. Bastian, the one she trusted the most, was her father's squire. His brother, Nicolas, her father's page, stood beside Bastian with his chin raised bravely. The baker's son scratched his dark head and cast a pensive glance at his little sister, only five summers old, who clung to him. Two other squires also listened eagerly to the tale.

Milo shrugged and turned away, his brown hair blowing in a gust of wind. "There's no way I'll be making that mistake again. I'll be finishing my chores by the Yule eve. You can bet your best horse on that."

The baker's daughter stared at Milo with wide eyes as she pulled at her brother's arm. Her brother grabbed her hand, and the two of them scampered off toward the keep.

Bastian glared at Milo. "You scared her. Why do you have to tell lies?"

"It's not a lie!" Milo argued emphatically. "I just wanted you to know. I must go finish up my chores now. I don't want to be eaten." Milo shrugged, sighed, and walked across the courtyard toward the keep.

Bastian's lips tightened in skepticism. He looked at Nicolas, who was gazing up at him with expectant eyes. "Don't believe him," he advised his little brother. "He just makes up stories." He glanced at Thora. "Don't be afraid."

Thora nodded, but inside, fear simmered like boiling water. Still, she lifted her chin bravely. "I like animals," she said defiantly.

Bastian appraised her before he returned his attention to Nicolas. He ruffled his dark hair and put an arm around him as the group separated, each going their own direction. "Come on." He pulled Nicolas toward the doors to the keep. He paused and looked over his shoulder at Thora, who remained standing beside the fire with her cloak wrapped around her shoulders. "Are you coming inside, m'lady?"

She nodded and skipped after them, but something on the ground in the darkness between the candlemaker's shop and the ale maker's building glimmered in the moonlight, making her pause. She glanced after Bastian and Nicolas before hesitantly approaching the shiny object. She liked sparkling items. She could add it to her collection of glistening rocks and gems. She moved toward the ale maker's building and paused near the gardens when a bird suddenly started shrieking in alarm. Tingles raced up her spine. She halted, glancing around. It was completely silent except for the alarmed

chirping of the bird.

The shiny object on the ground still beckoned to her. She saw it in the dirt near the half wall of the garden, sparkling enticingly. She took a step toward it, ducking beneath the barren branches of a tall apple tree. As she bent to run her hand over the frozen ground in search of the sparkling item, the bird stopped screeching.

In the ensuing silence, she glanced up toward the tree above her head. The shadows of the tree branches looked like gnarled fingers moving back and forth, summoning her. She slowly straightened, noticing an immobile, black mound in the tree. Prickles of dread raced along her shoulders, and she stepped back. Suddenly, at the head of the dark shape, two glowing eyes opened, staring at her. She gasped.

The Yule Cat!

A loud growl rumbled, and the shadow leapt from the tree.

Thora screamed and covered her head.

A ball of fur landed heavily on her, shoving her to the ground with its weight. She shouted and cried, flailing her arms to try to push it away. She felt the sting of its claws on her cheek. It was trying to eat her!

Thora screamed again, lashing out with her hands, trying to shove the Yule Cat away before it ate her.

Suddenly, a hand reached out and pulled her into strong arms. "Thora!"

She yelled and cried, pounding against the hold of the hands. "The Yule Cat! It's here!"

The arms pulled her tighter into a warm embrace. "Shhh." Her hair was stroked in a calming manner as her screams subsided into sobs. "It's well. I'll protect you. You're safe now."

The eyes glowed in her memory. She saw the Yule Cat's sharp claws and teeth in her mind. A tight fist of fear gripped her. She curled her fingers into the soft cloak before her and buried her face into the chest beneath. Warmth and safety slowly penetrated her terror. The scent of leather and woods filled her nose. When her sobs lessened, she pulled back to look into Bastian's light brown eyes. "It was the Yule Cat," she wept, tears trailing over her cheeks. "It came to eat me!"

Chapter 1

Eight years later

Bastian strolled through the sun-dappled woods, his heavy boots crunching fallen greenery and twigs. The trees had shed their leaves, covering the dirt with them like a blanket. Winter was on its way.

He stopped when he arrived at a square spot of branches with leaves strewn over them. He knew they covered a hidden hole. He inspected the trap, one of many scattered throughout the forest, with his hands on his hips. He shook his head, scoffing. It was his job as Captain of the Guard to make sure the traps were monitored and maintained, but he thought it a waste of time. Eight years ago, Lord Rowley, Lady Thora's father, had insisted traps be set around the castle to capture or kill the monster that had dared attack his daughter.

Eight years of inspecting, eight years of vigilance, without another incident. There had been no further attack by the fictitious cat. Bastian didn't doubt Thora *believed* it had been the Yule Cat that assaulted her. She had been a young girl, only ten summers old, when it happened. The tale spread like wildfire, sweeping through the castle walls and the village. She even had a battle scar to strengthen her story -- three scratches on her cheek. He recalled seeing a small shadow dart away from Thora as he approached. Yet, he couldn't be certain what type of animal it had been, so he hadn't disputed Thora's story. But Bastian doubted her injury had been from a pretend creature of lore and was much more likely to have been from a wild animal.

Bastian sighed at the thought of the tale: a cat who came out of the mountains at the Yuletide to eat children who didn't finish their chores. He kicked at the branches to make sure they were secure. Anyone with a mind could see that the legend was invented to get children to complete their duties before the Yule.

Most of the pits they had dug had never been disturbed. He remembered digging them with the other guards and squires. It had been back-breaking labor due to the frozen earth, but they had persisted until the traps were done to Lord Rowley's satisfaction. But even dozens of traps had not alleviated the

fear that gripped the town at this time of year. The Yule was less than a week away, and with every passing day, the people of Grandmore village became more and more afraid that some small cat would breach the tall stone walls of Grandmore Castle and eat them.

Bastian glanced through the trunks of the trees toward the castle walls. He could make out the thick, tall stone walls surrounding the fortress and village. Nothing was getting in.

Still, Lord Rowley believed it was important the traps be maintained. Although they hadn't rid the town of unease around the Yule, they did help to mitigate the town's terror. One good thing had come from all this nonsense -- the children finished all their chores around the Yule. Even Nicolas, who swore he didn't believe in the Yule Cat, worked hard to complete his tasks. Bastian chuckled as he moved on to the next trap.

As he walked, birds sang around him, flying from tree to tree. He ducked beneath a branch and heard something scurry inside of the trap. He froze, tingles dancing along his nape as he cautiously stepped towards the trap. The branches covering one corner of the trap had collapsed in. Something was in there.

He did not think it was the Yule Cat, because he didn't believe in it. Rather, it was likely just some unlucky animal trapped inside. Once, a boar had been discovered in one of the pits. Another time, a raccoon. He moved to the edge of the trap, bent to a knee, and carefully lifted the branches from the top, peering into the shaded pit. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He lifted the branches higher, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. Something shifted at the bottom of the trap that caused him to jump. But with a sigh of relief and incredulity, he sat back on his heel. Then, he started laughing.



* * *

“You have to be very careful,” Thora explained. She held her cloak closed around her with one hand, the other tucked inside. “Move very slowly and cautiously. It is afraid.”

Two freckled boys walked backwards ahead of her across the drawbridge. They watched her with exuberance. One of the boys almost tripped as he stepped from the wooden platform into the grass, but he righted himself.

A young girl with brown hair and a tan cotton dress bounced at Thora's side, shifting to try to see inside her cloak.

Thora continued to walk across the drawbridge and into the open field.

"Will it be able to fly?" the young girl asked with strained enthusiasm, her curls bouncing about her head with each step.

"I hope so, Bella," Thora answered. "We've given his wing enough time to heal."

One of the boys pointed to her face. "Will he scratch your face like the Yule Cat did?"

It took all of Thora's willpower not to reach up and run her hand along the three scars on her cheek. "Not if I am gentle. But you never know."

Thora stopped in the center of the field, halfway between the castle wall and the forest. The children quickly came closer, clamoring to see better and angling their necks to look inside her cloak.

"Step back, children," Thora advised. "I want him to have plenty of room to fly away."

All the children moved back two steps, their gazes fixed on her cloak.

Thora looked around the wide, open field and the trees in the distance. There was plenty of room here to release the small swallow.

"Will we have time to say goodbye?" Bella asked, swiping a strand of curly hair from her eyes.

"I'm afraid not. As soon as I release him, I expect he will fly." As the little girl's large brown eyes saddened, Thora quickly added, "But he was so lucky that you found him. Otherwise, a hawk or falcon might have eaten him. He certainly would not have been able to find food. He would've gone hungry. You saved him."

Bella nodded, even as her chin quivered.

"Ready?" Thora asked.

The children hopped anxiously, shifting from foot to foot.

Thora eased her cloak open, rapidly unfurling her fingers and lifting her hand to the sky to release the swallow. The bird opened its wings and soared into the blue sky.

The boys cheered and whooped and danced with joy, racing after the swallow across the field. Bella stayed where she was. Thora looked down at

her.

The small girl's eyes stared after the bird, and her lower lip puffed out. Thora bent down to Bella. She brushed the brown hair from the girl's cheek and put a lock of curls behind her ear. Thora squeezed her hand. "I'm certain he will never forget you. You *saved* him."

"But how will he survive?" Bella asked sorrowfully. "Who will bring him food?"

Thora grinned and tilted her head. "He knows how to find food. He knows how to stay safe. He'll build a nest somewhere with a girl bird and have plenty of little birds."

Bella lowered her eyes and kicked at the ground sadly. "I wish I could have kept him."

"I know, my little dove. But the bird is wild. He deserves to be free. It wouldn't be fair to keep him in a small crate all the time." She gently tweaked Bella's nose. "You wouldn't want that for him."

Bella shook her head and threw her arms around Thora's shoulders.

Thora squeezed the child. Over her shoulder, she saw a black warhorse trotting across the withered grass toward them, and her heart missed a beat. Bastian, her mind sighed. His black cloak was like a cape, billowing out behind him with each step of the horse. His dark shoulder-length hair bobbed with each movement. She stood to greet him, picking Bella up with her. The boys saw him approaching and ran back toward them.

Bastian drew to a stop before her. He was the picture of protection. Tall. Strong. Resilient. Oh, so handsome.

Thora always felt safe when Bastian was near. She wiped a stray strand of hair from her forehead. "Are the traps all set?"

His lips turned up in a grin.

Her heart began to pound in response, and she mentally told herself to stop reacting this way.

The boys raced up, one on either side of Thora, gazing up at Bastian with admiring eyes.

He swung his leg over his horse to dismount and landed on the ground before her. "One of the traps had been sprung."

Thora gasped and her breath caught in her throat. A shiver raced up her spine as the glowing eyes in the tree haunted her memory yet again. Bella linked her hands around Thora's neck and tightened her grip.

"Was it the Yule Cat?" one of the boys asked.

Those were the words Thora dared not speak; the question she did not have the courage to ask.

“The Yule Cat?” the other boy gasped, his eyes growing wide.

“Did you get it?” the first boy wondered. “I don’t want to be eaten!”

Bastian cocked his head, and his expression grew serious. “It was even more terrifying than the Yule Cat,” he told the children. “When I saw it, I almost drew my sword.”

“Did you kill it?” the first boy asked enthusiastically.

Thora narrowed her eyes, suspicious that anything could be more terrifying than the Yule Cat.

“What was it?” Bella asked, staring at Bastian with fearful eyes.

Bastian swiped his cloak aside and produced a tiny rabbit from the folds. The rabbit’s nose twitched.

For a moment, they all stared. One of the boys blinked and waved his hand, dismissing it. “It’s just a rabbit!”

The other boy shoved him, laughing. “Maybe it will still eat you!” He darted away as the first boy chased after him.

Thora’s jaw clenched. How could Bastian frighten the children like that? How could he pretend this rabbit was anything like the Yule Cat?

“Its leg is broken,” Bastian explained. His eyes alighted on her. “Who better to mend it?” He held the creature out to her.

Thora set Bella on the ground and despite her irritation, she scooped the little rabbit from his hold and stroked it gently. She held it in the crook of her arm as she carefully inspected its leg.

“It was caught in one of the traps,” Bastian continued. “Must have fallen in.”

“Can you help it?” Bella wondered, staring at the rabbit with compassion.

Thora nodded. “I hope so, but I’ll need help. It will need carrots. Do you think you can find some in the kitchens?”

Bella nodded enthusiastically and clasped her hands together eagerly. She turned and began skipping toward the drawbridge.

“Make sure you ask the cook this time! Don’t just take them,” Thora called after her.

Bella turned, waved, and ran off, her brown curls bouncing around her head.

Thora turned back to Bastian. His amber eyes gazed at her. A small gust of wind swirled around them, brushing his dark hair from his shoulders. She

lifted her chin, ignoring the swirling breathlessness inside her.

“It’s not funny,” she told him sternly.

“The rabbit’s foot?” he asked, one brow lifting in confusion.

“Comparing an innocent creature to the Yule Cat,” she replied heatedly, stroking the speckled hair of the rabbit. “You shouldn’t joke about such things.”

“If I find humor in the comparison, perhaps the children will, too. And then they won’t be so afraid.”

Thora narrowed her eyes in disapproval. “They *should* be afraid. They should always be afraid of the Yule Cat. It is a monster that may come for them.”

Bastian sighed softly. “Thora, it has been eight years, and there have been no other attacks. Don’t you think...”

She met his gaze with a steely stare and lifted her chin, daring him to continue.

Bastian’s gaze swept over her face, and he released a soft breath. “The traps are in order. Nothing will get past them.” He jerked his chin at the rabbit. “Least of all small, terrifying creatures.”

Thora turned to head back toward the drawbridge. “You mock me. But I know what I saw that night.”

Bastian hurried after her. “And you told everyone. The town believes you.”

She whirled on him. The wind whipped around her, tugging her cloak and hair around her. “But you don’t. You don’t believe me.”

Bastian’s eyes softened as he gazed at her. His dark hair swayed as the breeze died down. “I am a factual person, Thora. I believe what I can see. And I have yet to see this Yule Cat.”

“Pray that you never do.” She spun toward the drawbridge.

Bastian caught her arm to halt her. His eyes dropped to the rabbit in her arm, and he ran his hand along the rabbit’s back. “You love animals far too much not to see the truth of what happened that night.” He cast her one last look before heading to his horse.

She watched the way he moved -- striding, confident. A pang gripped her chest. Yes, the villagers believed her. But Bastian did not. What more did he require to convince him the Yule Cat was real? She had the marks on her skin as proof. Those glowing eyes in the tree above her still haunted her dreams.

The rabbit squirmed in her arms, and she wrapped her cloak about it

before hurrying across the field toward the drawbridge and Castle Grandmore.



* * *

That evening, Thora held her father's dinner tray as she moved down the hallway. The aroma of the cooked venison wafted to her, and she inhaled the delicious scent. Torches on the walls lit the way, lighting her path. Her father had missed his meal. Again. She knew he was busy and liked to bring it to him herself. It was one of the few times during the day that she got to spend time with him, especially around the Yule. He was always so busy making sure the castle was ready for the winter, and that the stores of food were adequate.

She fondly remembered a time when he would sit in his chair before the hearth in the Great Hall with her nestled in his arms. Together, they would watch the burning Yule log grow smaller and smaller. Often, she would fall asleep, and he would carry her to her chambers. That had been long ago, when she was young, and her mother was alive.

In the past years, it had become her responsibility to make sure they had a Yule log for the celebration.

She approached his solar and slowed. The door was ajar, and two deep male voices floated from the room. She sighed with disappointment. As usual, he was busy. She glanced back down the hallway and debated whether she should return with his meal later.

"It's been eight years since Thora's incident," one of the voices said.

At the mention of her name, she paused.

"In all that time, the traps have caught two boars and three rabbits, if you don't count the dead ones."

Thora recognized Bastian's deep voice and drew closer to the door.

"There's been no sign of any cat, let alone a Yule Cat. There have been no tracks around the traps, nor any around the castle. It's a tale, m'lord. The Yule Cat does not exist. It is a waste of time and manpower to monitor and maintain the traps."

Thora's jaw clenched, and her back straightened. Her fingers curved tightly over the tray with such fury the knife on it began to rattle. She immediately lessened her grip to stop the shaking. Bastian didn't want to supervise the traps. The man who had saved her once no longer cared to protect her.

She wanted Bastian, of all people, to believe her. And she didn't know why it was so important for him to do so.

She leaned closer to the door to hear her father's voice.

"Even if it is a tale..."

She strained to hear his reply, praying he would trust his own daughter.

"I understand your position, Bastian. I may even tend to agree with you," her father said.

Thora scowled fiercely. How could he believe Bastian? Betrayal pierced her heart.

"However," her father continued. "My people, as well as my daughter, feel safer having the traps. We must continue to have a united front against this... tale."

Tale. The word cut deep. It wasn't a tale; it was reality. The Yule Cat had attacked her, gouged her cheek, and left a scar. It was definite proof. And yet, they still didn't believe her.

"Aye, m'lord. What are your orders?" Bastian asked.

"Cut the monitoring of the traps in half. Do so once a week, or less. I will leave that to your discretion."

"Aye, m'lord," Bastian replied.

Thora's lower lip quivered. What more did they want?

"One more item, m'lord," Bastian added. "Perchance if Lady Thora understood that this Yule Cat was just a story, the people would begin to believe it also."

Her jaw clenched. They might believe it was only a tale, but she knew the truth.

Her father's laughter rolled from the room. "Thora is adamant that the blasted cat is real. It didn't help that her mother also believed the fable. If you can convince her otherwise, it would be best for all."

Shock rocked her. Her father didn't believe the Yule Cat was real. He didn't trust his own daughter. Hurt at the betrayal, Thora spun away. How could her father try to enlist Bastian to influence her the Yule Cat wasn't real? She couldn't understand it. Did her father think so little of her? That she

had made the entire attack up? And Bastian... Anguish and fury churned inside her. Bastian, the man who had saved her from the attack, who had promised to protect her, now plotted with her father to deceive her and her people. She looked down at the venison, the sweet tart, and the apple on the tray. Suddenly, none of it was appealing.

She would not let them succeed. She paused in the middle of the hallway, trying to get her emotions under control while rage pounded through her blood. She returned to the doorway, placed the tray on the floor beside the door and stalked down the hallway.

She would never be convinced the Yule Cat was not real. She was certain it would attack again, and they needed to be prepared.



* * *

Bastian emerged from the solar and found a tray of food at his feet. He looked one way and then the other, but no one was there.

Chapter 2

Bastian walked through the inner ward. The stars above his head were shrouded by gray swirling clouds. His gaze moved over the tall stone walls as he wandered, looking for ways to improve the defense of the castle to keep the people that lived inside safe. He never considered himself off duty. Even when he had time off, he searched for ways to improve the fortifications. He knew all the secrets of the castle, all the weaknesses. He knew all the ways in and out. He took his duty as Captain of the Guard seriously. No one would be harmed on his watch.

He strolled by the keep, doing his final rounds for the night, being extra cautious about surveying the east wall across from the keep where a stone in the wall was beginning to crumble. It needed to be reinforced, and he was waiting for Lord Rowley to give the order to the mason. It made Bastian uneasy, having part of the wall in need of repair. But he had reported it and had to be content that it would be repaired.

A wall of cold hit him, and he paused, tensing. He narrowed his eyes against the sharp bite of the chill. The snow would start soon. He would have to make sure they had enough oil for the portcullis gears.

Bastian moved forward. As he walked, he heard the crunch of footfalls behind him and sighed to himself. He walked two more steps and suddenly drew his sword, whirling. He held his blade out before him.

Nicolas stood at the end of Bastian's sword. His dark hair shaggily hung to his shoulder, in desperate need of a cut. He wore a black cloak that swirled about his feet from his abrupt halt. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "How did you know?"

Bastian sheathed his sword. "I always know."

Nicolas's eyes narrowed. "One day, you won't hear or see me coming. One day, I'll fool you."

Bastian smirked and nodded in agreement. "One day. But not today." He turned and began walking.

Nicolas matched his stride. "What did you do to make Thora so angry?"

Bastian stopped and faced him, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Is she angry?"

Nicolas swiped his hair from his forehead. “She was pacing, and claimed it was all your fault before storming away.”

Frowning, Bastian looked toward the keep. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since.”

Worry tickled the back of Bastian’s neck. “Look for her. Make sure she is inside the castle.”

“She wouldn’t leave the castle at night. Not this close to the Yule. She’s too afraid.”

Bastian had to agree. Still, the need to know she was safe gnawed at the bottom of his stomach. “Look for her inside the keep,” Bastian ordered.

Nicolas nodded and spun, jogging off toward the keep.

Bastian strode through the inner ward to the outer ward. He would find her. He would start at the outer ward and work his way back through the castle. He knew Nicolas would search inside. It was only a matter of time before they found her safe.

As he walked across the outer ward toward the gatehouse, he scanned the area for any sign of Thora. The blacksmith’s shop was quiet for the night. Besides that, the leather maker’s shop was closed. All was silent. A male voice echoed through the ward, coming from the gatehouse, drawing his interest. It was nothing. Probably the guards were speaking to one another. But one of them might have seen her.

A flash of red caught his attention between the crenels on the walkway. He instinctively paused, watching, waiting to see if it was Thora. What would she be doing on the walkway? It couldn’t be Thora. Yet, he still waited, shifting his position to see better in the darkness. He didn’t realize he was holding his breath until the clouds parted, and the moon appeared. Her red hair shone in the soft rays of light. He expelled his breath in a relieved burst.

Thora stood on the gatehouse walkway, staring out into the forest. Locks of her hair fluttered in the wind.

Concern for how he had upset her caused him to trot to the gatehouse and take the stone stairs two at a time. He nodded to the guard on duty and continued to the walkway where he had seen Thora. As he emerged from the gatehouse, he saw her standing facing the forest. The moonlight showered down on her face, casting a pale glow over her smooth skin. The wind whipped her hair, making it appear like fire. She hugged herself tightly against the chill. He moved forward, removing his cloak, and preparing to place it about her shoulders.

As he neared, she spun, pinning him with a scorching look of anger that froze him in his tracks.

“Don’t,” she snapped.

He pulled his cloak back, stunned at the vehemence in her voice. She turned back to the forest. He glanced at the trees and then at her. An icy wind swept around him, and still, he did not put his cloak back on. He clenched it tightly in his hand. “What are you doing out here?”

“If you think it is a waste of time to protect my people, then I will take it upon myself to do so,” she answered heatedly.

He straightened, insulted. “I never said protecting the people was a waste of time. It is my duty. One I take seriously.”

“And yet you think the traps are unnecessary.”

His mouth dropped slightly before he closed it. How did she know? And then he remembered the trap set outside of Lord Rowley’s door. He folded the cloak over his arm. “I think the time spent maintaining the traps could be better spent on other things. Like training the guards. Surely you can see the wisdom in that.”

“What I see is a knight who promised to keep us safe, and now he wants to abandon his promises.”

Bastian’s jaw clenched. She couldn’t possibly believe that! “That’s not what this is. I want to prepare the castle for real threats, not imaginary ones.”

Thora’s lips thinned in anger. Her blue eyes flashed as the moon slid out from behind a cloud. “It is almost the Yule. That cat will return. And you’d best be prepared.” She marched past him with her chin held high.

Bastian caught her arm, stopping her. “I know you are angry. And I know you are frightened. But it’s been eight years. Think back to your attack.”

She yanked her arm free, her fist clenched. “I know what I saw. It was the Yule Cat. It swooped down and would have eaten me if you hadn’t come.”

“Or, was it an animal that jumped from a branch? Or fell?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I know what happened. I know what I saw.”

“You were ten, Thora. You’re a woman now. It’s time to stop believing in legends. The Yule Cat isn’t real. You are playing a dangerous game with the minds of the villagers.”

Her fists clenched into balls. “This is no game. This is not from my imagination. It attacked me. I didn’t just imagine these marks on my face.” She stepped back from him. “If you stop monitoring those traps and the Yule Cat comes, someone could get hurt or worse. It is your duty as Captain of the

Guard to protect us.” She whirled and stormed away, the strands of her red hair flapping behind her in the wind like a pennant.

Bastian shook his head. Stubborn. Fierce. Beautiful. She would not give up her belief in the damned cat. And she had convinced others her story was true, that this legendary cat had attacked her. That it had come to eat her. The village went mad around the Yuletide. They were afraid, just like Thora.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the crenel. A memory slammed to the forefront of his mind. Madeline, his sister. Lord, he hadn’t thought of her in a while. He had loved her dearly. She had promised to keep him safe, her little brother. He grinned. Silly as the vow was, he had believed her. And in return, as children do, he had promised to protect her. He recalled her beautiful, excited brown eyes, a shade darker than his own. Her hair had been dark like Nicolas’s but ringed with tiny curls. She had been vibrant, just a year older than him.

He stared down at his cloak without really seeing it, recalling the day long ago. The sun had been warm on his cheeks. He remembered Madeline telling him in her singsong voice that his cheeks were going to burn from the sun as they raced down to the large boulders that lined the riverbank. They had climbed to their favorite spot and began to toss rocks into the rushing water below, seeing who could throw it farthest. Two boys from bordering lands had arrived a few minutes after they had.

Bastian’s fist tightened around his cloak. They had wanted to play a game. They had climbed up on the boulder with him and Madeline. Madeline had announced that they were leaving. She’d reached out for his hand. He wished he had clasped it. He wished he had reached it. He wished he had been a second quicker to grasp her hand. But before he could, one of the boys grabbed Madeline’s arm and tugged her to the edge of the boulder, asking her if she could swim, and pushed her in. She fell into the river with her hand still outstretched.

She couldn’t swim. Madeline hadn’t even screamed when the boy shoved her.

Bastian had. He had called her name and raced up and down the shoreline, searching for her.

He had not been able to protect her from the older boys who had shoved her into the river. He had not been able to protect her from the water that seeped into her lungs and took her life. His lips thinned, and he tried to thrust the thought away. His father had blamed him for her death, but he had done

everything in his power, everything a child of seven summers could do to save her. It had not been enough.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. And now, Lady Thora believed he didn't want to guard the castle. He would not fail to defend the city. He would not let them down as he had Madeline.

Thora's harsh words burned like an ember in the pit of his soul. Still, he understood how she could feel so betrayed. Eight years ago, he had been the one to comfort her after her attack, holding her in his arms. He 'd seen how terrified she was. He had been surprised how easily the words came to him, the vow. He had promised he would keep her safe. He had promised to protect her. The same vow he had uttered to his sister.

His shoulders sagged. He couldn't protect his sister. Why did he think he could protect Lady Thora? Even from an imaginary creature.

Chapter 3

Thora returned to the keep. Her fists were balled tightly at her sides as she stalked through the iron-bound wooden doors and down the hallway, fuming. It was unacceptable. Bastian had to keep the traps monitored. There were no other options. It was important to trap the Yule Cat -- if it were to come this year -- so it could not enter the castle and hurt anyone. There was only one solution to preserve the traps. If her father ordered Bastian to continue to maintain them, then he would. She had to convince her father to change his mind.

As she entered the spiral stairway, she thought back to Bastian's words. 'Did it jump from a branch? Or fall?' She ground her teeth. She knew what had happened. She ran her fingers over the three scars on her cheek. Three lines left by the Yule Cat. 'It's time to stop believing in legends. The Yule Cat isn't real.' Then where had she got these very real marks?

She walked down the hallway with her jaw clenched. She passed one of her father's servants, who bowed to her. She nodded in greeting, trying hard not to let him see how angry she was.

Pausing at her father's chambers, she knocked on the door.

"I told you I don't need to bathe!" her father's voice rose.

She eased the door open. "Father?"

He stood near the window where the shutters had been opened. When he saw her, his scowl eased, and a grin touched his lips. "I'm sorry, my dear. I thought you were James." He crossed the room to the hearth, signaling her to enter with a quick wave.

Thora closed the door behind her.

As he eased himself into the padded wooden chair, he groaned softly. "The man can be vexing."

She crossed the room and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "So can you, on occasion."

He smiled and nodded in agreement. "I missed our dinner."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes. Bastian found the tray near the door. You didn't come in."

"No." She took a deep breath and stared at her clasped hands. "Father, I

want to talk to you about the traps.”

“I knew you heard us speaking.” He sighed. “Dearest, Bastian is right. It’s been eight years since your attack, and there has been no incidents since. We need to concentrate our efforts on real threats. I’m sure you’ve heard tell of raiders coming down from the Highlands. They are more dangerous to us than a cat.”

She swallowed heavily. At the very least, he hadn’t denied the attack had happened or that the Yule Cat was real. “It’s close to the Yule, Father. The people... *I*... would feel safer if the traps were maintained and monitored through the Yule.”

He gazed at her with tender blue eyes.

She laid a hand on his arm. “Please, Father. It’s important. It’s important we all feel safe.”

“Is it the others you are worried about, or yourself?”

She pulled back, startled. His words repeated in her mind, an accusation. She paused. Was she only thinking about herself? Was he right? Was she only insisting the traps remain maintained so that *she* felt safe?

He patted her hand. “I’m sorry for what you endured years ago and the scars it has left you physically and mentally. If I find that damned cat, I will rip it to pieces for the terror it has instilled in you.”

Thora wished with all her heart he could do just that -- find the Yule Cat and kill it. Put an end to all this.

He took a deep breath. “I understand your fear. I do. But no one else has been attacked by the Yule Cat.” He considered his words with a scowl on his brow. He spoke softly. “It’s been so long since your attack. Perhaps the cat is dead. Perhaps it has moved on to another castle.” He paused before continuing, “Perhaps it is not real.”

She straightened, hurt. Her lip quivered for an instant before she brought it under control. She had not made the attack up! “It *is* real. I saw it. I --”

He held up a hand for her to cease. “So be it. I will inform Bastian to keep checking the traps. For you.”

The statement that it was all for her weighed more heavily on her conscience than the fact that he thought the Yule Cat was not real. Two men had told her it was not real, two men she adored. Was she being selfish in demanding the traps be kept up? But was it not better to be safe than sorry, even at the expense of convenience? She wrung her hands. “Thank you, Father.” She kissed his cheek absently before departing the room, more

troubled than when she'd entered.



* * *

Bastian couldn't get Thora's accusation out of his mind. He wanted to abandon his promise? He scoffed. He would never abandon his promises, not again, least of all those to Thora. He entered the military quarters of the castle, moving through the hallway. All the guards stationed in the castle had rooms here. Bastian knew Sir William and Sir Garrett were patrolling the walkways that night.

He quietly opened the door to his chambers and entered the darkness. The room was eerily silent, and he stopped, listening. He shook his head when he didn't even hear the sound of a cricket. "Not tonight, Nicolas," he growled. "I'm not in the mood."

There was a pause and then a sigh. "I would have got you tonight!"

Bastian made his way to his straw mattress, tossing his cloak over a chair before sitting. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

A candle flamed to light on a table near the wall, and Nicolas stepped into the brightness. "I was waiting for you." While Nicolas wasn't a knight nor guard, Lord Rowley let the brothers share chambers. Two straw mattresses lay against opposite stone walls with a table propped between them, a chair at the foot of each bed, and a large chest against the wall.

"Did you find Thora?" Nicolas asked.

Bastian nodded, pulling his boots from his feet. "Aye."

"Is she still angry?"

"Aye."

"Did you find out why?"

Bastian lifted his eyes to his brother. Nicolas was a scrawny boy who hadn't yet grown into his body. At sixteen summers, he was tall and willing to learn. Bastian was proud of the man Nicolas was developing into, but he had a long way to go before becoming a knight. Nicolas sat on his straw mattress and leaned forward. Candlelight fell over him in a deep red wave. As the light flickered from a draft, long shadows were cast over the boy's

face.

Bastian leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “What do you think of the Yule Cat?”

“It’s a monster,” Nicolas exclaimed, gesticulating. “It’s big and --”

Bastian knew the legend and waved him off. “But do you believe it’s real?”

Nicolas’s eyebrows rose in surprise. He thought about the question for a moment and then scratched his head. “Thora believes it is real.” When Bastian didn’t respond, he furrowed his brow in seriousness. “I guess... sure. Why couldn’t it be real?”

“A big black cat that comes down from the hills at the Yule and eats children who haven’t done their chores?” Bastian asked doubtfully.

Nicolas blinked and then grinned. “It doesn’t come down alone. It has that troll lady with it.”

Bastian lifted a brow in disbelief. “When have you believed in trolls?”

Nicolas shrugged and leaned back against the wall. “Yeah. It does sound pretend.” He yawned. “But Thora was attacked by the Yule Cat. If that hadn’t happened, I might say it was just a silly tale. But she has those scratches on her face as proof.”

A moment of silence stretched in the room, and Bastian leaned back against the wall, mirroring his little brother, and stared into the flickering candlelight. Proof. That was what he needed. Proof to show Thora and all the rest that the Yule Cat didn’t exist. But how was he going to find that?

Thora was the key. She had always been the answer.

Chapter 4

Satisfied that her father would keep the traps maintained and in working order, Thora's anger evaporated. As she moved toward the kitchens, she thought back to her argument with Bastian. She had said hurtful things to him that she now regretted. She knew he would defend her people with his life if need be. She had been angry with him and wanted to hurt him as he had hurt her. He didn't believe the Yule Cat was real. Did he even believe it attacked her? She didn't understand. Bastian had been there that night. She remembered how he had convinced her that he would never let anything happen to her. She remembered how he held her until she stopped crying and shaking. And now... now what? He thought she had made the entire thing up?

She stopped by the kitchens to take a carrot for her favorite horse, Midnight, and a piece of venison for the barn hound, Beaumont. Then she left and headed toward the stables.

As she walked across the inner ward toward the stables, she distractedly twisted her golden bracelet, the one her father had given her for the Yule five years ago. She tried not to dwell on Bastian. Some people didn't have faith that the Yule Cat was real, and that was certainly their right. But a monster that struck infrequently was still a monster to be aware of. But Bastian... It stung that he questioned what happened that night. Yes, she had been young, but she knew what had happened, what she'd seen. Those glowing eyes in the tree would never be erased from her memory.

They *were* the eyes of the Yule Cat!

The night air was crisp and getting colder. The gray clouds churned above her head, hiding the night stars. She hurried through the cold, passing two boys huddled around a bonfire.

She opened the stable door and entered, moving toward Midnight, a sleek black stallion tied to a beam in his stall.

Around Midnight a handful of other horses stood, secured to beams in separate stalls. It was dark, but she knew the way down the aisle to her beloved horse by heart. Her feet crunched on the hay lining the floor.

Entering the stall, she ran her hand along Midnight's side, and he

nickered softly in greeting. She stroked his nose, and he nudged her hand, looking for the carrot. She pressed a kiss to his snout and removed the carrot from inside her cloak, where she had tucked it into her belt. She presented it to Midnight. He nibbled it from her hand, his lips brushing softly against her palm. He bowed his head, allowing her to pat his neck as he ate.

After stroking his nose, Thora turned from her horse to find the mastiff sitting excitedly behind her. He stared at her with large brown eyes and a wagging tail that sent the hay on the floor scattering.

She smiled. "You smelled it, didn't you?"

At her voice, he stood, his tongue lolling out of his mouth to one side. Beaumont's ears and muzzle were brown, his body tan. He was a large dog and came up to Thora's waist.

She scratched behind his ears. "You are a good boy, aren't you? Aren't you?" she cooed before reaching inside her cloak and pulling out the venison. She handed it to him, and he eagerly ate it.

Thora turned back to Midnight. She stroked his nose, gazing into his eyes. Lord, she loved this horse. She had raised him from a colt and trained him herself. Her father insisted he did all the training, but it simply wasn't so.

Midnight was hers.

Beaumont suddenly froze, and his ears perked up. A moment later, a horrible screeching filled the night. It was like nothing she had ever heard before. Her stomach dropped. She hurried to the door, followed by a bounding Beaumont. She opened it slightly, blocking Beaumont's exit.

Cackling laughter floated to her on the night breeze, and she tilted her head to listen. A yowling pierced the air. She stepped outside, easing the door closed behind her.

Two boys stood across from each other around the bonfire. One had his hood up, and the other wore no cloak. They stared down at the fire with crooked grins. The fire snapped, and the one with the hood pointed toward the flames. "Don't let it get it away!"

Confused, Thora took a step forward.

The boy without a cloak jerked to the side and kicked something toward the fire. "Kick it back! Beware! The Yule Cat!"

Startled and frightened, Thora straightened. Shivers of fear raced through her body.

The Yule Cat? In the castle?

"Get it!" the hooded boy hooted with laughter. "Get the Yule Cat!"

The boy without a cloak swiped with his foot, snickering.

Terrified, Thora retreated to the stable wall. *The Yule Cat*. It was here, inside the castle walls. It had got through the traps. In her mind's eye, she saw those two glowing eyes and felt the sting of its claws against her cheek. She trembled fiercely.

A shadow shot out of the fire and tried to dodge the boy's cocked foot, but the boy blocked it and kicked it back into the fire.

The Yule Cat. Thora couldn't move; her body was numb with horror. She could barely breathe. The image of the glowing eyes consumed her thoughts. The memory of the awful growl echoed in her ears. Black spots dotted her vision, and her body grew cold.

The shadow tried to race away, but the hooded boy grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, laughing. He lifted it above his head and shook it. "Ahhhh! The Yule Cat!"

It was a cat, a small black cat. Thora blinked. The haze of fear holding her immobile drained from her body, and puzzlement washed over her. The Yule Cat was a small black cat?

"Throw it in!" the boy without a cloak ordered, pointing to the fire.

The cat looked at Thora.

For a moment, time seemed to halt. Those wide, brown eyes stared at her, pleading with her. The boy held it over the fire, laughing. The cat's thin black tail was curled beneath its hind legs, the tip on fire. Its paws were splayed helplessly.

At that moment, Thora saw a helpless animal, not the horrible Yule Cat of her nightmares. She saw an animal that was being tortured by two boys. Tears rose in her eyes as the boy lowered it toward the flames. His laugh echoed in the night.

Who was the real monster here?

She might get scratched again. She might be terrified. But she could not let them hurt the cat. Without another thought, she bolted from the wall. She came up behind the boys and shoved the one holding the cat aside. He dropped it, and it dashed toward the stables.

"Hey!" one boy called.

"Ahh!" the other screamed. "My tunic is on fire!"

Thora ignored him. She followed the path of the cat with her eyes. It squeezed between two planks of wood and into the stables.

Beaumont started barking.

Thora dashed toward the stables. She flung the door wide and stood for a moment in the entry, scanning the darkness as her eyes adjusted.

Beaumont's insistent bark came from an empty stall. He howled, digging at the hay. The horses in the other stalls shifted nervously.

Thora rushed forward and grabbed Beaumont around the shoulders, dragging him away. He continued to bark and twist his body to return to the stall. Thora held him, scanning the hay-covered ground for the injured cat. She knew it was here somewhere; Beaumont was trying too hard to reach *something*.

Suddenly, movement caused Beaumont to jerk forward. The cat darted out of the hay, and Thora put her hand down, hoping to catch it. She managed to scoop it into her arms, clutching it close, and released Beaumont. It squealed as she grasped it, and she whispered in a soft voice, "It's well. You're safe now. I'll protect you."

Beaumont barked, trailing her to the door. Thora held the cat to her chest as she made her way out of the stables. She pressed through the doorway, shutting it quickly before Beaumont could escape. She made her way across the courtyard, pausing to glance toward the bonfire. The flames snapped and crackled, but the boys were not there. She breathed a sigh of relief and raced toward the keep.

Inside the stables, among the strands of hay where the cat had hidden, a small waft of smoke curled up from a tiny flame.

Chapter 5

Thora's heart raced as she clutched the cat to her chest, wrapped safely inside her cloak. As she hurried up the spiral stairs, her only thought was for the safety of the little cat. Those boys had been evil and callous to hurt it. How barbaric! Why would they want to harm such a small creature? And then laugh about it.

She suddenly realized the cat had stopped struggling. Dread filled her as she glanced down into the shelter of her cloak, hoping it was not dead. In the flickering light of the torches ensconced on the wall, she saw two large eyes gazing up at her, two large, frightened eyes. She could only stare. Her heart twisted -- what an innocent creature, unable to defend itself against the two boys.

Poor thing. It was terrified. Her stare moved over the little face. One of its ears was still smoking and burnt badly. On one side of its cheek, its whiskers had been completely singed. "It will be well," she whispered, anguished over the abuse the little cat had endured. She cuddled the cat against her and hurried up the stairs to her chambers at the far end of the hallway.

She entered her chambers, grateful for the warm fire in the hearth. She glanced down at the cat, comforting it with soft words, "You'll be well. I'll take care of you." The frightened cat would probably dash into a corner of her room, looking for safety and a hiding place as soon as she released it. But she had to take care of its injuries. Its ear looked wounded and raw. She pushed all her covers into the center of the bed with her one free hand, making a small, protected cocoon. She took one of the blankets and pulled it up over the top of the rest.

Then she lifted the cover, easing her arm open so the cat could crawl into the nest. She hoped it didn't dash beneath the bed where she couldn't tend it. She also hoped it wouldn't lash out at her in its fear. Thankfully, the black cat slunk into the warmth of the cave she had made with the blankets and lay down, looking at her with wide, soulful eyes.

For a moment, Thora could only gaze at the cat. It called to her; beckoned to her for comfort. She carefully and slowly eased the cloak from her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. As it fell, she noticed a piece of venison

tucked in her belt. She removed it and broke off a smaller piece to present to the cat. The cat's pupils dilated. It drew back fearfully, its body tensing, ready to flee.

Immediately, Thora withdrew the meat and left it on a blanket near the cat. It would eat when it was hungry.

She slowly stood, trying not to frighten it. She took the basin of water and cloth from her table and placed them on her bed.

The fire in the hearth grew small as the night waned on, and Thora tended the wounded animal. A spot on its side had burned by the fire, leaving pale pink skin. The cat tried to lick it and wouldn't let Thora close enough to tend it. She did the best she could by dabbing the injuries when it was distracted.

Finally, satisfied with the job she had done, she brought a clean bowl of water and some leftover venison from the kitchen, leaving it on the bed.

She stared at the cat as its sleepy eyes drooped. Compassion welled up in her. The poor little thing.

Shouting and commotion came from outside her window, and she slowly eased herself from the bed. She threw open the shutters. A strange red-orange glow lit the courtyard below her window. Confused, she closed the shutters and rushed to the door.

A male servant raced by her as she stepped out of her room. "What is going on?" she asked.

He ran by without an answer. Thora shut the door behind her and followed him. Something was wrong. She hurried down the spiral stairway and into the main hall.

Knights, squires, and servants were all dashing out of the keep into the cold. Some had no boots on. Others had no cloaks and only wore their nightclothes.

Prickles of trepidation and concern raced up Thora's nape. She ran into the night and stopped cold. The orange glow filled the courtyard. A guard urgently shouted orders into the night. A line of people stretched from the well into the courtyard, passing sloshing buckets.

Thora followed the line of people with her eyes until her gaze came to rest on the end, where guards tossed the buckets of water onto the fire. Other men ran about, using blankets to swat at the flames. The stables were ablaze.

Covering her mouth with disbelief, Thora knew their efforts were in vain. Flames crackled and ate away at the blackened beams. Dark smoke rolled from inside the structure. Hot, thick flames danced across the roof. A burnt

beam collapsed inside, defeated.

Shocked, Thora watched the wooden stables burn.

Chapter 6

Everyone had pitched in to battle the fire. Even Lord Rowley passed buckets full of water and issued orders. After a hard battle that lasted all night, the fire was out, leaving behind destruction, devastation, and death.

Bastian gave orders to take the dead animals from the stables and bury them outside the castle. Good horses had perished in the flames. It was a tragedy. He breathed a sigh mixed with frustration and relief. At least they had contained the fire before it spread to any of the other buildings. They had been lucky on that account.

Exhausted, he made his way toward the keep. He was looking forward to crawling into his bed. A handful of villagers clustered near the bottom of the stairs, along with two squires Bastian recognized as Tommy and Rob.

“It was the Yule Cat,” Tommy proclaimed to the group around him.

Bastian clenched his jaw. He had no time for this tale. He kept moving toward the keep but couldn’t help overhearing their conversation.

“We were trying to kill it,” Rob added. “Burn it alive. But Gryla, the troll woman that travels with the cat, came and saved it.” He held up his blackened sleeve. “She tried to burn me!”

Bastian shook his head in irritation. That damn cat. It felt like his own personal curse. He couldn’t let word of this get out. The entire village would go mad with fear. It was already an uneasy time of year with the Yule approaching. He marched toward the squires and the group around them. “Have you nothing better to do?”

They turned to him. As he neared, he heard someone call him from near the doorway of the keep.

“Sir Bastian!” Lord Rowley’s voice boomed across the courtyard as he exited the keep. He was a tall, thin man of imposing stature. He gazed at Bastian with an imperious look.

Bastian came up short, shifting his path to intercept that of his lord. “M’lord. The fire is out. There is --”

Rowley came closer to him and lowered his voice. “How many horses were killed?”

Bastian released a soft breath of unhappiness. “Three. We managed to

save seven.”

Rowley’s gaze shifted to the blackened skeletal remains of the stables. He sighed softly. “Well done, Bastian.” He watched a child run past him. “We need to check the traps. How did that devil cat get into the castle?”

Bastian mentally groaned. Word had somehow already reached Lord Rowley about the cat. “A cat did not start this fire. A cat *could not* have started it. There was a fire pit close to the stables. I think that --”

“Two squires were attacked. We have no choice but to send a garrison after that witch and her cat. Fortify the castle. Send men to check the traps. Look for footprints, hair, anything. I want to know how that cat got into the castle.”

Bastian had been so close to getting Lord Rowley to forget about those traps and to concentrate on other, more important items. Like real threats. He nodded. “Aye, m’lord.” It was going to be a very long day. It was going to be a very long Yule.

“Have you seen Thora?” Rowley asked, scanning the courtyard for her.

“She was helping with the fire earlier, but I haven’t seen her since.”

“Her horse, Midnight... is it safe?”

Bastian swallowed heavily. He shook his head. Midnight was one of the first bodies they had removed from the stables.

Rowley took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. “This shall not go unpunished.”

Bastian nodded as Lord Rowley returned to the keep. Bastian didn’t follow him. His gaze moved over the faces of the villagers walking through the courtyard, all with their stares upon the stables, all muttering about a cursed cat. He rubbed his fingers over his eyes. The fire had to have been an accident. No cat could have started a fire. The thought was ludicrous.

He lifted his gaze, continuing to scan the area. It was a second later that Bastian realized he was looking for Thora.



* * *

It must have been that cat, Thora thought with fierce bitterness. The fire from

her tail had ignited the hay in the stables. It was the only answer. There had been no wind to blow the bonfire, and the boys had not been near the stables.

Grief overcame her, and she had to stop in the spiral stairway as her vision blurred with tears. A heaviness filled her chest, and a sob hitched in her throat. Midnight was gone. Her beautiful, kind horse. The horse she had spent months training. The horse she had grown up with. The horse she had loved.

Anguish overcame her, and she clenched her fists against the onslaught. She looked up at the ceiling toward her chambers, where the cat rested safely. If she hadn't rescued the cat, it would never have run into the stables and started the fire. Midnight would still be alive. It was all the fault of that cat. She never should have saved it. Yet, even as she thought that she knew she couldn't have let the boys hurt it. Her body shook with sorrow. She hated that cat!

She flung open the door to her room. She stood in the entrance, trembling with remorse and grief.

She had saved the cursed cat, and her horse had paid the price for it. Where was the justice in that?

She hurried to the bed, but the center of the nest of blankets was empty. The cat wasn't there. She stared at the indent in the blankets where it had been. The venison she had left on the bed was gone. She turned around, inspecting her room. She dropped to her knees to look beneath the table, at each corner of the hearth. It had to be here somewhere.

She looked back at the empty pile of blankets. Her body began to shake with sadness. Her wonderful horse was dead. She would never ride him again, nor give him a carrot, nor feel his gentle nibble on her skirt when he wanted her attention. Tears watered in her eyes. Poor Midnight. Her beautiful horse... She dropped onto the side of her bed and folded her hands in her lap. Tears rushed from her eyes, bathing her cheeks. Her body was wracked with tremors. Her breathing came in hitched breaths.

Something moved at the bottom of her bed, and she shifted her gaze. The cat sat at the end of her bed, watching her with those large, brown eyes. The tip of one ear was raw and pink, damaged from the flames.

For a moment, Thora stiffened, afraid it would pounce on her and eat her. It must be the Yule Cat. No other cat could cause this much damage and pain.

But the black cat simply sat still, gazing at her. Its sleek coat reflected the firelight from the hearth. She realized the cat was not going to eat her or

pounce on her. Her shoulders slouched, and she nearly laughed at herself. “I hate you,” she whispered.

She shifted and slowly stretched her body out on the bed toward the cat. It tensed, preparing to run. She stayed still. A long moment passed, and she stared at it, so small, so hurt. Finally, it relaxed.

A soft rumble of purring issued from the cat before it licked its paw and rubbed it over its face. Then, it regarded her with a less frightened look. Its eyes were not as round and were more relaxed, its lids coming down over its eyes.

With a jolt, Thora realized it wasn't the cat's fault. Midnight's death, the fire -- none of it was the cat's fault. It was just an innocent animal trying to survive, just like they all were. She could no more have it killed than she could rip out her own heart. And that realization made her anguish even worse.

Guilt and sorrow mixed and culminated inside of her. She lifted a hand toward the cat, reaching toward it, searching for comfort or affection.

The cat leapt from the bed and dashed beneath it.

Defeated, Thora's fingers curled, and she turned over to look at the ceiling. Exhausted, she wept herself to sleep.



* * *

Bastian led the men back into the castle. The garrison had swept the countryside and found no trace of tracks nor a cat and troll woman. The sun was heading into its descent, and he was hungry, tired, and moody. It was a waste of time to be chasing after a legend. How could one catch an imaginary figure?

He stalked into the Great Hall, his booted feet crunching on the rushes, and collapsed into one of the chairs near the hearth. His fingers were frozen, his toes icy. No man in his right mind would be out pursuing imaginary creatures in the cold.

“Bastian!” Nicolas raced up to him across the Great Hall, his voice echoing in the cavernous room. He sidestepped a servant carrying a tray of

drinks and came to Bastian's side. "They found long scratch marks from the Yule Cat near the stables. It really was the Yule Cat that started the fire!"

"What?" Bastian demanded, irritated. "How could they have found anything? The ground was trampled from putting out the fire. There were no tracks."

Nicolas shrugged, his eyes wide with excitement. "They are there. I saw them."

Bastian ground his teeth. "Who found the marks?"

Nicolas raised his shoulders again. "I'm not sure who found it, but Tommy told me about it."

"Tommy, Sir Garrett's squire?"

Nicolas nodded. "But I don't think he found it. There are three long gouges. It couldn't have been anything else except the cat's claws."

Angry and disgusted by the news, Bastian rose so quickly that he almost knocked his chair over. It was time to get to the bottom of this. Time to discover who started the fire, and who was spreading these rumors. "Where are the marks?"

Chapter 7

Three long gouges were etched into the frozen earth beside the charred remains of the stables. Bastian stared at the marks. He surveyed the footprints all around it. There even appeared to be tracks beneath the gouges if that were possible. He gazed at the gashes, and anger simmered his blood.

He pulled his sword from its scabbard and placed the tip in one of the marks. It fit perfectly. He traced the mark with his blade, running it the length of the scrapes, about three feet. It looked more like a line a sword would make than a cat's claw.

"What are you looking at?"

Bastian whirled at Thora's voice. She stood behind him with her hands on her hips, her gaze shifting from him to the ground and back. A curl of her red hair twirled in the breeze, and the setting sunlight caught it, making it glimmer with scarlet highlights. But it was her eyes that captured his attention. There were dark rings beneath them, and they were bloodshot as if she had been crying.

Sympathy swept through him, and he stepped toward her. "I'm sorry," Bastian consoled.

She dipped her head and nodded. "Thank you."

"We tried everything we could --"

"I know you did." She lifted her hand to silence him.

He felt bad for not being able to save the horses. He knew Midnight was her favorite. He stepped toward her. "If there's anything I can do..."

She looked around him at the marks. "What are those?"

Bastian glanced over his shoulder at the three streaks. "Nothing," he said, trying to erase them with his foot. No one else needed to be fooled by these 'scratches.'

Thora cocked her head, raising an eyebrow. Her gaze dropped to his hand, where he still held the sword. "I'm certain whatever it was deserved to be challenged by your sword."

He calmly re-sheathed his weapon. "I was testing out a theory."

She again looked toward the marks.

He stepped toward her, hoping to guide her away from the fake lines. He

didn't need her to be further convinced that a deadly cat had made its way inside the castle walls. She was the most vocal believer in the Yule Cat. She didn't need more evidence.

"What theory?" She stepped past him and stopped near the marks. "Are these the Yule Cat's scratches?"

Bastian groaned silently. He closed his eyes for a moment. It was no use trying to keep it from her. She would hear the rumors from Tommy, Nicolas, or any of the villagers. "I don't believe they are," Bastian admitted.

Thora studied them for a long, quiet moment.

Bastian debated telling her he thought they were marks from a sword and, in the end, decided against it. It would just lead to an argument between them.

She turned to him and regarded him with an expression he had not seen before. "They are saying that it was Gryla and the Yule Cat who burned the stables."

Bastian shook his head.

Thora continued, "What do you think happened?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise and then lowered. "Do you really want to know? If I tell you what I think, you might believe I don't want to protect the people of this castle."

She winced and looked down guiltily. "I'm sorry, Bastian. I shouldn't have said that yesterday. You are the most loyal, dedicated knight in my father's service."

"Perchance, that is why I'm Captain of the Guard," he said lightheartedly. His comment was rewarded by Thora's grudging smile. One he liked to see. He looked at the burnt remains of the stables.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

His gaze scanned the blackened beams. This was not started by a cat. Perchance it was an accident. Or maybe someone was covering something up. Either way, he needed to disprove that it was caused by a fictional cat. His eyes narrowed slightly. "Find out the truth,"

"How?"

He turned back to her.

How, indeed. How could he prove to an entire castle, nay an entire village, that their belief in a spiritual cat was nothing but legend? "I'm going to check out the traps."

"I'd like to accompany you."

Surprise rocked him, and his gaze swept her. Her skin was pale, her eyes bloodshot. “You should get some rest.”

“I can’t sleep,” she answered.

Again, a tug of concern and compassion pulled at the pit in his stomach. He could not deny her, even though she clearly needed rest. If he could convince Thora that this cat was only a legend, then perhaps the entire town would believe him more readily.



* * *

They rode from the castle on Bastian’s horse, Thora in front of him. His strong arms were securely around her, and for the first time in a long time, she relaxed. She looked down at his forearms where they gripped the reins. He was an excellent rider, confident in the saddle. She leaned back against him as his horse charged forward over the drawbridge. Her lids drooped, and she forced them open.

The sun was setting, nearly at the horizon. The horse’s hooves pounded over the wooden drawbridge, and Bastian steered his horse across the field toward the forest.

Bastian stopped at the edge of the forest. He tied the horse to a tree and reached up to help Thora dismount. She placed her hands on his broad shoulders. A sudden awareness filled her. Tingles shot through her. It was strange. His light brown eyes were lined with long lashes. Her gaze moved over his straight nose. His jaw and upper lip were covered in a day’s growth of beard. Their bodies were close, almost touching. She breathed in the scent of forest and leather. For a moment, she couldn’t take her gaze from his face, from his lips.

Bastian was all duty. When her feet touched the ground, he released her.

She immediately missed his power and his warmth. What was wrong with her? It must be because she was so tired. The cold wrapped around her, and she pulled her cloak tight as she followed him through the forest. He stopped just before a brush-covered spot, holding out a hand for her to stop.

Many sets of footprints tracked through a light layer of snow around an

exact square. Branches and fallen leaves covered the square. Thora could see exactly where the trap was.

Bastian shook his head in disapproval. “We won’t be able to find any proof of anything. There are no tracks, and if there were, they have been trampled upon.”

Thora stared at the trap as guilt rose inside her. Bastian was out searching for clues, for reality. He deserved to know what happened. “What would you do with the cat if you find it?”

“The cat?” he guffawed softly in disbelief and shook his head. “Your father would be the one to cast judgement on anything or anyone I find.”

“If you found it, you would give the cat to my father?” she asked hesitantly.

Bastian looked at her with a scowl of confusion. “It was not the Yule Cat, Thora. The stable fire was not caused by an animal.”

How wrong he was. Chills ran through Thora’s body as she thought of the black cat in her room. She bowed her head. If she told Bastian the truth, that the black cat *had* caused the stable fire, would he hand the cat over to her father to be killed? She couldn’t let that happen.

He looked at the darkening sky. Thick gray clouds marred the horizon. “We should head back. It looks like snow.”

Thora lifted her gaze and scanned the darkening swirls before looking at the trap again. “What about the rest of the traps?”

“Undoubtedly, they have been compromised just like this one. I won’t find the truth here.”

Chapter 8

Bastian trotted the horse back toward the castle. As they reached the road, he glanced down at Thora in his arms. She had been still since he mounted and took up the reins. Her eyes were closed, her dark lashes resting against her smooth cheek. He grinned. She was sleeping.

He pulled his horse to a stop and reached to ease her cloak closed before her. She shifted and settled her cheek against his chest. He stared down at her, relishing the quiet, solitary moment. Here, he could gaze at her without hiding his longing. Here, his eyes could feast upon her beauty. Here, he did not have to hide the feelings growing for her.

Curls of red hair hung over her smooth, flawless cheek. He longed to brush them aside and look into her open eyes. He wanted to kiss her full lips. And yet, he knew she did not feel the same way. They believed in different things. He doubted she saw him as anything but a childhood friend and the castle protector.

She snuggled against him, and for a moment, he allowed himself to believe it could be possible. That one day, he could be holding her in his arms when she was awake.

He took a breath and stopped short, not wanting to disturb her. They all had had a long day. He was as weary as she was. He spurred his horse into a walk toward the castle, enjoying the feeling of her soft form in his arms.

They rode across the drawbridge and beneath the open portcullis. He entered the outer ward and went through the gatehouse into the inner ward, where he stopped his steed.

A barn hand rushed up to him, flicking his dark hair from his eyes. "I'll take your --"

Bastian put a finger to his lips, signaling him to be quiet.

The boy nodded, grasped the reins of the horse.

Bastian pulled Thora close to him and swung his leg over the horse, dismounting. He held her in his arms so as not to disturb her. After landing on the ground, he gazed down at her. She turned her head away and then nestled back against him with a sigh.

He grinned and carried her inside the keep, up the spiral stairway, and

down the long corridor. He found a woman with long brown hair carrying a pile of blankets. He stepped into her path and signaled her to follow with a soft jerk of his chin.

She glanced down at Thora and then nodded, following them.

Bastian reached Thora's chambers, where the maid opened the door and allowed Bastian entrance.

He bore Thora to her bed and eased her down upon it. She groaned and turned on her side, tucking her hands beneath her cheek. Bastian undid the button of her cloak at her neck. He then removed one of her boots and then the other. When he placed them on the floor, her boot knocked into something. A small bowl.

He bent and looked at it. It was filled with water. He shrugged and placed the bowl on the table. He pulled a cover over Thora and turned to exit the room.

He paused in the doorway where the servant woman waited and nodded his thanks. Then, he left, closing the door behind them, forgetting about the water bowl.



* * *

The inside of her lids lightened with the rising sun. She felt a heavy warmth against her leg. Slowly, Thora opened her eyes. She blinked and stretched, arching her body.

She saw a bundle of black fur dart to the edge of the bed and leap down. She grinned. Her little cat had been sleeping beside her. She looked at the window where sunlight filtered in through a slit in the shutter. Morning, her groggy mind proclaimed. Morning! She sat straight up and was shocked to see she was still in her day clothes.

Her gaze caught on her empty wrist and she lifted it, running her fingers along her skin. Her bracelet! Where was it? She leaned over the bed and searched the floor. She looked on the table and noticed the cat's water bowl.

How had the bowl got onto the table? Her mind searched the day before. She had been with Bastian at the traps. They had been returning to the

castle... How had she got to her chambers? She vaguely remembered being so tired. Images of torches passing, and then darkness came to her mind. Then she recalled the hallway. Bastian. He had carried her here.

Good Lord! She swung her legs out of bed and stepped on her boots. Had he seen the cat? Did he know? She raced to the door and opened it, quickly exiting, and shutting it swiftly behind her. She ran down the hallway. She had to find Bastian and learn if he knew about the cat.

“Thora!”

She skidded to a halt and whirled to find her father walking down the hallway toward her. “Father.”

“I wanted to see you last night, but Bastian told me you were asleep,” her father said. He opened his arms, and she stepped into his embrace. “I’m so sorry, dearest. Midnight was a good horse. He deserved better.”

She nodded against his chest and stepped back, inspecting his face. Dark rings lined his blue eyes, and the indent of a frown lingered on his brow. “You haven’t slept.”

He shook his head and granted her a grim smile. “No. The destruction of our stables is a matter of extreme importance.”

“It was an accident,” Thora explained.

He placed a hand against her cheek. “When your mother spoke of Gryla and the Yule Cat, I chuckled and allowed it, thinking it all fantasy. But now...” His hand dropped from her face to his side. “Even when you were attacked, I didn’t quite believe it was the cursed cat of legends. But how can I ignore this? I must defend the castle.”

Thora shook her head. “We have traps.”

“We had traps, and it somehow still managed to get through. No. It is time for action. I cannot risk my castle, my people, *my daughter*, any longer.”

“What will you do?”

“I will find this thing and kill it.”

Her chest tightened. “You can’t really believe it was a cat that started the fire.”

“Maybe not the cat. It must have been the witch.”

“The troll woman?” Thora asked in disbelief.

“Either way, I shall kill them both for daring to burn my castle.”

“How do you know it was them?” she asked desperately and added to throw him off the track of the cat, “Perchance it was a fallen spark from a nearby bonfire. It would make more sense.”

“It would,” he agreed. “Except the squires saw the troll woman and the cat.”

Dread filled her. “They *saw* them?”

“The squires said they were fighting the cat, trying to burn it and save the castle.”

Thora’s jaw clenched, and her fists balled. The squires were lying. She looked down to hide her anger.

“They said the troll woman ran by and shoved one of them into the fire, promising to return to eat them.”

Thora’s mouth dropped. They thought *she* was the troll woman.

“I will find that cat and behead it. And I will find that troll witch and burn her. I have trackers and hunters out searching now. Have no fear, dearest. These monsters shall not escape.”

Disbelief filled Thora, and she could only stare at her father in horror. How had this got so out of control? How could her father believe a cat could burn down a stable? And then, her shoulders slouched. How could he not? It was what she had believed most of her life, what she had professed. She told everyone she had been attacked by the Yule Cat. “Father...”

He kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, Thora. Nothing will stop me this time.”



* * *

Bastian walked through the remains of the stables. Blackened beams rose like a giant skeleton around him. He searched the charred relics, inspecting for anything that could be saved. Unfortunately, almost everything was a complete loss. He eased a loose charred board aside with the toe of his boot. He had seen burned houses before, but this fire had been so hot it laid waste to almost everything. He lifted his gaze to the sky.

Beaumont bounded into the blackened remains, sending ash flying into the air around him.

Bastian scratched the large dog behind his ears. At least Beaumont had survived.

Large flakes of snow drifted down, coating the ground with a covering of white.

Bastian patted the hound and lifted his gaze to the surrounding shops. They had been lucky the fire had not spread to other buildings. Very lucky.

He continued through the remains of the stable, Beaumont padding along beside him. Bastian paused to kick another board. They would start clearing the remains before long. Before winter set in and it was too late. He tested another board with his foot. Beaumont nosed the board, pushing it aside. When it fell away, Bastian noticed something glinting beneath it. He bent to inspect it. Perhaps it was a tool they could salvage.

He reached down, brushing ash from the top. A piece of gold. Strange. He picked it up. A bracelet. A thin golden bracelet embroidered with swirls. He glanced at the ground. It had been buried beneath the ash, so it had been there before the fire started. He scowled. What would a bracelet be doing in the middle of the stables?



* * *

Thora sat on the floor of her room, staring at the darkness beneath her bed. She knew the little cat was there. Somewhere. Hiding. Frightened. She had shoved some blankets under the bed, hoping the cat would sleep in them comfortably. She had stopped at the kitchens, and the cook had given her some venison. Thora broke it into smaller chunks to leave a pile for the cat.

Had Bastian seen the cat last night? Did he know about it? Did he suspect she had been at the fire? What did he know? Terrified for the little cat and for herself, Thora chewed her lip thoughtfully. If anyone found out she was the troll woman, what would happen? Her people would be angry. Would they ever believe anything she told them again? Would she be punished? Thrown in the stocks for burning down the stables? And what would the villagers do to the cat? She sighed softly.

She should tell the truth -- she should tell Bastian. He was smart and would figure it out eventually. Maybe he would help her keep the little miracle alive. Yes, that was what the cat was for surviving the abuse of the

squires. A miracle. That's what she would call the cat.

She gazed into the darkness beneath the bed. This little miracle *couldn't* be the Yule Cat that had attacked her when she was eight summers old. It didn't match up with what she remembered. She recalled the animal that had scratched her being much bigger. Plus, her miracle hadn't tried to eat her. It didn't make sense that Miracle would come down from the mountains to attack the children who didn't finish their chores. More likely, Miracle had ridden into the castle on a merchant's cart.

Firelight from the hearth bathed her room in a soft glow that reminded her of the stable fire. Its light didn't reach beneath the bed. She couldn't see the cat. She pulled her knees in to rise from the floor.

Two glowing eyes peered at her from beneath the bed.

She froze. The memory of her attack returned with startling clarity. Two glowing eyes stared down at her from the branch of the tree...

Just like the ones beneath her bed!

Chapter 9

Paralyzed with fear, Thora's chest tightened. The Yule Cat! She had been mistaken! *Miracle* was the cat that had attacked her years ago. She was transported back in time to when she was ten, and the glowing eyes stared at her from the tree. Was the Yule Cat going to eat her now? Had it returned to finish the job it had started eight years ago? She trembled. Even as these thoughts raced through her mind, part of her refused to believe it. It was just a little cat! How could it eat her? Did it have magical powers to consume someone in one gulp?

Miracle stalked closer, those eyes moving toward her.

The need to flee gripped her, and she pushed her feet beneath her, preparing to run.

The black cat poked its head from beneath the bed. The glowing eyes were gone, replaced with wide brown eyes.

Thora blinked, stunned. What had happened to the glowing eyes?

The little cat moved hesitantly to the pile of venison and began to eat, chewing on one piece and then looking around the room cautiously before taking another.

Confused, Thora stared at it. How could the glowing eyes have vanished? She knew those glowing eyes belonged to her little cat. She had seen the eyes under her bed! There was no other explanation. And yet, where had they gone?

The cat seemed more interested in eating the venison than it did with eating her. Stunned, Thora sat and looked at *Miracle*. Just a little skinny black cat, its tail tucked beneath it as it ate. It wasn't going to eat her. It had the chance the night before when she was asleep, but instead, it had slept with her. Suddenly, the thought that it *could* eat her seemed preposterous.

The realization brought doubt and bewilderment. *Miracle* had glowing eyes, the same eyes as the creature who had attacked her. How could *Miracle* have the same eyes she'd seen on the Yule Cat? It must be a coincidence. It must be...

Laughter rang out from the hallway behind the closed door, drawing Thora's attention. She was afraid someone would enter her chambers, find

Miracle, and accuse it of being the Yule Cat as the squires had done.

As she had done. Her shoulders drooped. This cat was not the Yule Cat. It couldn't be.

She was afraid her people would not believe her, and they would take the cat to her father. The thought sent anxiety through her. She looked back at the cat. She had saved the cat and would not let anyone hurt it. She had promised to protect it.

Miracle shifted its head from the doorway to her. Its eyes caught and reflected the firelight. Glowing. Then, Miracle looked back at her, and its eyes were normal.

Thora's mouth dropped.

It must be a trick of the light.

As Miracle continued to eat, Thora was tortured by her thoughts. The creature who attacked her had glowing eyes, but was it just a deception? She touched the scratches on her cheek, running her fingers across the scars. Could she have been wrong to believe it had been the Yule Cat? Had it just been an animal? Had Bastian been right?



* * *

Bastian strolled through the keep searching for the two squires, Rob and Tommy. He wanted to find out exactly what happened the night of the fire. He found Rob in the kitchens, seated at a table, eating a loaf of bread. He was a tall boy with dark hair and a pinched look.

“Are you getting enough to eat, Rob?” Bastian asked, walking up to him.

Rob jumped up from his seat on the bench. “Aye, Captain. I’m catching a quick bite before Sir William and I are off to check the traps.”

A practice in futility, Bastian thought. But he showed none of his feelings. The men had to think this job was relevant and important. He nodded. “I would like to ask you about the night of the fire.”

Rob's eyes lit up. “Aye. It was horrible.”

Rob's sudden enthusiasm made Bastian think he had told this tale before and relished the attention. Bastian inquired, “What were you doing before the

fire?”

“Fighting off the Yule Cat!” Rob exploded with excitement, his eyes bright.

One of the cooks near the hearth looked up, wiping her hands on her apron. She met Bastian’s gaze and turned back to stirring the black pot hanging over the fire.

Bastian nodded, looking back at Rob. “Before that. Why were you outside in the courtyard?”

“Oh.” Rob’s eagerness drained, and he sat on the bench. “Well, I was waiting for Sir William to return from the night watch. I was going to tend his horse and retire for the evening.” He shook his head. “A shame about those horses.”

Was that sorrow in his tone or guilt? Bastian sat beside him, hoping that would keep him from speaking so loudly. “Was it just you and Tommy waiting?”

Rob bobbed his head. “Tommy was waiting with me for Sir Garrett. Sir Garrett and Sir William patrol together for the watch.”

“It was cold that night.”

“Aye!” Rob exclaimed. “Freezing. Me hands were numb. It was lucky we had that bonfire.”

Bastian stared. A bonfire. The night of the stable fire. Coincidence?

Rob noticed his stare and quickly added, “It was just a small one. Just enough to keep us warm.”

“How long were you waiting?”

Rob shrugged. “They didn’t return until after the fire started.”

“What did you talk about when you were waiting?”

Rob’s brows furrowed in confusion.

Bastian guessed by Rob’s reaction that this wasn’t the usual interest in the incident. He was certain others were more attracted to the part of the story with the Yule Cat. He waited.

Rob’s gaze searched the ground as if looking for the answer. “We were just talking. Oh! About girls.” He grinned sheepishly, and then when he glanced up at Bastian, his grin faded.

“Then what happened?”

His lips curled up. “And then it came from the darkness like a shadow.”

Bastian listened impassively. This sounded rehearsed. Fake. “Which way did it come from?”

Rob's grin evaporated again, and he shrugged. "We didn't see which way it came from. But suddenly, the Yule Cat was there." He curved his fingers. "With sharp claws. Its mouth was open. It was going to eat us!"

"Didn't you complete all of your chores?"

His tale interrupted, Rob lowered his hands, and his passion waned. He scowled.

"Isn't that the legend?" Bastian asked. "The Yule Cat eats children who don't finish their chores."

"Well, I..." Rob raked a hand through his dark hair. "I thought I did. But maybe I missed one."

Bastian knew Sir William, Rob's mentor, and he knew that William would not tolerate Rob failing to do a chore.

"Maybe it was after Tommy. Anyway, it came at us, and we drew our swords to fight it," Rob continued, making the motion of pulling his sword from his belt and holding it up.

Bastian was not impressed. "Was it small?"

Deflated, Rob lowered his hand. "What?"

"The cat. I mean, cats are usually relatively small."

"Well... it wasn't a normal cat. It was a giant! Did you see the scratch marks it left?"

Bastian nodded. He had seen the marks that looked suspiciously like those of a sword. "How big was the cat?"

Rob hesitated with a frown. "About..." He held out a hand about waist high and slowly lifted it to a height above his head. "About this big."

"That *is* a big cat."

Rob nodded his head quickly. "And then that troll lady shoved me from behind into the fire."

"Where did she come from?"

"I don't know. We were too busy fighting the Yule Cat." Rob grinned, pleased with his tale.

"Did you hit the cat? Injure it?" Bastian wondered.

"The Yule Cat? No. It was too quick."

"But there were two of you." Bastian stood. "If you were here..." He motioned to the spot where he stood with his hands. "...and Tommy was beside you, and the bonfire was here..." He pointed slightly to his right. "Then, the Yule Cat must have been here." He indicated to his left. "In front of you. But you didn't see where it came from?"

Rob scanned the area as if recalling the positions. “No. As I said, it just came out of the dark.” He rolled up his sleeve. “But look at my arm. My entire sleeve was on fire. I had to put it out in the horse trough.” He displayed his forearm to Bastian.

His arm was splotchy with red patches. Burned. Bastian had no doubt the part of the story about him getting burnt was true. But he wasn’t sure *how* it happened. “How did you know it was the troll woman who pushed you? Did you see her?”

“No. I was on fire, but Tommy saw her running away.”

“And where was the cat?”

“My arm was on fire! I didn’t see where it went.”

Bastian scowled. “If it attacked you to eat you, why didn’t it eat you?”

Rob opened his mouth and then closed it. “We had swords. It must have been afraid of us. After all, we are going to be knights soon.”

Bastian stared at Rob. His story sounded like a made-up tale from a child that was going to further fuel the myth throughout the village. “And when did you notice the stables were on fire?”

Rob scratched his head. “Well, first, we put out my arm.”

“Tommy helped you?”

Rob nodded. “And then we went back to our bonfire and extinguished it. We were going to go into the stables and wait for Sir William and Sir Garrett. We noticed black smoke coming from inside.” He looked at Bastian. “That’s when we saw the fire.”

“Then neither the Yule Cat nor this troll woman could have started the fire.”

“Who else could it have been? It had to be them. They did it on purpose.”

“Why?” Bastian asked. “Why would they burn the stables?”

Rob lifted his shoulders. “Maybe someone inside didn’t do their chores.”

Bastian stared at him in disbelief. There was no one inside except the horses. He put a hand on Rob’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

Rob lifted his chin proudly. Bastian stood.

As Bastian headed for the door, he paused to glance back at Rob. The boy sat at the table, eating the loaf of bread. Something about his story was off. It didn’t make sense. A troll woman and cat starting a stable fire? It was just as likely that Rob started the fire accidentally when his arm was ablaze. But if there were no cat or troll, how did Rob’s arm catch fire? Was he careless and got too close to the bonfire? Bastian knew he needed to talk to Tommy and

compare their stories to figure out the truth.

As he was exiting the kitchens, he almost ran into Thora. She pulled back, and then a smile spread across her lips. He liked when she smiled; it lit up her entire face. His gaze moved from her lips to her eyes. Such vibrant blue eyes. Such flawless skin. He saw a smudge of grease marring her smooth cheek.

“What are you doing here?” They asked at the same time.

Each of them replied with smiles.

Thora bowed her head, and a lock of her red hair fell forward, glistening in the hearth firelight. “I’m just getting something to eat.” She licked her lips, moistening them. “I wanted to thank you for bringing me to my chambers last night. I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

Bastian nodded. “We both were.” When she looked at him again, his blood simmered. He took a step closer and lifted his hand to cup her chin. He rubbed his thumb along her cheek, brushing away the grease.

Her mouth dropped, and for a moment, his thumb stopped moving as he gazed into her eyes. “Grease,” he whispered in a suddenly dry throat. He dropped his hand, staring into the pools of her deep blue eyes.

A clang of something falling sounded from the kitchen, and Bastian stepped back, clearing his throat. He ran his fingers over his own cheek. “It was dirt.”

She blushed and touched her cheek, nodding. “Is it gone?”

He bobbed his head in answer.

A grin curved her sensual lips as they stared at each other. He had always admired her for her kindness, but when had she grown into such a beauty? How had he missed it? “I’m on duty soon. I’d best -- ” He moved around her.

She watched him with her intriguing, sultry blue eyes, eyes that suddenly made him feel longing. He took a step backward before turning away.



* * *

Thora watched him go, her face tingling with delight from his touch. His gait was confident and powerful. For a moment, she simply gazed at him. His cloak swirled out behind him. Then she came to her senses. She had meant to

find him and ask him about cats and their glowing eyes. “Bastian!”

He paused and turned to her.

She walked up to him, chewing her lower lip thoughtfully. “Why don’t you think the Yule Cat is real?”

Bastian’s gaze swept her, and he took a deep breath. “Thora, I know what you believe. I know that you think this Yule Cat is real and that it attacked you. But the village, your people, are made nervous by such stories. This barn fire didn’t help. It’s dangerous to keep spreading rumors like this.”

She remembered the Yule Cat jumping onto her and scratching her cheek, and yet part of her was beginning to doubt what she remembered was the truth. “Do all cat’s eyes glow?”

He pulled back slightly, startled. Then he sighed and shook his head. “It’s statements like that. The glowing eyes. It alarms your people.”

She placed a hand on his strong arm, needing to know the truth. “Do they?”

Bastian met her gaze with resolution. “As I understand it, their eyes reflect light. When I was visiting Greenwood with your father last year, I saw it.” He grinned. “I remembered your description of the attack and almost drew my sword to run the cat through.”

Alarm surged through her. “You didn’t hurt it, did you?”

The corners of his light brown eyes crinkled as he smiled. “No.” He leaned closer to her as a cook passed them, carrying an empty basket. “But if I reacted so impulsively, only think of how your people would respond. It will be the Yule in two days. We need to calm them.”

“How?”

“I must discover the truth of this incident. You should stop talking about your attack.” He engulfed her hand in a warm embrace. “The people are frightened. They fear another attack.”

Thora felt guilty. This was her fault for spreading a tale, a legend she was beginning to question. She didn’t want her people to be afraid. Yet she didn’t know how to stop it.

“I won’t let you be hurt. I gave you my word years ago. It is a vow I take to heart,” Bastian promised.

Her gaze moved over his face -- from his tender, light brown eyes, like the shade of honey, to his straight nose and full lips. Lips that she suddenly wanted to kiss. Startled at the thought, she pulled away, heat rushing through her body.

Bastian straightened and scowled.

How could she have thoughts like that for Bastian? He was her childhood friend! She cast a glance at him. But then again, how could she *not* have thoughts like that? He was so handsome. She had always thought so, she just never... Well, she never... Her heart fluttered. Words escaped her, and she wasn't sure if it was because he was staring at her with that intense look or if it was because she was mortified by her own thoughts of wanting to kiss him.

Bastian bowed his head and turned away.

“What if there is no Yule Cat?” she wondered quickly, partly to keep him with her for a bit longer and partly needing to know. “What if you are right?”

Bastian turned to her. Surprise lifted his eyebrows for a moment, but then, his face turned serious and stoic. “That the Yule Cat is a fable? A legend? That there is no troll woman? Then something or someone else started the fire in the stables. I will find out who and they will be punished.”

Thora watched him walk down the hallway. Punished. She would be punished. She wished she could tell him the truth of what happened that night. But she was afraid for Miracle and for herself.

She wanted Bastian to know he was right. She wanted to tell him the supposed Yule Cat was recovering in her room. But she knew if she did, he might turn Miracle over to her father. Her father would kill the cat. And she could never allow that to happen.

Chapter 10

After the evening meal, Bastian removed his cloak and strolled into the Great Hall, his booted feet crunching the rushes on the floor. Lord Rowley sat before the hearth, drinking a tall mug of ale. Bastian walked to him and reported that the castle was safe, and the portcullis was lowered for the night. Double guards were posted, as per Lord Rowley's orders. The traps had been checked and rechecked, even though Bastian knew they would find nothing. The garrison they had sent out to search for the troll came back empty-handed, as Bastian knew they would. As he spoke in whispered tones to Lord Rowley, he couldn't help but notice three separate groups of servants around the large room, casting glances their way and speaking in quiet tones.

Lord Rowley nodded in approval at Bastian's report. He looked tired. His shoulders slumped, and he stared. "We have chosen and secured the Yule log," Lord Rowley said, looking into the fire.

Bastian bent to him to murmur, "With all due respect, m'lord, the people appear uneasy. They are frightened."

"This will pass," Rowley said. "After the Yule, everything will return to normal. It will be as if it never happened."

Until next year, he thought. He glanced again at the groups of peasants as they whispered amongst themselves and shot troubled gazes at their lord. How afraid were they, and what actions might result because of their fear?

Bastian spotted Thora as she entered the Great Hall holding a small girl's hand. The entire room seemed to pause to gaze at her. Perhaps it was in Bastian's mind, but he also believed the entire room released a silent sigh before the groups dispersed, some moving toward the kitchens, some toward the double doors. Bastian knew the answer. Thora had to set an example for her people. It might be unlikely because she was the most vocal in her belief of the Yule Cat, but it was the only answer. She had to realize the truth and declare the Yule Cat was a legend. He had to convince her somehow it was only a legend.

Thora locked eyes with Bastian across the room. It was as though a bolt of lightning struck him. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. Her red waves glistened as she moved. Her green velvet dress clung to her shapely curves.

She bent to the little girl and whispered something in her ear.

The girl jumped up and down, nodding her head, and raced through the Great Hall toward the kitchens.

Thora grinned, watching her, and then turned to Bastian. She crossed the expanse.

He couldn't help noticing the sway of her curvy hips. His eyes moved slowly, appreciatively up, lingering momentarily on her breasts and then her full lips. Delicious desire swirled inside of him.

"Sir Bastian," she greeted him.

Even her voice was melodic and sweet. "Lady Thora," he returned.

She moved around him and bent to kiss her father's cheek. "Father, you are up late."

He shrugged. "One day, you shall run this castle. You and your husband. These will be your people when I am gone."

Thora glanced at Bastian before returning her stare to her father. "You are lord. And you will be for a long time to come." She waved a hand at his servant. The man rushed over to her. "My father will retire now. See him to his room, please."

The man bowed his gray head. "As you wish, m'lady." He waited while Rowley got to his feet.

Bastian bowed as Lord Rowley moved by him.

She watched her father leave the Great Hall and turned to Bastian. They stared at each other for a moment; the air sizzling between them.

While Bastian didn't know what to say to her, he didn't want to look away. When had she become so mesmerizing?

"Bastian," she said softly, dropping her gaze. "There is something I want to tell you."

He nodded, words escaping him. It was ridiculous! He had grown up with Thora. He had known her all his life. Perchance that was the problem. She was unlike the other women he had been with. He would...

Only kiss those delectable lips until she wanted more.

"Bastian?"

Her word snapped him from his sensual musings. "Yes. Sorry. It's been a long day."

She nodded and hesitated. "The Yule Cat..."

"Yes. I wanted to speak to you about that, also." He glanced around the room and was pleased to see that he and Thora were far enough away from

others, so they could have a private conversation. Still, he wanted to be certain their discussion was not overheard. He took her hand and guided her closer to the hearth. Warmth washed over him, and the fire crackled behind him. He didn't release her hand, and her fingers closed around his.

She looked up at him, and the light made her blue eyes twinkle.

Beautiful. He shook his head. "What do you remember from the night you were attacked?"

She straightened and withdrew her hand from his.

He quickly captured it again. "I'm not judging. I am trying to reconcile some things that happened to the squires before the fire."

She looked down, and a lock of her red hair fell forward. "I've been thinking a lot about that night eight years ago. I remember seeing the glowing eyes in the tree. I'll never forget them."

Rob had not mentioned glowing eyes. Bastian also doubted that a cat of the size Rob described could fit in a tree. He waited patiently for her to continue.

She looked up at him. "But, you said that all cats have glowing eyes."

"Aye. I believe their eyes reflect the light."

She chewed her lip gently and lifted fingers to the three scratches permanently etched into her smooth skin. "When I was young, I saw glowing eyes in the tree. I remember them. They were terrifying. And yet... I'm not certain --"

"Help! The Yule Cat attacked Rob!" The cry echoed throughout the Great Hall.

Servants began rushing toward the large double doors where Tommy had just entered, his arm around Rob, who was leaning heavily on him and holding his shoulder.

Bastian and Thora raced across to the room to them. Bastian grabbed Rob's other side and helped him to a bench.

"What happened?" Thora demanded.

Bastian's gaze swept Rob. His tunic was torn across the chest, and blood stained his clothing.

"I was walking through the inner court," Rob gasped, clutching his chest. "I heard a noise near the candlemaker's and went to investigate." He peeled his hand from his chest and winced at the blood on his palm. "The Yule Cat... it was eating something. I tried to run, but it pounced on me, knocking me to the ground. It swiped at me and opened its mouth." He shook his head.

“I thought it was going to eat me.”

Bastian cast a glance at Thora. Her forehead was lined with worry. He looked back at Rob.

One of the servant women lifted his tunic to reveal two small lines of blood. The woman dabbed at them with a cloth and Rob winced.

Bastian stared, dumbfounded. He knew the Yule Cat was not real and yet... Here was Rob, clearly injured. “How did you get away?” Bastian asked.

“Tommy came.” The boys looked at each other before Rob continued, “He must have startled it and it just... disappeared.”

At Rob’s description, a gasp came from a servant woman with chubby cheeks watching from the other side of the table. She made the sign of the cross.

Bastian glanced at Tommy. “You saw it?”

Tommy nodded. “I did. It was over Rob, and I think it was going to eat him. It looked at me and then disappeared.”

Bastian grit his teeth. *Disappeared*. Creatures didn’t just disappear. He would speak to Tommy later and discover the truth. He didn’t want Tommy to elaborate now in front of all these people. He straightened and allowed the servant woman with brown hair to minister to Rob.

“It was a brave thing you did,” she whispered to Rob.

Rob nodded and managed to puff out his chest.

Bastian could have sworn he saw a grin slide over Rob’s lips. Suspicious, he looked at Tommy. “You said this happened by the candlemaker’s shop?”

Glancing at Rob, Tommy then looked back with a nod. “But as I said, it is gone now.”

Bastian headed for the door.

One of the knights who had been lounging in the Great Hall pulled his sword. “I’ll go with you! Let’s find this cat and gut it!”

Bastian held up his hand. “Stay here. I’ll alert the guard.” He didn’t want everyone tramping all over the ground and ruining any chance of finding evidence, or the lack of it. “It’s safer for everyone to stay inside.” He gripped the handle of his sheathed sword and left the Great Hall.



* * *

Thora hurried after Bastian, staying against the stone wall, watching him. He crossed the hallway and departed the castle through the iron-bound double doors. When she followed him through the wooden doors, a gust of cold wind and snow swirled around her. She shivered and wished she had her cloak but continued out.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her, and she jumped.

Bastian wore a scowl. “What are you doing? I told everyone to wait inside.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

He grinned, truly amused by her concern.

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t laugh at me.”

He bowed his head and peered up at her through long lashes. “Never.”

She lifted her chin in defiance. “You said you want to find the truth. So do I. And something about all of this seems wrong to me. Why does the cat always attack those two squires?”

“Hmm,” Bastian murmured. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Do you think the Yule Cat has targeted them because they are not finishing their chores?”

Bastian shook his head. “Even if that were true, I don’t think Sir William would allow Rob to be lazy. But my instincts are telling me there is more to this. The stable fire is a mystery. A cat could not start a fire.” A cold breeze pushed his dark hair forward.

Guilt swirled inside of her. She knew exactly what had happened. She took a deep breath. She had to tell him. “Bastian...”

“They did have a fire to keep warm, but Rob was burned. He wouldn’t do that to himself.”

She desperately wanted to tell him the truth. She knew the longer she waited to confess, the harder it was going to be. “He was pushed.”

“He said the troll woman pushed him,” Bastian agreed.

“But it didn’t happen like that.”

“I don’t believe so.” He grasped her hand and led her across the inner

ward. "Come."

The burned beams of the stable were gone, leaving an empty spot where it had once stood. A fresh layer of snow covered the vague outline of where the stables and stalls had been.

Thora clutched Bastian's hand and hurried after him, their tracks the only thing marring the coating of snow. He paused when they approached the candlemaker's shop, his gaze sweeping the ground. "Rob said the cat was eating something when he saw it. I see no sign of any remnants of a meal. No feathers. No skin. Nothing."

Thora scanned the ground beside the candlemaker's wooden shop. "There are no footprints."

Bastian looked down at the ground and inched closer to the candlemaker's shop. "Not human nor cat." He looked back at her. "They are lying."

Chapter 11

By the time they returned to the Great Hall, a large group of knights and peasants had gathered around Tommy. “It was huge,” he was saying to the crowd. His eyes were wide as he gestured over his head. “And black. And its claws were at least this long.” He held up his hand for length.

A gasp rippled through the crowd like a breeze.

Bastian grit his teeth as he watched Tommy’s excitement. There was no fear emanating from him. Only the story and satisfaction from the attention. Rob was nowhere to be seen. They must have taken him away for a physician to tend.

Bastian moved forward, pushing his way through the crowd, parting them like a curtain. “Tommy, I’d like a word with you.”

The enjoyment drained from the boy’s face, and he nodded.

Bastian escorted Tommy to Thora’s side, where Tommy cast a glance at her. He wiped his nose with his sleeve and looked at Bastian.

Bastian’s gaze swept the gathered crowd, who had not dispersed but waited as if expecting more information. “Let’s go to the judgement room,” Bastian suggested.

“Tommy did naught wrong,” one of the knights proclaimed. “He defended the castle.”

Bastian didn’t like the knight’s tone. “I am looking into the incident.”

“Why?” one of the peasants demanded. “You should be looking for the Yule Cat.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the group.

Thora moved around Bastian to stand before him and face her people. “We are handling the situation. I have the utmost faith in Sir Bastian. We will have a safe Yule celebration.”

Doubtful grumblings issued from some in the crowd while others nodded their head. They began to separate and move on.

Bastian was proud of Thora for taking her stance and even more proud of her faith in him.

“Am I in trouble?” Tommy asked.

“Why would you say that?” Bastian wondered, looking at him.

“The judgement room is reserved for judgement.”

“It’s close and private.” Bastian led the way. Thora followed them through the hallway to the room beside the Great Hall. Bastian opened the door and let them enter before following and closing the door. The large room was lit by two torches, barely casting any light over the spacious stone floored expanse.

Bastian looked at Tommy, where he stopped beneath a torch. His blond hair was wild and stuck up in a spot near the crown of his head. His gaze shifted uncertainly from Thora to Bastian.

“This is the second time you’ve encountered the Yule Cat,” Bastian said. “Tell me about the first time.”

A joyful light passed through Tommy’s brown eyes. “You mean when it burned down the stables?”

Bastian nodded. “What were you and Rob doing before that?”

“Before the cat attacked?” Tommy scratched his head. “Oh. Warming ourselves by the fire that we started.”

“What were you talking about?” Bastian asked.

Tommy scowled and chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. “How cold it was. Because it was really cold that night. Oh! And Bridgit. You know her. The miller’s daughter.” His smile spread until he noticed Thora watching. He looked down. “She’s very beautiful.”

This part was the same as Rob’s version. Bastian didn’t doubt it was the truth. “Then what happened?”

Tommy shrugged. “That horrible cat attacked us! It jumped on Rob and knocked him into the fire, trying to eat him! Rob’s arm caught on fire.”

Hmmm. Interesting. Rob had said the troll woman pushed him into the fire. “Which direction did the cat come from?”

“It came out of the darkness like a shadow,” Tommy said, his eyes wide.

Tingles danced across the nape of Bastian’s neck as his eyes narrowed. That was the exact phrasing Rob used. It was a lie, a practiced lie.

“It was huge. It had sharp claws,” Tommy said, holding up his curved hands. “And blade-like teeth! And the eyes were so --”

“Why are you lying, Tommy?” Thora demanded, cutting him off.

Surprised, Bastian looked at her. She wore a stern gaze; her lips thinned in disapproval and anger.

Tommy stood, stunned. His mouth dropped open.

“Tell the captain what really happened. Tell him the truth about the cat.”

Tommy's mouth stayed open, and he sputtered out his next words. "I'm sorry, m'lady. I had thought you of all people would believe the Yule Cat had attacked us, as the cat attacked you too."

"The cat that attacked me wasn't huge. It wasn't a monster. If it had truly tried to eat me, I would not be here. I was a child. But you are not. Tell the truth." Her jaw clenched tightly.

Bastian stared, stunned. Thora was *defending* the Yule Cat. She was saying it hadn't tried to eat her. She was changing what she believed, what she had told everyone. Just earlier this week, she had said the cat had tried to eat her. She had said it was a monster. What had changed?

Tommy's mouth slowly closed. He looked down thoughtfully with a scowl of concentration. "Maybe I stretched the truth about how big the cat was. But I tell you, that troll woman and her cat burned down our stables."

"Troll woman?" Bastian echoed. "When did the troll woman come?"

"She pushed Rob into the fire," Tommy said, the excitement for his story returning. "Rob's arm caught on fire."

"You just said the Yule Cat jumped on Rob and knocked him into the fire. Which is it? The troll or the cat?"

Tommy stuttered. "I... It could have been the troll woman. I'm not certain."

"But you saw them set fire to the stables?" Bastian asked.

Tommy's shoulders slouched. "Not exactly. I was helping Rob with his arm. But they both ran toward the stables. It had to be them. Who else could it have been?"

"The stable hound was in the stables. Wouldn't he have attacked the troll woman?"

Tommy nodded in agreement. "He was barking and howling. I remember that."

Bastian looked at Thora. She was staring at Tommy intently as if fire would blaze from her eyes and light the squire up.

He turned back to Tommy. "And what about the scratch marks on Rob's chest? What about the attack that happened tonight?"

"The Yule Cat is here! We were trying to protect the castle, that's all."

Bastian waited. The silence settled around the three of them.

Tommy frowned and looked down, refusing to meet their gazes. "Rob was hurt."

"We went out to the candlemaker's shop, Tommy," Bastian said. "There

are no tracks in the snow, human or animal.”

Tommy’s scowl deepened. “Maybe the snow covered them up.”

“It’s not snowing.”

“Maybe the cat made the tracks go away so you wouldn’t believe me.”

Tommy had an answer for everything.

“Isn’t it more likely that you made the story up?”

“Why would we do that? You saw the marks on Rob’s chest! How did those get there?”

Bastian’s eyebrows rose.

“It doesn’t make sense. I’m telling you, we were attacked by the Yule Cat.”

“A knight is supposed to tell the truth always,” Thora said softly. So softly that Bastian almost didn’t hear her. “You want to be a good knight, don’t you, Tommy?”

Tommy shuffled his feet and kicked at the ground. “Of course,” Tommy said, but there was no conviction behind his tone. He knew he’d been caught.

“Why would someone lie about the Yule Cat?” Thora wondered. “Why tell tales like this?”

Tommy looked at her. “You did.”

Thora stared at him, taken aback. Her face drained of color beneath the light from the torch.

“All’s good. That’s enough for now, Tommy,” Bastian said, his concerned gaze on Thora. “Go on. Check on Rob.” Tommy rushed toward the doorway. “But say no more of this story to anyone.”

Tommy bobbed his head and left the room.

After the door closed, Bastian turned to Thora.

She wore the most crestfallen expression he had ever seen, and he immediately moved forward to take her hands into his.

“This is all my fault,” she said softly.

“No. You were a child when you were attacked.”

She shook her head. “But what if I was wrong? What if all these years I believed something that wasn’t true? What if I believed in something that never happened?”

“Thora...”

Thora swiftly pitched into his arms, clutching him tightly, desperately.

She was shaking, and he stroked her back to calm her.

“What if I was wrong?” she asked again. She pulled back to look at him.

Her face was flushed, and her eyes darted from him to the door and then to the floor. “You always believed it was just a cat, didn’t you? You tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

He brushed a strand of her red hair behind her ear. “Sometimes, we believe in something so strongly that we can no longer see the truth.”

Her chest heaved. “What if it was nothing more than a cat? A cat that was afraid? Just as afraid as I was?” Her large eyes filled with tears.

“You were a child,” Bastian repeated. “You couldn’t have known.”

“Yes, but now I am a grown woman. And everyone wants to kill it. They want to burn it or run it through. And it could have been just a scared creature? It’s all my fault.”

His gaze swept her face. She was so distraught and panicked that all he could think of doing was comforting and holding her. He realized her body was still pressed against his. Her soft, pliant, curvy body.

She suddenly leaned forward, pushing her lips to his. Startled, he pulled back and gazed into her desperate eyes.

She had kissed him!

Kissed him with those full, delicious lips. He couldn’t resist. He grasped her head and drew her lips to his, slanting his mouth across hers. He held her close, his body hard and unyielding. Passion pounded through his veins as the kiss deepened.

She parted her lips for him. He thrust his tongue forward into the depths of her mouth, tasting her hot moistness.

He groaned softly, wanting to touch her everywhere, wanting to make her his own. What was he thinking? Here? In the middle of the judgement room? She deserved better. He pulled back suddenly, grasping her hands, and tugged them between them like a barrier. “Thora.”

Her breathing was quick and anxious. She tilted her head up, moving closer to his lips.

But he held her firmly at a distance. “Not like this. I want you so badly, Thora. But not here. Not like this.”

She blinked at him and settled back. Her lips were red from being well kissed.

He squeezed her hands. “Thora. Do you understand? If we continue, it will be difficult to stop. And this is hardly the place.”

Her gaze swept his face, and she nodded.

He gently shook her hands. “Do you understand? I want you. I want --”

She nodded firmly. "I understand," she whispered.

He took a deep breath and stepped away from her.

The cold air swirled between them, and she shivered as he released her hands.

His stare moved over her face, lingering on her full lips and her large eyes. "Are you all right?"

Another nod. She backed to the door. "I'd best..." She took another step.

It had never been this hard to separate from her. He stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say to alleviate her unease.

"I'll see you later," she finally said and left the room.

Chapter 12

Shaken and confused, Thora hurried from the judgement room. Her lips still tingled from his heated kiss.

She took stock of her whirling emotions in the empty corridor. Passion seared through her veins; embarrassment heated her cheeks. She inhaled deeply to calm herself. She had kissed Bastian. She had just kissed the most handsome man she knew. What had she been thinking? And he had returned her affection! She grinned. Bastian had kissed her back... and, it had been wonderful. She touched her lips, still moist from his kisses.

A knight exited the storeroom, and she straightened, nodding a greeting to him.

He bowed.

She almost giggled out loud, and when he disappeared into the Great Hall, she whirled in a delighted circle before heading off toward the kitchens. When she entered, she had somehow managed to cap her emotions.

Cook stood near the hearth, stirring something in a black pot. "Good eve, m'lady."

"Good eve," Thora sang in greeting. She had always liked Cook. She would sneak her sweets and tarts when Thora was young.

Cook smiled. She had a pudgy, warm face, and kind brown eyes. Her gray hair was pulled back into a braid. "I saved ya some venison for that dog."

Thora took the meat from her greasy hand. "Thank you." She hesitated. Maybe her little cat would like something other than venison. "I... I am hungry. Do you have any fish?"

"Fish?" Cook frowned. She put her hands on her hips. "I would have thought ya'd ask for sweets. Since when do ya like fish?"

Thora held up her hands. "I just have a taste for it."

Cook turned away and hobbled over to the table. "I do have some leftover from the evening meal." She cut a piece from the cooked fish and put it on a piece of bread, all the while mumbling about the strangeness of Thora requesting fish.

Thora took the meal, hugged Cook, and thanked her. She quickly made

her way back to her room. She would save some of the meat for Beaumont, but she wanted to make sure Miracle was fed and cared for.

She opened the door to her chambers, scanning the room. There was no sign of Miracle. One thing was certain: the little cat was remarkably good at hiding. She knew it hid beneath her bed, where she had piled the blankets. She eased the door closed behind her and walked to the wall across from the bed. She sat down on the floor facing the bed, her back to the wall. Beneath the bed was dark, and she could barely make out the shape of the blankets there. She noticed the small bowl of water she had left was half empty.

She took out the meat and placed the venison on the floor. She broke the fish into tiny pieces. When she looked up, she saw the two glowing eyes peering at her from beneath the bed. For a moment, her breathing hitched, and she froze as she remembered the eyes from her childhood. She forced herself to relax and turned back to breaking up the fish. When she looked back, Miracle had poked her head from beneath the bed. She lifted her head, smelling the fish. Her sleek black coat shone in the firelight.

Thora grinned. "You like fish better than venison?" She held out a piece.

Miracle froze, her eyes two round orbs.

"It's all right," Thora whispered. She put the fish down and sat back.

Miracle looked toward the door, and then at Thora, before inching out to eat the fish in one gulp. Then she looked at Thora as if knowing she had more.

When Thora moved to set another piece of fish down, Miracle dashed beneath the bed. Thora laid out a line of fish that stretched from the bed to her knees. She kept a small piece in the palm of her hand. She wanted Miracle to learn that she didn't have to fear her.

The cat quickly ate the ones closest to the bed. Then she inched nearer to the others, eating one piece of fish after another until she was at Thora's feet. She stopped and turned her head to sniff Thora's boots.

Her ear had been badly burned, and a patch of fur on her neck was gone, revealing pink skin. It looked to be healing nicely, which Thora was grateful for. The fur on Miracle's tail was also burned away. She wanted to scoop the poor little cat up and care for it, but she knew any quick movements would cause the cat to run. She couldn't blame it.

Miracle ate the next piece of fish. And the next, cautiously. Its large eyes were on Thora as she ate.

Slowly, Thora unfurled her fingers where the last piece of fish was. Her

hand lay on the floor. Would Miracle take it?

It stared at her, frozen.

Thora turned her head, not meeting the cat's eyes.

There was a long moment before she felt movement by her hand. She shifted her eyes in time to see Miracle inching toward her.

Suddenly, the door flew open.

The cat shot beneath the bed.

Bella ran into the room. "Lady Thora?" she called. When she spotted her, she skipped over to her and sat down beside her. "What are you doing?"

"How many times have I asked you to knock?" Thora inquired, tossing the piece of fish beneath the bed. She pushed aside her disappointment. She had been so close to interaction with Miracle. She stood up and dusted her skirt off.

"Sorry," Bella said. She looked at her and then at the bed. "Why are you sitting on the floor?"

"I was just relaxing," Thora explained. She was glad Miracle had disappeared. She didn't want Bella to see her. She was afraid Bella would be frightened of the cat, perhaps even accuse it of being the Yule Cat. "How is the hare?"

Bella lifted her chin in pride. "I'm taking care of him, and he is eating all the carrots I give him."

Thora wiped her hands on her dress before patting Bella's dark hair. Bella's ringlets bounced. "Well done, Bella," Thora said.

Bella's chin dropped, and she scowled. "Tommy told me the Yule Cat was going to come and eat me."

Thora glanced toward the bottom of the bed and was relieved to see Miracle was not there. She knelt before Bella, placing her hands on the child's shoulders. "Why would the Yule Cat eat you?"

Bella puffed out her lower lips. "Because I haven't finished my chores."

Thora's compassionate gaze swept her face. "It won't come for you, Bella. You're a good girl."

"It doesn't matter if you're good or not. You were good, and it still came for you." Bella threw her arms around Thora's shoulders. "I'm scared."

Thora hated herself at that moment. She hated that Bella was afraid because of what she had told her, because of the stories she had told the girl. The stories she had related to everyone. "We have strong knights who defend the castle. They won't let the Yule Cat in."

“It got in when the guards were on duty and started the fire,” Bella said in a thick voice.

Thora squeezed Bella tightly. “A cat can’t start fires. The Yule Cat didn’t start the fire.”

“No!” Bella exclaimed. “It was Gryla! It was the troll woman.”

“No,” Thora whispered, holding her. “It wasn’t. It was just a horrible accident. I promise, Bella. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Bella pulled back; her hands still linked around Thora’s nape as she eyed her doubtfully.

“I would never let some troll harm you,” Thora promised.

Bella hugged her again. “I love you, Thora.”

Thora smiled and kissed the top of her head. “I love you, Bella.” The weight of her guilt pulled her shoulders down and tightened her throat.

Chapter 13

Bastian slept restlessly and awoke thinking of Thora. Her soft lips, her honeyed taste. Last eve, he had followed her out of the judgement room with the intent of finding and making sure Rob was okay, but he'd overheard her in the kitchens asking for venison and fish. He knew the venison was for Beaumont, but Thora didn't like fish. Strange. He shrugged it off. It wasn't important. Except that everything about Thora was important. He found a grin on his lips just from thinking of her. He mentally shook his head. There was too much to do today to dwell on Thora. But even as he thought this, she returned to his mind. She lingered like a pleasant breeze, a tasty aroma.

The attacks. Concentrate on the attacks, he told himself. He knew Tommy and Rob were making up the Yule Cat attacks. Who had pushed Rob into the bonfire? Was someone else there?

He dressed and moved out of the barracks, noticing Nicolas was already gone. Bastian wanted to talk to Rob again and discover why the boys were lying, what they were covering up. Had Rob and Tommy started the fire and made up the story of the Yule Cat as a distraction? As Bastian exited his room and strolled through the corridor, he nodded a greeting to some passing knights. He opened the door to the outer ward, and a gust of cold wind swirled in.

Suddenly, a scream rang through the outer ward.

Instinctively, Bastian's head snapped toward the cry. Where had it come from? He looked up at the walkways to see the guards on duty hurrying toward the center of the ward. Another scream echoed through the outer ward. Bastian dashed toward it, shouting an order to Sir William on the walkway to stay put and keep watch.

A large group of people had crowded near the castle wall between the blacksmith's shop and the leather maker's. Bastian pushed his way through the crowd as a tailor with a leather apron raised a fist and shouted, "Kill it!"

"The Yule Cat!" someone behind him shouted.

"Kill it!"

A farmer was standing at the front of the group with a pitchfork pointed down aggressively in his hand. Two other men standing beside him had

wooden sticks clutched in their hands.

Bastian shoved through the crowd as they dashed forward.

The men raised and lowered their arms, stabbing, and clubbing. A horrible animal cry rang out. The men continued the attack, their faces twisted in grimaces of hate. Finally, they ceased the assault, peering at the carnage.

“We did it,” the farmer said happily, breathing deeply. “We killed it.”

Bastian moved up to them, staring down at the corpse. His lips thinned.

“It’s not a cat,” one of the men said, gasping for breath.

“It’s a raccoon,” Bastian affirmed, staring at the dead animal. He whirled on the group, angry.

Fear greeted his fury. The crowd was full of round, surprised eyes as they realized the raccoon wasn’t the monster.

“It’s still out there,” a woman with dark hair whispered.

“It’s a legend,” Bastian snapped. His eyes moved over the peasants surrounding him. “It’s not real.”

“Not real?” the farmer asked. “You saw what it did to Rob. How can ya say the Yule Cat is not real?”

“It’s here. In the castle,” another woman warned, looking around.

“If ya can’t protect us, we’ll do it ourselves,” the farmer said, grasping his pitchfork.

A grumbling of agreement spread through the group.

And there it was. Bastian’s personal fear, coming to life. His fear that people would lose faith in his abilities and take justice into their own hands. How long before they saw the troll in every woman they looked at? How long before someone was hurt?

Just beyond the group, Bastian saw Thora standing, a concerned look on her face. His heart twisted, and he wanted to take her into his arms and allay her fears, but he knew she felt the same way these people did. That he couldn’t protect her. His jaw clenched.

“You didn’t even draw your sword!” the farmer accused.

“It was a raccoon,” Bastian defended, gesturing helplessly to the corpse at his feet.

“It is your job to protect us!” The crowd began to close around him, angry.

“Stop!” Thora’s voice rang out like the bang of a bishop’s staff. Silence followed as the crowd turned to Thora. She approached with her fists

clenched, her eyes narrowed. “Captain Bastian defends this castle and people well. You will not defame him, nor say derogatory things about him.”

The farmer glanced at Bastian and then bowed his head in repentance. The rest of the group’s anger dissipated.

Thora hooked her hand through Bastian’s arm. “He is quite capable of defeating all of our foes.”

“What of the Yule Cat, m’lady?” a woman asked.

Thora locked gazes with the woman.

“The Yule Cat is a legend,” Bastian repeated.

Thora met his gaze for a long moment as if she were debating. Debating between agreeing with him and... sticking to her story about a fictional monster. A monster that had stolen her childhood, taken away the magic of the Yule.

“It is not real,” he insisted to Thora as well as the peasants. “You have to stop chasing it because it doesn’t exist.”

“How can you say that after you saw with your own eyes what it did to Rob?” the farmer demanded, clenching his pitchfork tightly.

“After it burned down our stables?” someone else asked with vehemence.

“I’ll prove it,” Bastian proclaimed. “With facts.” He walked away from the group, from Thora, tearing his arm from her grip. Hurting because she hadn’t agreed with him. His heart twisted with anguish because he didn’t know if she believed him capable of protecting her.

“We don’t need facts. We need protection,” the farmer called out after him.



* * *

Thora stared at Miracle as she licked her black paw on the edge of the bed. The cat sat on the bed across from Thora, her black fur gleaming in a shaft of sunlight streaming in from the window.

Thora twisted her hands. The Yule was one day away. The people were acting out with fear. That poor raccoon. Their distress was getting worse. It wasn’t fair to them to keep this secret. And it certainly wasn’t fair to Bastian.

They had treated him with such disrespect, such doubt. And yet, how could she tell them about what really happened? How would they react toward her? Would the villagers ever believe her again after telling a lie for years? And what about Miracle? Would her people beat the cat with sticks?

Thora reached a hand across the bed toward Miracle for comfort.

Miracle opened her eyes, lowered her paw, and bestowed Thora with an imperious half-lidded gaze. But she didn't run away.

Thora wished Miracle would not be so frightened, and would allow Thora to pet her. As her hand neared, Miracle tensed. Thora knew the cat would run away if she got closer and so she lowered her hand. The memory of the squires holding Miracle above the snapping flames of the bonfire played out in her mind. How could she ever give Miracle up and watch them kill her? Yet, how could she not when the villagers treated Bastian like that? When their faith in his abilities was fading? It was becoming dangerous.

She needed to tell Bastian-- but how?

A knock came at her door. She glanced at Miracle in time to see her leap from the bed and scurry into her dark shelter.

Thora stood up and walked to the door. She opened it and was surprised to find Bastian standing there.

He yanked Rob into her view and commanded, "Tell her."

Rob tucked his head in embarrassment. "It was supposed to be a harmless prank. We just wanted to scare some people."

Thora glanced at Bastian to see a furious scowl on his brow.

"No one got hurt!" Rob insisted.

"*Tell* her," Bastian asserted again.

"There was no Yule Cat. The second time. Tommy and I thought it would be funny to... pretend." He bowed his head and ran his fingers across his chest. "I used a dagger to make the scratch marks."

Bastian had been right. But to go to this extreme seemed ridiculous, even for the squires. This was more than a prank. Attention -- they wanted attention. Perhaps from the miller's daughter. Thora narrowed her eyes.

Bastian shook Rob's arm to encourage him to keep speaking.

"And the scratch marks on the ground. We did those with Sir Garrett's sword," Rob admitted.

Thora glanced at Bastian.

Bastian explained, "The scratch marks near the stable. I don't know if you saw those."

Thora recalled Bastian kicking dirt over part of the ground but hadn't realized it was due to scratch marks. Bastian had kept that from her.

"Sir William won't be pleased," Bastian said through clenched teeth. "And the rest."

Rob glanced at Bastian and then back at Thora. His head drooped. "The night of the barn fire... well, we found a cat... and we were playing with it."

Thora's jaw tightened. She knew what they had been doing to Miracle, and it hadn't been playing. She cast a quick glance toward Miracle's hiding spot and looked back at Rob.

"At first we didn't think it was the Yule Cat. But then, the troll woman --" Bastian shook him.

"I mean, *someone* pushed me into the fire. Who else could it have been? It must have been the Yule Cat and the troll woman."

"Or maybe it was someone who didn't like the way you were playing with the cat." Bastian looked at Thora.

Her mouth dropped open, and her chest constricted tightly. Did he know? Did he suspect she had shoved Rob into the fire?

"We were just playing with it! You know..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...Petting it."

Bastian pulled him close. "I will speak to Sir William about this. It is obvious you have too much time on your hands. I'm certain he will come up with other tasks for you to occupy yourself."

Rob sighed and closed his eyes.

Bastian pushed him down the hallway. "Go and tell Tommy I will be speaking with Sir Garrett, also. The two of you can start by mucking out the makeshift stables."

"And tell the truth," Thora added, calling after him. "People are terrified."

Rob shuffled off down the hallway.

Bastian turned to Thora. His intense gaze bore into her. "It was a dangerous game those two were playing."

Thora nodded, wondering if she was going to be the next one to endure Bastian's questioning. Or just his kisses.

"Can I come in?" Bastian asked.

Thora nodded and stepped aside, allowing him entry. She shut the door, partly hoping he would take her in his arms again and partly fearful he would start questioning her. She wanted to tell him the truth, but she was afraid he would not look at her with the same smoldering look. And that was

something that would break her heart.

“Thora,” Bastian began.

She winced. She wanted to tell him everything. But she was afraid for Miracle. “You told me you would kill this Yule Cat if you found it. Will you?” Thora asked.

Bastian sighed softly. “What those villagers did to that raccoon was merciless. I would never condemn an animal to that.”

Tears rose in her eyes. She looked down, wishing... Wishing she didn't feel reluctant to tell him the truth. Wishing he would understand why she hadn't told him. But she knew he would hate her for not telling the truth earlier. He had been searching for the truth for so long, and it stood right in front of him.

He placed a finger beneath her chin and lifted it to look into her eyes. “Don't be afraid. The Yule Cat does not exist. The villagers are frightened for no reason.”

She nodded. But that was not the reason she was scared. Her heart ached. How could she choose between Miracle and Bastian? Bastian could defend himself. Miracle was helpless. She couldn't let her Miracle be hurt. She had given her vow to the cat. “What they said to you. It's not the truth. I have faith in your ability to protect us.”

He sighed softly and stepped back, releasing her. “Against any real foe, I don't doubt it. But against an imaginary one... Against the Yule Cat?” He pulled something out of the pocket of his cloak. He twirled it in his fingers. “I almost have it solved. But that stable fire. I can't figure out who started it.” He shook his head.

And then, with a jolt of excitement, Thora recognized the item in his hand. “My bracelet! Where did you find it?”

A moment passed, and he didn't move. His fingers stopped moving over the golden bracelet, and he stared at it. Then, slowly, his golden gaze lifted to her. “It was you.”

Chapter 14

The puzzle pieces came together, as the bracelet was the final piece. He hadn't known who it belonged to. But now, he knew. Thora had been there the night the stables burned. "It was you." It came out as half a gasp, half an accusation.

The joy left her face, and her eyes widened.

He stood, certain in his conviction. "You were there. You were at the stables the night they burned."

She crossed her arms before her, clutching them.

"The bracelet is yours." He held it up. "I found it in the remains of the burned stable."

Her mouth opened as if she were going to offer an excuse, but then quickly snapped shut.

"The water bowl." He glanced at the side of the bed. It wasn't in the same spot, but he noticed it on the floor and pointed to it. He looked back at her. "The reason you asked me if all cat's eyes glowed. I saw you coming out of the kitchen with fish. You don't even like fish, and yet you asked Cook for it."

She bowed her head, her gaze moving over the floor.

"It was all there right before my eyes. A cat -- a real cat. Tommy and Rob weren't petting the cat, were they, Thora? They weren't playing with it."

She shook her head. When she lifted her gaze, tears glistened in her deep blue eyes. "They were hurting it. Kicking it into the fire. Burning the fur on its tail and body."

"And you couldn't let that happen, could you?"

She shook her head, a lock of red hair coming free from her braid and hanging against her pale cheek. "They said it was the Yule Cat, and they laughed as they hurt it."

Bastian scowled. It all came back to that damned legend.

"They wouldn't let it escape. They just kept kicking it... and burning it." Her face contorted in anguish. "At first, I really thought it was the Yule Cat. But I couldn't stand by and watch them keep hurting her. No creature should be treated like that. I realized she wasn't the Yule Cat, just an innocent cat."

I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wanted to tell you. I tried --"

"You have it here, don't you?" His gaze swept over her bed, the table. "Hidden in your room."

Her face drained of color, and she stepped protectively before the bed, her arms outstretched to the sides. "You can't. You can't take her. She's innocent. Miracle wouldn't hurt anyone. She's not the Yule Cat."

"Miracle?" Bastian repeated.

Thora nodded. "Please, Bastian. *Please*. Don't hurt her. She's just a little cat. She's harmless."

Bastian furrowed his brow. Thora thought he was going to hurt the cat. No wonder she hadn't told him. "Thora," he said gently.

"She's just a little cat. She won't hurt you."

The thought made him grin. "I won't hurt her."

"You said you would kill the Yule Cat were you to find it," she said, her chest trembling. "You said you would take it to my father and have it beheaded."

That was the reason she hadn't told him; she'd thought confessing meant death for the cat. She had saved the cat and was now protecting it. She was never concerned about her own welfare.

"You said it's not the Yule Cat."

She stood for a long moment, gazing at him as if uncertain whether he was friend or foe. Finally, she took his hand. "Here." She led him to the side of the bed. "See for yourself." She knelt at the side of the bed, peering beneath it.

Bastian followed her, kneeling at her side. He looked into the dark shadows. A pile of blankets formed a sort of bed. And then he saw them -- two glowing eyes, reflecting the light from the window.

"She's innocent," Thora whispered. "Just a tiny little animal. Rob and Tommy were torturing her. She didn't have anyone to protect her."

Bastian groaned inwardly and sat back against the wall. His instincts were immediately to protect the damned cat. Thora had safeguarded the cat the only way she knew how. He rested his arm on his bent knee and peered at Thora. "I thought you were afraid of cats. Of the Yule Cat. It attacked you."

Thora sat beside him, her arm brushing against his. "I was wrong. I think the cat that attacked me when I was little was probably just frightened. She was probably trying to get away." She touched the scratches on her cheek. "I don't think she meant to hurt me." She bowed her head. "How foolish I've

been.”

A smile stretched over Bastian’s lips. That was the Thora he loved. *Loved?* He looked at her, her concerned gaze unwavering from the darkness beneath the bed. Her smooth brow marred with concern.

Yes. Loved.

He loved her caring and her passion for the protection of innocent animals, much like his own need to protect those he was sworn to guard. He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to it.

She looked at him. “It *was* me. I pushed Rob into the fire to free Miracle. I didn’t mean to hurt him. I just wanted him to let her go. She ran into the stables, and I chased after her. I’m sorry for not telling you, but you said you would kill the Yule Cat.”

Bastian grinned. “She’s not the Yule Cat.”

“Father will think she is. My people will think she is. You saw what they did to the raccoon. I lost Midnight in the fire. I won’t lose Miracle, too.”

Bastian placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight. He would never let anyone harm her or her damned cat. He brushed a kiss to her head. “At least the cat didn’t start the stable fire.”

“Actually...” She drew back to look into his eyes, wincing. “I think she might have. When she ran into the stables, her tail was on fire. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but I think that might have been how the fire began.”

He had to agree with her. There was a lot of hay in the stable. Any stray ember could have started the stable fire. Yet, it could have been from Rob’s burning arm, too. They would never be certain.

“What are we to do?” she asked.

He was grateful she was looking to him for answers. He was grateful she included him in her secret. He was *very* grateful that she trusted him. “You have to tell the truth. It’s the only thing that can save your cat.”

Chapter 15

The Great Hall was crowded, but strangely quiet. Having finished the Yule meal, the villagers now sat at the empty tables and talked in hushed voices, almost as if they were afraid to leave. The warmth from the fire in the hearth washed over the room. The wind whistled outside. The soft tunes of a bard's flute floated from the corner.

Thora made her way through the crowd, nodding greetings to the farmers and villagers who had come for the Yule log burning. It was supposed to be a celebration, but unease permeated the air. A small boy raced past Thora, giggling as he chased a brown hound that was as tall as he was. Thora grinned at the child's carefree play.

Across the Hall, Thora caught Bastian gazing at her. Tremors raced along her skin that had nothing to do with their plan. He was her confidant, her friend, and her love. He stood a head higher than the rest of the men, making him hard to miss. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

Tightness squeezed Thora's chest. It was time.

For a moment, the room spun, and she closed her eyes to steady herself. She swallowed and opened her eyes, making her way to the hearth. On her way, Bella eased her hand into Thora's grasp. When Thora looked down at her, Bella smiled. Some of Thora's anxiety fell away at the child's complete trust. "Come. Gather round for a story," she announced.

Children eagerly followed her to the hearth.

Bella skipped beside her, gazing at her with large, brown eyes. "What is the story about?"

"Will there be knights in it?" one of the boys with dark hair asked.

Thora thought about this. "Well, there will be squires."

"Will they stab things?"

"Will there be a princess?" a little girl asked.

Thora sat in the padded chair before the hearth. Children clustered around her, excitedly, crossing their legs to sit on the floor. Other youths stood at the edges, gazing at her expectantly.

Villagers positioned themselves behind her, near the wooden tables.

Lord Rowley seated himself beside her in a chair, staring at her with fond

approval. Rob and Tommy lounged near the hearth, looking repentant and unhappy.

The room became even quieter as the villagers waited to hear the tale.

Thora took a deep breath. She twisted her hands in her lap anxiously. She didn't know how her people would react to the truth. Yet, she had to do this. It was the right thing to do. "A long time ago, there was a little girl who was afraid of a Yule Cat."

"I am, too," a small girl holding a stuffed doll in her hands agreed.

Thora grinned. "This little girl believed she was attacked by the Yule Cat." She touched her scarred cheek. "And that the cat left the three marks on her cheek."

"Like you?" Bella wondered.

Thora nodded and patted Bella's hair. "Very much like me. But it was not the Yule Cat that attacked her."

"It wasn't?" a boy with a brown tunic echoed, swiping a strand of russet hair from his forehead.

"Was it a different monster?" a boy from near the hearth wondered.

"No," Thora said. "It wasn't a monster at all. But the little girl believed it was. And as she grew up, she told her tale of the Yule Cat to everyone, and they all believed it was real." She cast a glance at her father. "Even her father. She was so afraid of the Yule Cat that her fear consumed her, and the lie seemed real. She didn't -- she *couldn't* -- see the truth. One night, when the girl had grown into a woman, she was in the stables with her favorite horse, and she heard a horrible sound. A screeching, hissing cry she'd never heard before."

"The Yule Cat?" a boy with a round face and wide eyes asked.

Thora shook her head. "It was a call for help. She looked out of the stables to see two squires kicking a little black cat into a bonfire."

Bella gasped.

A girl with long, dark hair sat up straight to announce with conviction, "It was the Yule Cat!"

"It wasn't," Thora insisted. "It wasn't. It was just a little cat who was being hurt by these two boys. Kicked into the flames so that they could watch it burn. And they laughed."

Bella's lower lip jutted out. "Was the cat hurt?"

"Yes, it was," Thora said softly. "Very hurt."

"Did the woman save it?" another girl asked, twisting a lock of her black

hair.

“The woman was afraid. She was afraid to save it because she thought at first that it might be the Yule Cat because the boys kept calling it that. And, she believed it could be the Yule Cat because she thought the Yule Cat was real. When you believe something for so long, sometimes you are blind to the truth.”

“What did she do?” a little girl asked, clinging to her mother’s leg.

“She was afraid. Only when one of the boys grabbed the cat and held it over the bonfire, ready to drop it into the flames, ready to burn it to death, did she realize the cat had to be saved. And that poor cat was so scared. It was just as scared as the woman was. The woman knew she couldn’t let that innocent little cat be hurt anymore. She ran as fast as she could and accidentally shoved one of the boys into the fire while trying to rescue the cat. His arm caught fire, and the two boys were distracted, trying to put it out.”

A boy with freckles gasped, while an older boy sitting beside him asked, “Did the boy burn?”

“Did the cat run away?” Bella asked, tears ringing her large eyes.

Thora shook her head at the boy. “The boy just had a small burn on his arm. He was well.” She stroked Bella’s hair. “The little cat did run away. It ran into the stables. And the woman went after it, wanting to see how badly it was hurt, wanting to see if she could help it.” She sat back in her chair. “What she didn’t realize was that the cat’s fur was singed, and some of it was still on fire.”

“From the bonfire?” a boy with shaggy, sandy brown hair wondered.

Thora nodded. “The cat hid in the hay. But the woman managed to find it. She took it away from the stables to a safe place.” She paused, looking over the children’s faces, feeling the eyes of everyone in the room on her as her voice echoed through the Great Hall. The silence rang in her ears. “But the stables caught fire and burned.”

The quiet grew as her words sunk in. Thora looked across the room to find Bastian moving slowly toward her. She needed his strength now. To tell the truth and hope everyone believed her. And hope everyone forgave her.

One boy frowned in displeasure, wrinkling his nose. “Because of the cat?”

“It was an accident. It didn’t mean to start the fire.”

“What happened to the cat?” Bella asked.

“The cat was badly burned. Part of its ear was burned off and much of its fur.”

“Is it alive?” a man behind her asked.

Thora nodded at the farmer who had beat the raccoon to death. “It wasn’t the cat’s fault. It was just trying to get away from the fire. It was trying to survive and protect itself.” She looked back at the children.

They stared at her as if waiting for more, their eyes locked on her.

“It wasn’t the Yule Cat nor Gryla, the troll woman, who attacked the castle. They are only a story meant to scare children. They are not real. And this tale has tortured us all for far too long,” Thora admitted.

Mumblings of uncertainty rose from the villagers gathered behind her.

“Are you making this up?” the farmer asked. “How do you know this is what happened?”

Thora took a deep breath as her stomach dropped and her heart fluttered in her chest, threatening to break free. She glanced at Bastian for strength and encouragement. “I know... because *I* am the woman.”

Chapter 16

Bastian watched the ripple of shock and disbelief spread over the villagers like a wave. His hand tightened around the sack he held as he made his way toward Thora, dodging a stunned farmer who stood with his mouth gaping. His only worry was Thora and her safety.

Lord Rowley looked at Thora. "Is this true?" he demanded.

The little girl with the dark curls pushed her hand into Thora's hold.

"I'm sorry, Father," Thora whispered, nodding. "It is true."

Bastian reached her side and stood silent sentry just behind her.

Lord Rowley swung his gaze to Rob and Tommy, who were standing by the hearth, glancing this way and that with round eyes. "It was the two of you who tortured the cat?"

Rob hesitated for only a moment as he glanced at Tommy. Finally, he admitted, "Aye." Astonishment flowed about the room, and he quickly added, "But we were only trying to save the village."

"Stop!" Thora said, rising from her chair. "You were hurting the cat and laughing. It posed no threat to the village. I saw what you were doing! It's time to stop the lies and put an end to this tale. It's time to defeat the Yule Cat truly."

Rob bowed his head.

"What of the other attacks?" someone asked from behind her.

The crowd mumbled in agreement.

Bastian turned, scanning the peasants gathered for the owner of the voice.

"The scratch marks near the stables and Rob's attack!" a knight asked, pointing toward Rob. "The cat attacked Rob!"

Bastian ground his teeth. He didn't like that his own men were questioning Thora's story.

As everyone looked at Rob, his chest swelled, and a smile began to form on his lips.

Bastian glared at him, his jaw tight.

Tommy elbowed him.

Rob met Bastian's stern gaze and instantly deflated, his shoulders slouching. "It was all a trick," he admitted reluctantly. "We made the scratch

marks on the ground.”

“And we used a dagger to make the marks on his chest,” Tommy added. “We didn’t mean any harm. It was just a joke!”

“It wasn’t a joke,” Thora insisted. “Not to the cat you hurt, nor to the people of this castle and village.”

The boys looked down, repentantly. “Sorry,” they grumbled in unison.

“But *you* were attacked by the Yule Cat,” Bella said, looking at her in confusion.

“No,” Thora said gently. “I thought I was. But it’s time I grew out of children’s tales and acknowledged the truth. It was just *a* cat. It was not the Yule Cat.” She straightened and announced, “The Yule Cat is not real. It and the troll woman are fantasy.”

The grumbling grew throughout the hall, echoing discontent and disbelief.

Thora stood and walked to her father, holding the little girl’s hand. “I’m sorry, Father. You were right to believe Bastian. He was correct all along.”

Lord Rowley gazed at her with tender eyes. “I’m proud of you for speaking the truth, dearest.” He embraced her warmly.

“What of the cat?” a woman called. “The cat them squires said was the Yule Cat. Where did it go?”

Bastian’s fist clenched over the sack, and he met Thora’s gaze for a moment. He had given her his word that no harm would come to the cat.

“I have been helping it heal,” Thora announced. “I have been taking care of it.”

Unease filled the hall as the peasants glanced at one another.

Thora reached for the sack in Bastian’s hand. “It’s just a cat. A little black cat that is just as afraid as all of you.” She held the burlap container, her eyes sweeping the crowd. For a long moment, she didn’t move.

“Is it in the bag?” Bella tilted her head. “Can I see it?”

Thora swallowed. “Of course.”

She eased the sack open and allowed Bella to step closer to look inside.

The room collectively held its breath. A servant woman strained her neck to see. The blacksmith scowled. One of the children stepped up.

One of the older boys rose quickly and shoved forward. “Let me see!”

The rest of the children followed his lead, standing. They surged, reaching for the sack, grabbing at it, wanting to look inside.

The bag was tugged and jerked to the side.

“Slowly,” Thora commanded, tightening her grip on the bag.

The children gathered around in excitement, jostling one another to see into the bag and grasping at the sack.

A hissing sounded from inside the bag.

One of the children shrieked and pulled back, bumping into a little girl whose head hit another boy.

“The Yule Cat!”

The cry went up from somewhere in the midst of the swarm of children, followed by an explosion of screaming and running.

A tidal wave of crying children surged around Bastian, fleeing toward their parents and the doors.

The Great Hall erupted in shouts and cries as villagers raced away from the imagined threat. Some ran for their children. A heavy-set man slipped and fell to one knee. Others jogged around him to save themselves.

The sack had come loose from Thora’s hand. She reached around for it on the floor as children dashed around her, obstructing her view.

The sea of frenzied children and villagers engulfed her, knocking her backward. She disappeared beneath a wave of bodies.

For a moment, dread consumed Bastian as the image materialized in his mind of a different girl disappearing beneath dark waters. “Thora,” he gasped and lunged forward, pushing through the children and villagers, fighting to reach her side. He wouldn’t lose her like he had his sister. He had to keep her safe. He had to reach her.

He saw her green dress amongst the crowd and stretched out his hand, the same way he had for his sister.

His mind tuned out the screams of the terrified villagers, the fearful cries of the children. His heart pounded in his ears. “Thora!”

Then, her hand emerged from the wave of bodies and grasped his. He yanked her from the depths of the swelling crowd, pulling her into the safety of his arms. He held her tightly, anguished fear giving way to relief. He held her as he waded through the crowd toward the hearth.

He searched her face, his gaze sweeping over every inch. He followed his stare with gentle touches for any sign of injury. “Are you hurt?” he asked desperately.

She looked around the stone floor near the fallen sack with a panicked gaze. “Miracle,” she frantically gasped. “Where’s Miracle?”

It took him a moment to realize she was talking about the cat. He scanned

the floor beneath the rushing people's booted feet but couldn't make anything out.

Her father approached; his jaw set with anguish; his brow wrinkled with concern. "Are you well?" he demanded, concerned.

Bastian realized he was still holding Thora close, and yet, he couldn't release her. He couldn't let her go.

She didn't answer her father. Her panicky gaze turned to Bastian, pinning him with an imploring look. "You have to find her." Her fingers curled in his tunic. "Bastian."

He had given his word to protect the little cat. He nodded once. "Stay there." As he moved to search, Lord Rowley seized his arm.

"This madness must be stopped," Rowley commanded.

Bastian agreed with a quick nod as he looked around the floor for the sack. The Great Hall was a mass of undulating people dashing to-and-fro. A frightened falconer stared at the corners of the room, looking for the monster. A thin, black-haired servant ran toward the door, kicking a cup across the rushes. A woman with a stained apron draping her round stomach put her hands on the sides of her head, stopping in the madness to scream.

Bastian spotted Sir Garrett and stepped out into the press of people toward him. He grabbed his tunic and pulled him close to hear him. "Stay here. Protect Lady Thora and Lord Rowley."

Garrett nodded.

Before he could go, Bastian added, "Have you seen Nicolas?"

"Earlier, helping Cook," he answered and took up a position before Thora and Lord Rowley.

Bastian's gaze scanned the room for Nicolas, but there was no sign of him. Then, Bastian continued to search for the sack, looking on the floor. Someone bumped him from behind, pushing him forward. He glanced in that direction, but too many people raced about. He scanned the area until his gaze came to rest on Tommy and Rob standing with wide eyes, backs to the wall. He approached them, his long strides parting the sea of people. He pointed to Rob and commanded loudly, "You. Go and get the guard. Bring them here." He looked at Tommy as Rob bobbed his head and raced out of the Great Hall. "You. Find the sack."

Tommy nodded and began searching the floor with his eyes.

Bastian whirled, his gaze moving over the room. He dashed to the doors, dodging a farmer who was sitting on the floor, holding his eye. Bastian

picked him up by the tunic and deposited him on a bench at a wooden table. Another woman bumped his shoulder, and he steadied her. He had to calm these people. But how? How to allay their fears?

He climbed onto the table near the farmer. "Hear me!" he shouted, lifting his hands to the ceiling.

Those closest halted and turned to him with fearful expressions.

"It is the Yule! You are safer here than anywhere else! Castle Grandmore is a fortress against all evil."

"But the Yule Cat is here," one woman cried nervously.

What could he say? His mind raced as his gaze moved from one person to the next. One woman held her sobbing daughter in her arms. How could he fight their fear? And then, an idea occurred to him. He couldn't fight their fear, and so he had to weaken it.

Bastian announced, "Yes. The Yule Cat was here, 'tis true." The people shifted and glanced uneasily about. "*But...*" Bastian quickly added loudly to keep their attention. "But... I know the legend well. In the tale, I was told, the Yule Cat and the troll were afraid of one thing."

More villagers stopped to hear him. Interested, the growing crowd came closer to him, listening. Villagers hurrying their children to the doors to escape paused. All wide eyes were on him.

He looked at Thora across the room, meeting her gaze. "There is a way to keep the Yule Cat at bay, for there is one thing above all else the Yule Cat cannot tolerate."

"Fire!" a farmer shouted.

"Swords!" a knight suggested.

Bastian shook his head. "Song." Mumbled echoes of uncertainty sounded throughout the group. "Aye. Sing. At the top of your voices. As loud as you can. The Yule Cat and troll woman cannot stand the noise, which is why they live in the soundless mountains."

Silence greeted him.

"Or so I've heard."

More quietness stretched across the room.

Bastian knew he should be grateful. At least they were no longer screaming. He nodded in encouragement.

And then, from near the hearth, a voice began quietly with a familiar tune.

Bastian lifted his gaze to the singer. Thora couldn't hold a tune, but

Bastian was proud and grateful to her for helping him. He smiled and joined in the song with a rousing chorus. He was a much worse singer than she was. His voice boomed through the hall.

Around him, others slowly and skeptically joined in. Singing was the cure. Singing was hope. Singing was the answer. More people began singing, their voices lifting. Song had the power to conquer fear and bring back the festivities of the Yule. It was happiness. It was uplifting. As more people sang, a bard stepped forward to lead the gathered crowd with a rhythmic beat of his flute.

Bastian was grateful the bard had taken over. He was no singer. He hopped off the table and made his way through the crowd toward Thora, patting a knight on his back for his good work.

Tommy intercepted him, holding an empty sack.

A sick feeling swirled in the pit of Bastian's stomach as he took the sack from Tommy. It was empty. He glanced at Thora near the hearth. The red glow from the hearth washed over her stricken face, her stare on the sack.

Bastian thanked Tommy and continued across the room to Thora.

"Where is she?" Thora asked with a hitch in her voice, her brow lined with concern.

"We'll find her," Bastian promised.

Thora bit her lip as if attempting to keep her fears from spilling out.

The chorus of voices rose around them. But Bastian didn't feel victorious or celebratory. He only felt guilt weighing down on his shoulders. Had he got Thora's Yule Cat killed?

Chapter 17

Unshed tears burned Thora's eyes as she approached her room in the early morning of the Yule. If it weren't for Bastian's arm about her waist, holding her tight to him, she was certain she would have collapsed.

They had searched everywhere for Miracle. She must have got away. At least, that was what Thora chose to believe. The other option was unthinkable.

Bastian squeezed her. "I'm sorry, Thora."

"Oh, no. It's not your fault. I don't blame you. What you did in there, with the people, how you calmed them and even managed to get them into a festive spirit..." She shook her head, gazing at him with adoration. "You saved them."

Boisterous, off-tune voices sounded from down the corridor. Bastian stepped back and removed his arm from Thora's waist.

Two servants approached, singing loudly. As they passed them, they nodded a greeting.

Thora looked back at Bastian with gratitude etched into her face. "You saved us all."

"Except for the Yule Cat."

"You did what you could. For that, I'm grateful."

"You were the brave one," Bastian said. "To tell the truth to everyone. To save a cat when you were so afraid of it." He cupped her chin with his hand and ran his thumb along her cheek.

"You were the one that told me I loved animals far too much not to see the truth of what happened that night. You were right. How did you know me so well?"

Bastian smiled and stepped closer, pulling her against him. "I love you. That's how. I think I've loved you longer than I even realized."

Shocked, Thora stared into his honey-colored eyes for a moment. "You love me?"

His lip slowly curled into a half-smile. "With all my heart."

Joy bloomed inside of her as her heart pounded with joy. She lifted up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, Bastian," she

murmured, pressing her lips to his.

He drew back to look down at her with a speculative gaze. "I would like your opinion on a matter I've been considering."

She tilted her head, wondering why he had put space between them. Her lips tingled with the memory of his lips.

"I was thinking of speaking with your father and, if you approve, asking for your hand in marriage."

Surprise washed over her, and her lips curled in a smile. "You want to marry me?"

His grin was heart-stopping. "I can think of no one else. You are a wonder. Beautiful, kind. And I thought we would be a perfect match."

She nodded. "We will be."

"So, you agree?" he asked.

"With all my heart."

He held her against him, claiming her lips in a deep, sultry, heated kiss that promised so much more.

Movement sounded from inside the room. Thora pulled away and looked at the door in confusion. There should be no one in the room.

Bastian stepped before her as the door opened.

Nicolas stood in the open doorway.

Bastian greeted him with a fierce embrace. "Where have you been?" he demanded and stepped back to look at him. "And what are you doing here?"

Nicolas ran a hand over his hair to straighten it. "It was the safest place."

Thora stepped into the room and saw the small water bowl on the floor, and sadness filled her. Poor Miracle. She hoped the cat was safe somewhere.

Bastian scowled at his brother. "You were *hiding*?" he asked in disbelief and disgust.

Nicolas lifted his chin. "No. I was protecting."

"Thora?" a small voice called.

Thora spun, searching for the voice. As she came around the side of the bed, she saw a tiny booted foot sticking out from beneath it. She bent and peered beneath the bed. As she did, she met Bella's gaze.

Bella's eyes widened. "Thora!"

"What are you doing here?" Thora asked incredulously as the little girl crawled from beneath her bed. "Are you well?"

Bella nodded. "I didn't know where else to go. I was afraid."

Thora sighed and opened her arms to embrace the little girl. "You don't

have to be afraid. The Yule Cat won't hurt you."

Bella shook her head, her curls swaying. "I wasn't afraid of the Yule Cat. I was afraid they would hurt it."

Thora scowled in confusion. "The cat?"

Bella nodded. "We took her here and hid her."

Thora gasped. "She's alive? She's okay?"

Bella bent and pointed beneath the bed. "She's right there."

Thora released Bella and dropped to her hands and knees to peer under the bed. She spotted those glowing eyes immediately as Miracle slowly came toward her. Relief and happiness overwhelmed Thora.

"She came right to me in the Great Hall," Bella explained. "I think she was scared. Nicolas led us up here. He stayed and protected us the whole time."

Miracle poked her head from beneath the bed and gazed at them with those big brown eyes.

Relief flooded through Thora as tears of gratitude entered her eyes. Miracle was safe! She grabbed Bella and hugged her fiercely. "Thank you, Bella! Oh, thank you!"

Nicolas shoved Bastian's shoulder as his chest inflated proudly. "Told ya."

Bastian ruffled Nicolas's hair. "You did good, little brother." He nodded in satisfaction. "It's a Yuletide miracle."

Thora released Bella and stood, laughing. She embraced Bastian. "This is the best Yule ever!"

Chapter 18

Three Months Later

Bastian stood in his chambers, *their* chambers, staring at his new wife. He couldn't believe how lucky he was to have wed the most beautiful woman in the land. Thora's red hair was braided into compliance beneath her white veil. He stepped up to her and eased the veil from her head.

She watched him with large blue eyes that darkened when he approached.

He was immediately aroused. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had fallen in love with her. He ran his hands through her red hair, freeing it from its confines. He wanted to go slow and enjoy their lovemaking, but when she lifted up on her toes and pressed her lips to his, he realized she had other plans.

Her fingers skimmed up his side, removing the tunic he wore. Her kiss was urgent and exploratory.

He showered kisses along her smooth jaw and down her neck, as his fingers worked the lacings at the back of her gown. Finally, he pushed it from her shoulders and pushed it off of her. She stepped out of the garment. Her chemise was a barrier he wanted to rid them of. He looked down at her, trembling with the effort to control himself.

Thora was the one who eased the chemise from her. It slid down revealing her naked glorious body to him.

She was perfect. As perfect as he had imagined.

She took his hand and lifted it, pressing it to her breast.

He gasped slightly, fondling the small globe. It fit into his hand exactly right. He could feel the pointed nipple against his palm.

And then, she was tugging at his leggings, pushing them from his body.

He caught her hands and eased her back onto the bed. Clouds of blankets surrounded them as his body imprisoned hers in a web of growing passion. He gazed down at her, studying her face in the glow of the hearth. She was beautiful. Sultry. Innocent. He lowered his body over hers and she gasped before he claimed her lips.

They took time to discover, to arouse and to give each other pleasure until

Bastian could not stand another moment of the exquisite torture. He entered her with a painstaking slowness until he filled her completely. Then slowly their bodies moved as one in delightful lovemaking, soaring higher and higher with each thrust. When Thora cried out and clung tightly to him, he shattered in a shuddering release.

Gasping and spent, he rolled from her and gathered his wife into his arms. "You are mine, now."

"I've always been yours. Since the day you saved me from the Yule Cat."

He grinned against her head and they succumbed to the satisfied sleep of fulfilled lovers.

Epilogue

Nine months later

Melodic singing rose to the rafters high above the heads of the villagers, peasants, and servants gathered in the Great Hall for the Yule celebration.

Thora sat in the chair before the hearth, her stomach round with child. Miracle sat on the top of her stomach as she ran a hand over the cat's head and then scratched beneath her chin.

It had taken a long time to convince the villagers that Miracle was not the Yule Cat.

But once the villagers had accepted Miracle was not the cursed cat of lore, it was simple to convince them other cats and creatures weren't. And it was all due to Bastian. Singing was the answer. And the villagers felt safe singing. If they were frightened of an animal, they would break out into song. The animals would run away. Thora smiled. Bastian was brilliant.

Bastian strolled over to Thora and handed her a mug of ale. He laughed at seeing Miracle sitting atop her stomach. "That cannot be comfortable for Miracle."

Thora shrugged. "It is the only thing that calms the baby. When Miracle is near, he stops kicking."

"He?" Bastian echoed.

Thora looked up at Bastian with a grin. "The midwife says it is a boy. She says she has no doubt. And she is rarely wrong."

"A boy?" Bastian mused, running his hand along her stomach. "Our boy."

Thora put her hand over Bastian's. "He will make a wonderful knight."

Bastian nodded. "That he will." He leaned in to kiss her lips gently.

His kisses always left her hungry and burning for more.

A boy stopped before them, raising a wooden sword to the ceiling. "The Yule Cat has been defeated," he announced.

Bastian grinned.

Thora stroked Miracle. *Yes.* She had to agree. The legend of the Yule Cat had been defeated.

The End

Dearest Reader –

Thank you for reading **A Yuletide Miracle**. I hope you enjoyed Thora and Bastian's tale and fell in love with Miracle.

I did a lot of research into the legend of the Yule Cat. The legend in my story is from Icelandic folklore. According to the legend, Gryla and the Yule Cat live in the mountains and come down at Christmas time to eat children who do not do their chores. It was a fascinating legend and I had fun incorporating it into my story.

A lot of this story was based on real-life experience. Remember the two squires who kicked the little cat into the fire? I once read in my neighborhood animal shelter's newsletter about a cat who was rescued from a group of boys kicking it into a bonfire. I was so horrified that people could be so mean that I wanted to give the little cat her own happy ever after and forever home. The cat in the animal shelter did survive, for which I am grateful.

I based Miracle on one of my own cats named Muse. She is just as skittish as Miracle. While Miracle was black, Muse is a little tortoiseshell cat. Shortly after ending the story, Muse became sick. She was hiding (which is a terrible sign) and not eating or drinking. It was horrible to see her suffering so. After a visit to the emergency vet and one to her regular vet, she was given antibiotics. Two days later, she showed signs of getting back to her normal self of sitting with us, eating, drinking and not hiding. The vet said she had a wound, perhaps a scratch from one of my other cats, that had become infected. Anyway, I'm thankful to say Muse is back to her old wonderful self.

Thank you for reading!

Laurel

About Laurel O'Donnell

Bestselling, critically acclaimed novelist LAUREL O'DONNELL sold her first book to Kensington after being a Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart finalist.

Laurel began writing in junior high school when she carried a pen and paper wherever she went. In college, she took fiction writing classes to further her skill. She worked at King Richard's Faire in Wisconsin where she learned sword fighting.

Laurel has many books yet to write and hopes you will join her on her journey to bring the medieval era to life!

Visit www.laurel-odonnell.com to discover a free book, to view upcoming releases, and to subscribe to Laurel's blog by email.

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The Lady Who Stole Christmas

by Sydney Jane Baily



To all those who keep the spirit of Christmas alive all year long, I salute you!

Acknowledgments

I had three dashing-good beta readers for this quick-paced novella: Toni Young, Lesley Walsh, and Philip Thomas. My story was made better by each of them, and I offer my sincere gratitude. And as always, a big thank you to my lovely mom, Beryl.

Prologue

Great Oakley
1814

The carriage rocked sharply, before tilting wildly, causing Lady Sarah Worthington and her maid to shriek as they slid across the leather squabs and crashed against the inside of the door. Thankfully, the door latch held, and they didn't pop out onto the frozen ground. Finally, the vehicle came to a halt.

"Drats!" Sarah exclaimed aloud. They were so close to their destination—Forde Hall and Lady Macroun's Christmastide house party—but not so close that they could walk, especially with the afternoon air being so chilly one could see one's breath. The only blessing was the lack of snow so far that winter, though she knew circumstances could change within a few hours.

An instant later, her footman's face appeared at the window, which she lowered.

"A broken wheel, my lady. Went down a rut and four spokes shattered."

"Repairable, Henley?" she asked, her mind thinking of alternatives because even if it were fixable, it would take ages. Far more quickly, her coachman could unhitch the horses, and she and her maid, Dorie, could ride.

Before Henley could answer, she turned to Dorie with a question she'd never considered before. "Can you ride?"

"I don't know, my lady. I never have tried in my life."

Sarah would consider that answer to be firmly in the negative. She wouldn't risk Dorie atop a steed, only to have the horse run off with her or for her maid to fall and get injured.

Turning her attention back to her footman, she realized, he wasn't looking in the window anymore but behind them.

"Another carriage approaching, my lady."

"Then hail it, Henley. We are saved!"



* * *

Lord Miles Denbigh felt his carriage slowing down and leaned over so he could look out the window. Another vehicle was blocking the path and was clearly disabled. It seemed a genuine accident of some kind, however such tricks were often used by highwaymen. Reaching under his seat, he grabbed his pistol, already loaded and ready. Although he was not one of the Robin Redbreasts, who sought out and disarmed highway robbers, he had worked for Bow Street long enough to have a healthy dose of suspicion.

His carriage had hardly come to a halt when he opened the door and jumped down, not the type to wait for the assistance of his footman or even have the iron steps lowered. Maybe when he was eighty, he would allow such luxuries.

Still, his footman had beat him to the ground in a little contest that always occurred between the two of them, but as the man had to walk around the coach, Miles reached the other carriage first.

Obviously, the front left wheel had snapped. A footman, blocking his view of the window, looked alarmed at the sight of a gun and flattened himself against the carriage door. Then, Miles heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

Looking up, he saw the coachman pointing a shotgun at his chest.

“Lower your weapon,” the driver ordered, “and step back from her ladyship’s carriage.”

Her ladyship? Interesting.

“I don’t mind lowering my weapon,” Miles said, “as long as you do the same. I stopped only to offer my assistance, but I shall not leave myself open to the potential menace of a robber’s grand scheme. I demand to know the occupant before I lower my pistol.”

A tapping at the window made the footman turn to speak with the carriage’s occupant.

“Her ladyship asks your name.”

Miles sighed. “Lord Denbigh.”

There was more noise from the carriage, and then the footman was being

pushed aside.

“Denbigh!” came a familiar voice as the door was pushed open before the footman recalled his duties and lowered the step.

Lady Sarah Worthington. He should have known. A house party with many jewels and festive revelers apt to become snookered by midday, ripe for being fleeced—that would be exactly to her liking.

Suddenly, she appeared, offering the footman her hand. As usual, she was stunning, this time in a sable-trimmed blue wool pelisse and matching muff, her blonde hair piled upon her head, with a fur trimmed hat perched on top.

Not even glancing at her coachman, she ordered him, “Lower your weapon, Mr. Higgins. We are safe with my good friend, Lord Denbigh.”

Safe, unless they found themselves alone, as had happened upon two occasions. Both times he’d kissed her senseless and relieved them both of pent-up lust, once on a sofa in a sitting room during a diner party with her skirts raised to her corseted waist, and the second time, far more comfortably, in his own bed. After unwrapping her like a delectable present, swiftly and with care, he’d found her not only to be warm and willing but far more beautiful when bare than when artfully made up.

Without a doubt, they were two of the best, most satisfying sexual experiences he’d ever had, even the hurried one on the sofa when he’d been unable to feast his eyes upon anything except her passion-glazed blue ones while driving into her. He wouldn’t mind making it a third time for Christmas’ sake. Truth be told, if she wasn’t so inclined to buzzing dazzlers from the nobility, he might consider a longer arrangement with her.

That last time, though, she’d left without a word, not even deigning to answer his missive the following day. He’d been a bit shaken by her *sang froid*.

Miles slipped his gun into the pocket of his overcoat. “I was right,” he said.

“About what?” she asked, a fine eyebrow arched.

“I was convinced the carriage contained a highwayman setting a trap. And here you are, not a common footpad, but a thief nonetheless.”

She sighed, deigning neither to protest nor to respond. Yet after peering past him to his comfortable carriage, she gave him her most winsome smile.

It made his heart clench. Ignoring his own foolish emotions, he said, “I assume you’re heading to Lady Macroun’s house party.”

“I am.” She batted her lashes at him like an actress on the stage. “I didn’t

expect *you* to be there.”

Evidently not. She wouldn't want him keeping an eye on her. Speaking of which, he noticed her shivering.

“I am shocked an ice queen such as yourself feels the cold.”

Rolling her eyes flippantly, she asked, “Is that any way to greet me?”

He leaned forward so only she could hear. “You mean after you left my bed cold and slithered from my townhouse.”

Unbothered, she made a moue of her mouth, looking infinitely kissable. Then she leaned forward so he could feel her breath upon his ear. “I did neither. I warmed your bed all night, as I recall, and I sauntered from your townhouse because I had better things to do.” Then she stood back. “Now, greet me properly, or I shall declare you petulant and jealous.”

He was neither. However, he had become smitten with her a few months back, despite her penchant for marrying old men who died quickly. But he couldn't possibly truly care for a thief, not in his line of work, and somehow, despite her notoriously humble beginnings, she had married into a fortune and rumor had it jewels disappeared when she was nearby. He'd experienced it himself with his own diamond cravat pin missing after she'd spent the night.

Before the loss of his pin, he'd been ready to help her clear her name, but after slaking her desire with him that evening, she'd walked away, denying him the chance to play the knight in shining armor, not to mention piercing his pride, too.

And now she had a cocky, devil-may-care expression that infuriated him.

“I should turn you over my knee and spank you,” Miles said, half to himself. The danger to her person should she be caught, tried, and found guilty did not bear thinking about.

“Oh, do tell,” she said, then smirked. “I can't recall, did we try that?”

He gritted his teeth. She was implying their encounters were forgettable, and worse, she'd said such in front of their footmen. Reputations had been lost for less. Too late now.

“You'd best come with me after all. We'll have to see if Lady Macroun's carriage-house has a spare wheel, and a wainwright nearby whom she can send out.”

She shrugged delightfully. “Perfect.”

She was plainly unbothered by such things. Other people took care of them for her, as he was doing at that moment.

Calling up to the coachman, he said, "I believe we are about twenty minutes away, so hopefully, within the hour, help shall arrive."

"Yes, sir, thank you."

Turning to her, he offered his hand, noticing his own footman had put the step down. "Shall we?" he asked.

"We shall," she agreed and climbed in.

"Are you traveling alone?" Most of the people attending the party were couples, although undoubtedly, there would be single men and women attending, all of them hoping for a festive twelve days, except for himself, who would be working.

And except for Sarah apparently.

"I am, apart from my maid, of course." She cocked her head. "Why do you ask? Wondering if I might be husband hunting? I hear there will be at least one ride to the hunt."

He smiled at her witticism, although inside, he felt her words like a dart. He might have been interested in being her next husband if she hadn't walked out and refused to respond to his invitation. How he'd let her get under his skin so easily was beyond him.

"I'm quite confident there will be hunting," he agreed, playing along. "I'm merely surprised you're not with your sister for this festive season."

"Julia had other obligations," she said cagily, "and a gentleman who requested her presence elsewhere."

"A wealthy nob, no doubt," he said, thinking of Sarah's equally stunning sister. From what he'd gleaned, Julia Sudbury used her good looks in the same fashion, to manipulate and get what she wanted. They were often at the same London parties, leading men on a merry dance.

"I have wondered how a parson could have two such—"

"Beautiful daughters," Sarah finished for him, arranging her fur-trimmed pelisse and smoothing her skirts.

He cocked his head. "I was going to say conniving and dishonest daughters."

"Shame on you, Denbigh. 'Tis the season of peace and good will."

Miles considered. "It is, isn't it? And that's why I didn't leave you in the frost to await help."

She paused as if she hadn't entertained the notion he might not wish for her company. Then she dazzled him with another smile, leaning forward to place her hand upon his pant leg, squeezing his knee in an outrageously bold

fashion.

“How kind of you,” she said.

While his body was still humming from her unexpected touch, his head filled with her delicately enticing floral fragrance, she added, “And my trunks, if you please. I cannot possibly arrive and be unable to change out of these dusty rags.”

Sighing, he slid the window down and addressed his footman. In a moment, he felt the weight of her luggage added to his traveling coach. Good thing it had the sturdiest wheels money could provide, unlike hers, which he could see were all for show. Silly things, painted powder blue and probably made out of kindling.

“And my maid,” she added as he was about to signal his coachman to drive on.

“I have come without my valet,” he pointed out.

She looked him up and down.

“Such *déshabillé* is your prerogative. However, I intend to look my best, even in the backward countryside of Great Oakley. Besides, if we show up and I have no companion, tongues will begin to wag at once. Do you want our names to be irrevocably linked in scandal? I don’t mind in the least, but it might interfere with your stellar reputation as one of Prinny’s prized lackeys.”

“Careful, Lady Worthmore, you’re a guest in my carriage.”

She paused. “You just called me *Worthmore*.”

He blinked. *Had he?* “I did not,” he insisted. “I said Worthington, for your poor, dead husband.”

“You did,” she said with a pretty lifting of her shoulder in a shrug. “And poor is the one thing my husband was not. Anyway, at least I didn’t call you a *toady*. Nor *lickspittle* or *flunky*. My intent was nothing but polite, I assure you.”

He had performed a valuable service for the Prince Regent during the War of 1812 as a hired man who could get done certain sensitive tasks, helping to bring about the Treaty of Ghent, which was, in fact, about to be signed in a few days. He wouldn’t let her make him feel tainted by her snide remarks. In fact, she was undoubtedly fishing to discover what he was doing at Lady Macroun’s.

Miles leaned his head out again. “Her ladyship’s maid may accompany us.” He nearly ordered her to take a seat up with the coachman, but it was

cold and almost Christmas, after all.

As soon as the pudding-faced maid climbed aboard and took a seat beside her mistress, all interesting talk had to cease. Instead, they discussed which guests they knew would be there and what parties they'd already attended in Town. He watched Sarah's face when each name was brought up, but he could ascertain no particular interest she might have.

Before Miles knew it, they'd reach the long drive to Lady Macroun's expansive manor house. And he couldn't quite believe he was with Lady Sarah Worthington. She was going to be trouble—a big Christmas helping of it, to be sure.



* * *

Sarah managed to remain as cool and in control as she'd ever been—whether trapped under a bed in a marquess's chamber, a diamond ring held in her mouth, or escaping out a second-story window onto an adjacent rooftop, a sapphire necklace with matching earrings in a small sack stuck down her décolletage. Harder than doing either, in fact, was the mission of remaining relaxed while sitting a hairsbreadth from the Viscount Miles Denbigh, the only man who'd ever made her desires rage and who'd brought her to the peak of passion on two separate occasions. *And glorious peaks they were!*

Nevertheless, she had a goal for the Christmastide, and it didn't involve enjoying passionate relations with Denbigh. Unless ... she looked him over while he ordered their trunks taken inside as smoothly as though he were her husband, and then he went about asking for a wainwright.

Hm, perhaps they could slip in a tryst without disturbing her plans. After all, she was beginning to get used to the life as a lady of the *bon ton*. As a widow, she'd been invited to partake of many an assignation. She could hardly imagine Denbigh's insufferable male pride if he knew he was the only one with whom she'd actually shared a passionate *rendez-vous*. Twice! None of the others had tempted her in the slightest.

On the whole, he seemed to be a good sort of man, a solid, upstanding citizen of England, loyal to crown and country. She loved her country, too,

but they had different roles to play, and she had one very large burden to carry and, hopefully, to relieve herself of by the time she left the Yuletide gathering at Forde Hall.

Chapter 1

After settling into her room, Sarah let Dorie, who'd been assigned a small adjacent chamber, change her into a dress for the late afternoon.

"I hope you can get the wrinkles out of the blue silk by eight o'clock," Sarah said, taking a look in the mirror at her current gown of pale burgundy with cream trim.

"Yes, my lady. Don't worry your head."

And Sarah decided Dorie was correct. She shouldn't spend a moment worrying about fashion, as she had plenty of other things to keep her occupied, thanks to Julia's antics. Hopefully, her sister would stay out of trouble until the Epiphany when Sarah would be back in London.

She had more than enough time to carry out her onerous tasks, as long as she could stay away from Denbigh's watchful eye, although she wouldn't mind an encounter with his firm, warm lips, his wicked tongue, his expert hands, and his—

"My lady, the schedule said there is a gathering in the east drawing room. It is already underway."

"Thank you, Dorie. I'll go at once." *All hot and bothered with thoughts of Lord Miles Denbigh.*

Sure enough, as soon as she entered the room on the first floor, despite there being many guests milling about, her gaze landed upon the tall, attractive man who'd left a heavy stamp upon her heart.

If only he weren't in his particular line of work. If only her younger sister weren't up to no good, and she, Sarah, the only one who could make it right.

Immediately, she was met by Lady Macroun, a decade-long widow, who enjoyed her freedom, her parties, her friends, and her lovers. Many a younger woman aspired to everything the viscountess had.

"So glad you could come," Lady Macroun said by way of welcome.

A true hostess, the viscountess treated Sarah as though she were a coveted guest instead of one who'd wangled an invitation by hook and by crook.

"I am grateful to have been invited," Sarah assured the woman, giving her a small curtsy of respect. While she might be titled Lady Worthington, and considered a countess, she was still a nobody, with no influence and no

friends among the *ton*.

Lady Macroun stood half a head taller than most females, and looked every inch in command of her estate and her Twelvetide party. And that night, she stood out like the North star, wearing a silver silk gown and dripping jewels from her throat, her upper arms, her wrists and fingers, and even from her coiffure.

Sarah gave a silent sigh of gratitude Julia was not in the vicinity. The temptation to her sister would be far too great.

Soon, she was drinking an egg-and-milk flip, a hearty afternoon beverage to tide them all over until there would be small edibles at dusk before an enormous meal later. House parties were notorious for providing one opportunity to eat and drink followed by another, intertwined with outdoor entertainment when the weather permitted and indoor amusements for the rest of the time. Although this was Sarah's first such experience, she had heard a Yuletide house party would be the ultimate in gustatory indulgence.

"We'll be having music with our refreshments," the viscountess said. "We're so fortunate one of my guests is an accomplished pianist. If you will excuse me." And she glided away in a silvery, glittering motion of regal smoothness.

Despite having been a titled lady herself for nearly two years, Sarah felt in her bones there was a difference between those born to the manor and those, like herself, who married into it. A vast divide. Dress up as she might, she would always be a parson's daughter with a wayward sister. However, her cunning might set her apart from some of the more complacent, indolent noblewomen who hadn't had to lift a finger to get where they were.

Then again, maybe she'd merely been extremely lucky.

Hoping her luck would hold, Sarah sipped the frothy beverage from the sideboard and found it to be the creamiest, most delicious flip she'd ever tasted. A few sips made it easier to turn and survey her fellow guests. One in particular was on her mind, and in the next moment, she spied him. Lord Devonstone was missing a particularly expensive ring, given to him by his father, and he wasn't going to rest until it was returned. He'd been crying its loss all over London.

At that moment, Sarah had the precise piece of jewelry nestled between her breasts, resting on the seam of her corset, awaiting a moment when she could slip it into the man's coat pocket, to be found later by him or his valet. It should be one of the easiest tasks she'd ever performed.

“There you are, looking bewitchingly lovely,” Denbigh said, suddenly at her elbow. “Not to mention furtive, even a little guilty, dare I say.”

Even when he was accusing her, she thought him charming. But she must try to steer his attention in a different direction.

“I do not look furtive, nor guilty. So, no, you may not dare. And you are standing out like a sore thumb. If you’re attempting to appear as an honored guest and not a blasted bloodhound, then at least, take a glass of Lady Macroun’s exceptional egg-and-milk flip.” She sipped hers again. “You won’t be sorry.”

He stared at her, blinked, and then, strangely, he grinned, looking for all the world as if he intended to laugh. *At her?*

“What?” she demanded. “Why do you have that look upon your face?”

“Your lip,” he said quietly. “You have a cream mustache, and it is perfect on you.”

Now Sarah could feel it, foam upon her upper lip. Quickly, she licked it away, wanting to wipe the back of her hand across her mouth, too. None of them were wearing gloves indoors at that time of day, so she wouldn’t soil her satin. Still, if someone saw her...

“Is it gone?” she asked, unable to keep from leaning close and whispering.

His gaze was fixed on her mouth. “Your tongue did exactly what mine wished to do,” Denbigh murmured, making her insides turn molten instantly. *What a salty rogue he was!*

Sighing to keep from leaning closer to him, which was what her body wanted to do, Sarah said, “A gentleman would give me his handkerchief, so I didn’t have to use my tongue.”

“Not nearly as fun,” he quipped, but drew a linen square out of his pocket nonetheless and handed it to her.

Their fingers touched as she took it. *How could his fingers be so warm in the middle of winter, sending sparks of excitement through her?*

Recalling the ecstasy of those same fingers trailing across her skin, she shivered, despite the fire blazing merrily in the enormous hearth at one end of the room. Their gazes met. Was he recalling the way she’d responded when he’d caressed her, especially when his fingers had dipped into her intimate place?

Still looking at his intense brown gaze, she took another long draught of the flip, this time carefully wiping her mouth with his handkerchief.

“In America, they call it egg-nog,” he said, “and they serve it as quite a strong drink.”

“This might be strong, too. It’s hard to tell with all the sweetness.” She felt like giggling and decided there was an ample amount of liquor in Lady Macroun’s holiday beverage.

“I think it’s time for some prittle-prattle with the other guests,” Sarah told him. “The fortifying flip will undoubtedly give me courage since, besides you, I don’t know anyone here.” And she wasn’t the bravest of souls—at least not when it came to the vast gatherings of nibs and nobs, all of whom seemed to know she wasn’t truly one of them. When it came to slipping into someone’s room and returning their rightful baubles, she was as brave as St. George. Anything for her sister!

Remembering this and that she had a backbone, she straightened it and walked away.



* * *

Miles watched her approach a small group of other guests, many whom he recognized—the Belmonts of Grosvenor Square, the Evingdons of St. James’s Place, and even old Lord Devonstone in his decade’s old garb, which he still wore proudly. All extraordinary wealthy members of the *ton*. With a sinking feeling in his gut, he was certain Sarah was up to no good, and also firmly convinced she was the most beautiful, desirable creature at Forde Hall.

They would have nearly a fortnight together, as these Yuletide gatherings lasted the entire twelve days of Christmas. He had the distinct suspicion they would find themselves in a compromising position before the Epiphany because he was doubtful he could resist their intense attraction—or stop himself from pleasuring her if she gave him the opportunity.

Not when she was obviously so affected by his touch and his glance, and not when he felt like kissing her every blasted time they were within three feet of one another. *Happy Christmas, indeed!*

Helping himself to the creamy flip, he acknowledged Sarah was correct. It was delicious, and infused with brandy and rum. With a glass or three, one

might become half seas over and begin to stagger.

Since it was a working holiday, Miles drained his first glass and took another, then began to circulate. Unlike Sarah, he knew most of the guests. Although he did a little work for both Prinny and for Bow Street when he was called to it, still, he was a viscount who'd been welcomed into the wealthiest homes in Britain all his life. He was immune to the trappings of nobility, except for how he enjoyed them, to be sure. He didn't want to be a ditch-digger, yet nor did he intend to sit around a stuffy club and get a case of the gout. Life was too short, and he found being a blasted bloodhound, as Sarah called it, was an amusing pastime, one for which he had an intuitive knack.

Where was she? He spied her talking with Lord Devonstone, an ancient widower of about a year. So that was her game! His heart sank a little to think of her up to her old tricks.

Nevertheless, his lordship could take care of himself, at least for the moment. Miles was there at the request of the Prince Regent, an admirer of Lady Macroun's, who didn't want a repeat of what had happened to her cousin, Lord Andover. A month earlier, Andover's house party had been ripe with thievery. Someone on the guest list had taken to stealing whilst the others slept. *The audacity!* Common snoozers were usually found at inns, waiting for drunken guests to pass out. Thus, it had been a shock to discover a thief brazen enough to sneak around the bedrooms of a country manor, even worse to believe it was a fellow nob.

He took a second look at Sarah and the widower. She'd been on the guest list of the previous party, as her deceased husband was distantly related to Lady Andover. He watched as Lord Devonstone, clearly flattered by her undivided attention, preened, rubbing a hand across the sides of his hair, smoothing the already impossibly smooth gray curls before returning his hands to his pockets. Nonchalant and about three decades too late—unless Sarah was husband hunting again.

As if she sensed his gaze, she turned slowly, made eye contact, and frowned at him. He would not have been at all surprised if she'd stuck out her tongue.

However, as if she didn't care a fig about his scrutiny, she turned away, nodded to Lord Devonstone, and then moved on to another group of guests.

Lady Macroun approached him, an impressive vision in silver.

"Anything awry, Lord Denbigh?"

"I've only recently arrived, my lady, as you know," he responded, "but I

will keep my eyes and ears open, and do my best to thwart any untoward behavior. The Prince Regent agreed we cannot have this type of careless disregard for the rights of property in the realm.”

“I’m glad His Royal Highness remembered the favor my family did for his, and I am beyond grateful he actually sent you, my lord. Your reputation precedes you.”

Miles nodded his gratitude, not realizing he was gaining such a public reputation for being helpful where needed—as he thought of it. Yet it was probably inevitable. On the other hand, the more people who knew he behaved as both diplomat and man-of-action, wherever Prinny needed him, the less effective he would be. Why, if Lady Macroun was right, then every guest at the manor might know why he was there, including the thief.

“As I said, I will do my best. The flip is excellent, by the way.”

“Thank you.” She moved away, shimmering as the last rays of the afternoon sun fingered the room.

He noted Lady Worthington had moved along to another group, two couples. Brave of her to insinuate herself and create an odd number. Glancing about, he wondered if there were other singles besides himself, the bewitching lady, and Lord Devonstone.

Taking a tour of the room, passing behind Sarah who bristled as he went by, Miles found other unmarried guests clustered together by the windows overlooking the gardens and the lawn that stretched out until it became wild fields. Wonderful hunting to be had at Great Oakley, and they were assured of at least two hunting days, if not more, over the course of the extended house party. Moreover, Lady Macroun kept excellent hounds for the sheer enjoyment of doing so, and as her husband was long gone, there would be many foxes ready to be pursued.

Miles had brought his favorite double-barreled shotgun and looked forward to the first event in two days. They had to get through the holy day of Christmas first and then the festivities could begin.

“Lord Denbigh, can that possibly be you?” came a familiar female voice.

He stiffened, turning to see one of the single guests was Lady Frances Thornton, daughter of an earl. He cringed.

More than one previous paramour at the same party! Not good form of Lady Macroun, if she only knew. However, while most of the *ton* were well-aware of his attachment to Lady Frances for the good part of last Season, none knew of his brief and fiery dalliance with Lady Worthington. He

couldn't blame their hostess for this discomfiting situation.

On the other hand, at the very least, Lady Macroun should have told him even one former flame would be in attendance. Could their hostess be playing the *shoulder sham* for the earl's daughter, hoping to help her rekindle their relationship?

It wouldn't work. There wasn't a thing about Lady Frances that enticed him. He escorted her around Mayfair as a paid favor to her father—another friend of the Prince Regent—who thought a dandy prat was angling for his precious daughter. For the life of him, except for her fortune, Miles couldn't imagine why any man, prat or otherwise, would want her. Yes, she was pretty, but her entitled nature would grate upon anyone who wasn't her loving father.

Thus, he'd done his duty and moved on as quickly as he could at the Season's end when the earl whisked Frances away to the relative safety of the country. And good riddance!

Lady Frances reached out a gloved hand to him, which he took, bowed over, and then released. It had been months since he'd laid eyes upon her, and he could honestly say he hadn't missed her in the least.

"I didn't know you would be here," she simpered, batting her lashes, thrusting out her bosom, doing all but rubbing up against him like an alley cat, and he realized she had, in fact, known.

"Nor did I know of your attendance," he remarked. "I wish I could say I would leave if my presence makes you uncomfortable. Alas, I cannot." He was being paid handsomely for his services. Even if he wasn't, there was Prinny's oft-mercurial favor to consider. In a word, he was stuck.

Frances narrowed her eyes. He'd never told her what he did when he wasn't simply enjoying himself as a viscount. And, unlike Lady Macroun, the earl's daughter hadn't discovered his reputation for helping people with sometimes unpleasant tasks. Frances would be fit to be tied if she knew she'd been one of those tasks.

"Your presence is nothing to me," she said a little sharply since he was not behaving in a suitably eager manner. "We parted on good terms, neither of us with a broken heart, neither with any cause to give the other the cut direct, or even indirect. Still, since we haven't made new attachments, one wonders why we stopped ours."

Miles didn't wonder for a moment. She had become too comfortable around him by far, showing her true nature, and he hadn't particularly cared

for the truth—self-centered, petty, and light between the ears. And he'd cringed more than once at her sharp tongue for those whom she didn't like. That included every woman whom she saw as a competitive threat. In a word, she was unpleasant to be around, and he'd been beyond relieved when his duty had been done.

Glancing past Frances, he realized belatedly he was searching for Sarah, who had impressed him from the first with her wit and her vivacity. Moreover, she had an abundance of gumption, since she'd snagged an earl from the obscurity of her small-town parish.

She was still talking with the unmarried guests, apparently having gained the particular attention of a young lord, the son of a baron—Sumner or Salmer, something like that. Miles wondered if she would settle for a man who wouldn't die in the near future and leave her his estate. He supposed she would, if she actually fell in love.

Something Sarah had said made the baron's son laugh, and Miles didn't like the resulting twist to his gut.

"You're taken with the Widow Worthington," Lady Frances observed.

He'd forgotten she was standing there and wished she hadn't been so keen-eyed. Or maybe he was simply being obvious, his tongue hanging out and his gaze fixed upon the blonde vision in cranberry and cream. Plus, Frances was jealous of everyone, as he recalled.

"Nonsense," he said, as casually as possible. "I thought I saw an old chum. In any case, I'm glad you're not bothered by my being here. I bid you good afternoon." And he strolled in the opposite direction to Sarah, to chat with the married couples. A viscount was always welcome.

A few hours later, when he entered the large dining room, he couldn't help feeling disappointed in Sarah, standing next to the aged Lord Devonstone. Evidently, she had made her choice.

Chapter 2

Sarah was instantly aware when Denbigh entered the dining room. A dinner gong had rung about ten minutes earlier, and ready and waiting in her room, she'd hurried to be among the first in order to arrange, if at all possible, to sit next to Lord Devonstone.

Alas, she'd located her nameplate beside the place setting of one of the younger single men. That wouldn't do at all. As surreptitiously as possible, on the pretense of leaning down to examine a centerpiece of holly and rosemary, she palmed her place card. Now, she had only to circle the table, which she did, so swiftly, she nearly knocked over a few other guests. She had to find Devonstone's seat before his dinner partner took hers.

"Rats!" she muttered, when she found Lord Devonstone's name to the left of Lady Macroun's at the head of the table. *Had their hostess requested the older widower be placed there?*

Sarah could either take his card and move him back down to her own intended seat and switch it out for the young lord who was there, or she could switch hers for the woman on Lord Devonstone's left and hope the viscountess didn't notice Sarah's elevation in stature at her dining table.

In a second, she had exchanged her card for ... Lady Frances Thornton. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Sarah couldn't quite bring her face to mind.

Normally, after this first informal Christmas eve entrance, they would arrive at the dining room table in twos from one of the drawing rooms. And thus, this had been the only night she could use the ploy of rearranging the seating to return the lord's ring. Hurriedly, as others were entering, she took Lady Frances's card back to her own original place and set it there. Then, returning to her new seat, she waited by her chair, hoping the aged widower was fit enough to draw it out for her.

Glancing to her left to check the nameplate, Sarah nearly spit out her teeth. *What the Devil!* Lord Miles Denbigh would be able to torment her all evening by sitting on her other side. Cursing her poor luck, she would have sent his place card down two seats, as well, if she'd had another few moments.

Too late, she saw Lord Devonstone enter, looking outdated but dapper in a last-century, pink frock coat with silver brocade and matching waistcoat. She blinked at the pockets, nicely placed by his sides. All she had to do was lift the heavily decorated flap.

Rolling her eyes at her own audacity, she hoped she would be brave and slick enough to complete her first task while Denbigh was so close.

With the bare skin of her neck prickling, she knew he'd entered the room and was looking at her. Giving him the cut modest, she kept her gaze fixed on Lord Devonstone's seat beside hers. However, out of the corner of her eye, she watched Denbigh wander around the table with the other guests, all making a game of finding their seats.

Both Lord Devonstone and Lord Denbigh reached her at about the same time.

"Good evening, Lady Worthington," Lord Devonstone said, bowing slightly, so the scent of his hair wafted toward her, and not a single one of his oiled curls dared to misplace itself.

"Good evening, my lord. It appears we can continue our earlier conversation."

"Of course," the gentleman agreed, "if you will only remind me of what we were speaking."

She thought she heard Denbigh cough behind her and whirled about to face him. However, he was the picture of innocence, in his own modern, dark-gray, woolen dress coat. Unlike Lord Devonstone, Denbigh wore nothing that could be considered the least garish. Even his buttons were cloth covered. She couldn't help noticing how fine and trim he looked, and how his pockets were stylishly placed in the fabric gathered over his muscular rump. Not that she could discern his rear end under the long tail of his coat. Nevertheless, Sarah recalled the firm feel of it under her fingers as she clutched at him when they made the two-backed beast.

Her mouth went dry and she turned away, staring at Lord Devonstone, even clearing her throat until the elder gentleman looked past her.

"Denbigh, isn't it? You can do the honors for this filly. I'm too old for the gallantry of drawing out chairs or pushing them back in once full of female flesh."

Denbigh definitely was biting back a snicker. It didn't matter if he thought her thwarted in an attempt to gain herself another old husband. In that regard, he was incorrect, and she wouldn't need to spend another

moment bothering the gentleman after dinner, if all went well.

As soon as their hostess was seated by a footman, Denbigh drew out Sarah's chair. All around the table, women were being assisted into their seats. Glancing across to where she would have been seated, Sarah had a shock, making her sit rather heavily as if the viscount had hit her in the back of her knees before pushing her in.

"Thank you," she said, having realized with a start exactly who Lady Frances was—Denbigh's old flame. She'd seen them at any number of events when she was beginning to make her rounds of the Season's events after coming out of mourning. And with another jolt, she understood Lady Macroun had put the woman next to him on purpose, perhaps in order to reawaken their relationship. And in that case, their hostess was certain to notice Sarah was in the wrong chair. Moreover, she couldn't help wondering if Denbigh had wanted to sit next to the Earl of Thornton's pretty daughter, and perhaps had even requested it.

A little snake of jealousy suddenly coiled upon her lap and stole her appetite. However, she, along with everyone at the table, turned their attention to their hostess, who was now tapping her wine glass with her fork. Sarah reminded herself, she was there to aid Julia, not to think about Miles Denbigh. But it was so hard with him at her left elbow, smelling heavenly from his Floris toilet water she remembered only too well—bergamot and cedar, amber and bay.

Turning her head slightly, angling herself toward him, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She, herself, favored Stephanotis from the same Jermyn Street perfume seller. Strangely her scent of orange blossoms, spicy carnations, and jasmine blended beautifully with his, and she could recall even then the blissful aroma arising from their heated skin when they were in the throes of passion.

Biting her lip, Sarah reminded herself she had to concentrate.

Their hostess began to speak, "As you may have noticed between our early afternoon musical entertainment and now, the greenery has been brought in throughout the house."

The diners took another admiring look around the room, now decorated in every nook and cranny. Across the table, on the mantle, and hanging from the two chandeliers were bay, holly, laurel, and, of course, mistletoe.

"I trust my guests will act with all due decorum when happening upon the mistletoe boughs in the front hall and in the drawing rooms. But I shall

conduct a daily check of the berries in any case.”

Their hostess laughed at her own words, and so the guests laughed, too, realizing the decorum due at this festive time was practically none at all. Thus, with each stolen kiss, a berry would be plucked.

Glancing at the interested guests, Sarah wondered if there would be any berries left by the morning.

“And the Yule candle shall hopefully have light enough for the entire night,” the viscountess continued. They all took in the massive candle at the midpoint of the table, as it was tradition to dine by it for Christmas eve and let it burn all night.

Then her ladyship’s gaze began to move down one side of the table, taking in each face, passing over Sarah before quickly returning to her. The viscountess frowned slightly, and Sarah knew Lady Macroun thought an error had been made. Some hapless footman would pay for her being in the wrong place.

At last, their hostess looked toward the far end of the table where her latest paramour was positioned. Lord Fenway, who’d lasted six months and, thus, was to be respected, lifted his wine glass to his lady.

“You have made a splendid Christmas and Twelvetide for us all!” he declared.

“Hear, hear!” “Cheers!” exclaimed the guests.

“After dinner, some games are in order,” Lady Macroun informed them.

Inwardly, Sarah groaned, although Blind Man’s Bluff or Steal the Loaf would give her more opportunities to slip the ring into the earl’s pocket if she hadn’t managed to do so before then.

“I know many of you had long journeys,” their hostess added, “so we won’t stay up too late, although we shall arise early for Christmas breakfast. I urge you all to write down your heart’s desire and toss it onto the large log in the second-floor drawing room before you retire tonight. It shall be lit promptly at noon tomorrow, and I hope it will burn through the entire twelve days. If we are fortunate,” she added, again frowning at Sarah as if her being in the wrong seat indicated already a lack of good fortune.

Or was her imagination simply running wild?

Along with the viscountess, and her dining companions, Sarah lifted her spoon and started on the chestnut soup. By the roasted game course, Sarah thought her self-appointed task to be all but impossible. Wishing she could write her heart’s desire and set it on fire right then and make it come true,

instead, she feared she would have to delay the ring's return until Lord Devonstone was wearing pockets without those blasted flaps.

She even considered asking to borrow his handkerchief and then returning it to him with the jewelry wrapped inside it, but that was too obvious and a little revolting. He would hardly welcome its return, and when he discovered the ring, he would immediately know too much.

Denbigh had kept up a disconcerting scrutiny of her during the meal, broken only when he was forced to engage in discourse with the married woman to his left while Sarah chatted with Lord Devonstone to her right.

Upon a few occasions, Denbigh had made hushed remarks to her out of the side of his mouth about the frightful height of the woman's hair across the table from them or the way one of the gentlemen was stuffing food into his mouth so quickly crumbs were flying across the tablecloth, like a cache of lead balls from a blunderbuss.

However, his comments were not truly mean-spirited, but seemed designed to amuse her, which she thought endearing. In fact, she couldn't help but feel in good spirits, surrounded as she was by happy people, a man whom she liked immensely by her side, and another year of good health drawing to a close.

Then Denbigh ruined it by asking, "So, how fares your little plan?"



* * *

Miles wondered at the stillness of the woman beside him. She actually went pale at his question, indicating she was truly up to something, and he feared he knew what it was. If she was intent on the earl, she was selling her future for a luxurious new townhouse in Mayfair, grander than old Worthington's home. But perhaps it was something else, something far more nefarious.

A part of him didn't care about her shadowy intentions. Sarah's presence at Forde Hall had actually brought him a little joy already, and there were many more days ahead of them. Nevertheless, he didn't like how guilty she appeared at his blunt question, so he asked another.

"Are you well?"

He watched her swallow before she turned to him. "I am quite well, my lord, and I don't know to what little plan you could possibly be referring.

Miles decided to speak plainly. "To make yourself the Countess of Devonstone."

He was relieved when her visage relaxed noticeably. She even reached for her wine, as she smiled at him. "Oh, that plan."

And then he knew something else was afoot.

"Why don't you tell me all of your Christmastide plans at once," he suggested, "so I don't have to suss each one out individually."

She laughed, a delicious sound that reached inside of him and grabbed hold with a clutch of desire. The sparkle in her eyes and the pretty way her lips bowed enchanted him as on previous occasions. He nearly sighed like a moonstruck lad of fourteen. Instead, Miles shook his head and reached for his own glass. It was a good night to imbibe.

"The first of the pastillage will be finished for tomorrow's dinner," Lady Macroun said. "Something quite spectacular, I assure you."

Miles didn't know how spectacular sugar carvings could be, but he was game to find out.

"Meanwhile, tonight's pudding course," their hostess continued, "will be marchpane cakes and gingerbread with fresh cream. I hope you will enjoy some of each. Naturally, there will be butter biscuits in the parlor with mulled wine during the games."

Naturally, Miles thought. *What better way to cause guests to make fools of themselves?*

On the other hand, most were there for jollification, eager to have a giddy, country Christmastide and forget about any cares they might have in the city. While there was a captain or two at the table, there were no companies of soldiers in scarlet uniforms as there were in the city, always reminding one of the long war. Napoleon was in exile, Wellington was a hero, and a portion of London, along the Pall Mall, had been lit by the new gas lamps—not very effective and apt to explode, but better than what they made do with before.

That particular Twelvetide, bringing them into 1815, was certainly better than the previous couple of years' conclusions, with their king going mad, Glasgow weavers rioting, Prime Minister Perceval being assassinated in the House of Commons. Truly, 1814 had represented a turning point, not only with the war with France, but also with the Prince Regent settling into his

role.

And Miles, for one, was looking to the future with hope. Shouldn't he be ready to settle down with a wife and have a family? Someone had to carry on the Denbigh name, after all.

Again, he glanced at Lady Worthington. She was the only female he even considered remotely up to the task of being his mate. Yet she was probably entirely unsuited, not to mention uninterested, in settling down, not while she still had enough dew on her petals to capture another fortune and bury a couple more husbands. He looked past her to the unwitting Earl of Devonstone.

On the other hand, Miles had wealth and a title of his own. Frowning, he wondered why she hadn't attempted to trap him after either of their intimate encounters. Did she really value the freedom of a widow's life over any other?

That seemed a hollow existence, enjoying a man's name, money, and house without enjoying the rest of him. And she certainly could enjoy herself with a man. He had first-hand experience.

Musing over his gingerbread, he missed what caused Sarah to knock over her wine glass, and in his direction, too. Pandemonium broke out. A footman dashed forward with a rag to sop up the wine, standing right in between them so Miles couldn't see what was happening on the other side. Another footman stepped forward with the carafe of wine, but Lady Macroun could be heard wondering aloud whether perhaps Lady Worthington didn't need any more.

"We are nearly ready to leave the table," their hostess pointed out.

Moreover, Sarah was leaning away from both footmen toward Lord Devonstone, who exclaimed, "My word!"

"Excuse me," Sarah offered to the older gentleman, and no wonder. From what Miles could see, peering under the second footman's arm, she was practically in the old earl's lap.

"I'll have no more wine, at present, thank you," Sarah agreed.

"Carry on, everyone," Lady Macroun commanded, and the noise at the table resumed, a good hostess trick for making a guest feel comfortable after a severe bout of clumsiness.

And then, suddenly, everything was back to normal. The footmen vanished, the table had been repaired nearly to perfection, and Sarah was sitting straight in her chair, taking the last bite of marchpane onto her fork.

Turning to Miles, she smiled, and for the first time all evening, she

looked entirely relaxed and happy.
Something was definitely afoot.

Chapter 3

*Here he comes with flaming bowl,
Don't he mean to take his toll,
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

Once they were in the drawing room some of the more jubilant guests began to sing, prompted by the viscountess herself, in anticipation of playing at Snap Dragon. Servants put out almost all the lamps, leaving the guests in a dim room, assembled around not one but three different wide shallow bowls of heated brandy.

Knowing these were to be set on fire, Miles couldn't help but think of the waste of good liquor. At the same time, servants stepped forward, and scooped raisins into each of the bowls spread about the room to give the many players a place to partake of the game.

Lady Frances approached him. "I missed you at dinner," she said.

"I beg your pardon." He was scarcely listening, as in the darkness, he'd momentarily lost sight of Sarah.

"I thought we might be seated nearer," the earl's daughter continued.

"Nearer to what?" he asked, having already lost her meaning.

"Why, each other," she clarified. "In fact, I was assured of it. No matter, I had a pleasant conversation with a young lord who owns diamond mines."

"How wonderful for you." He searched the three groups again, and then spotted Sarah in the middle one.

*Take care you don't take too much,
Be not greedy in your clutch,
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

"Snap Dragon!" Lady Frances said with derision, posing with her arms crossed, chin in the air. "So childish and tedious. Don't you agree? We could slip away for a stroll while the rest are trying to grab at raisins."

He fully intended to enjoy the moment but not with her.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Miles said.

When Lady Frances pursed her lips, he added, “I intend to get close enough to play and to win. If parlor games are not to your liking, there’s a library nearby, or you could simply stand over by the wall.”

And he walked away toward the center bowl, just as a footman lit the brandy. It flamed into life, as did the bowls on either side, casting all those gathered in a bluish glow. Miles had to admit, in the darkened parlor, with only a few candles on the edges of the room, the burning bowls were impressive, and the smell was delicious, too.

“Do you intend to try?” he asked Sarah as he took the spot beside her.

She glanced at him, merriment sparkling along with the reflection of flames in her blue eyes, turning them into a shimmering sea in which he longed to swim.

“You first,” she said, her voice breathy with excitement. He remembered that honeyed tone all too well from when she writhed under him, and it made his blood flow thickly.

*With his blue and lapping tongue,
Many of you will be stung,
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

Catching her enthusiasm, he nodded, reached forward while a few of the other less-timid gentlemen did the same. Swiftly, Miles snatched two raisins from the swirling, burning brew, holding them up briefly for Sarah to witness his triumph, before presenting them to her on his open palm.

She laughed and plucked one raisin, popping it between her lips.

“Tasty!” she declared. “Go on, try it.”

He did, although now he longed to kiss the brandy off her lips and taste it on her tongue.

“Let *me* try to get two more,” she said.

“Careful,” he warned, as he heard more than one voice exclaim in pain.

*For he snaps at all that comes,
Snatching at his feast of plums,
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

Humming along, Sarah reached toward the bowl. Unfortunately, she bumped hands with a man beside her, and her fingers disappeared for a moment into the flames and hot brandy before she drew it quickly back.

“Ouch,” she muttered.

She was rather stoic, in Miles’s view, since he knew it must smart like a host of bee stings.

Pulling her away from the group, he steered her toward the side of the room and the nearest candle.

“I am fine, my lord,” she protested, while shaking her hand slightly.

“You’re not very good at this game,” he teased.

“No, I never was. My sister always had quicker fingers,” she confessed. “She still does.”

Ignoring her prattle, he held her hand up toward the light, leaning close. A pungent aroma filled his nose—the distinct smell of Macassar oil.

The scent distracted him as he examined her hand. Her thumb and the ends of two fingers were definitely red, but there were no blisters. Still, he drew her hand close to him again.

There was no doubt—it was the Earl of Devonstone’s hair oil he could smell. *What the Devil!*

The old man had a habit of rubbing his own hands on his head before placing them in his pockets. He’d done it all afternoon. Had Sarah also rubbed the old man’s curls?

His stomach churned to think of it, but he could come up with no likely reason for the earl’s hair oil to be on her hand.

*But Old Christmas makes him come,
Though he looks so fee! fa! fum!
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

“I tell you, Lord Denbigh, my hand was stung as it should have been due to my awful clumsiness—the second time I have been so *maladroit* tonight—but now, it’s fine. Still, I wouldn’t mind a biscuit and some of the promised mulled wine. How about you?”

He wasn’t pleased by her hand smelling mysteriously like Devonstone’s Macassar oil. Nor did he approve of how she’d practically sat on the old man’s lap. And he hated how she’d put her fingers in flaming brandy, but he could do nothing about any of that. He could, however, attend to the lady’s

wishes.

“Yes, both sound good to me, too,” he agreed.

*Don't 'ee fear him but be bold.
Out he goes his flames are cold,
Snip! Snap! Dragon!*

As the brandy flames died out and the lamps were lit once again, the room went from a somewhat eerie blue-black to the familiar warmly orange glow. Laughing, some guests were still dipping their fingers into the bowl for the sodden raisins. Miles led Sarah to the sideboard, laden with biscuits, cherry-almond shortbread, and bowls of mulled wine. He ladled her a cup, and then one for himself.

“Why are you being so attentive?” she asked, although her tone was not unfriendly.

“Why wouldn't I be? It's Christmas eve.”

“It was Christmas eve when you found me on the road today, but you weren't so pleased then.”

He eyed her over his cup of wine, breathing in the spices.

“I suppose I was simply caught unawares, and now I've warmed to the idea of your presence.”

His words made her smile. “And here, I thought you were plastered close to me because you didn't trust me.”

He grinned. “That, too.” And Sarah rolled her lovely eyes.

Lady Macroun approached. “So sorry about the seating at dinner,” she said, confounding him. *What was she on about?* he wondered. “I must cry *peccavi*,” their hostess added.

The way Sarah kept her face utterly blank was a clear indication she knew something. If anyone was to *cry the blame*, it was probably her.

The viscountess eyed them both. “However, it appears you two have become fast friends, so it was for the best, I suppose. The next game is Steal the Loaf.” And her ladyship lifted her cup of mulled wine, nodded, and moved on.

“Would you like to tell me something?” he asked.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Sarah assured him, her blue eyes staring directly into his.

“Don't worry,” he said. “I have no doubt you'll do better at the next

game. Sneaking up on someone while their back is turned and stealing the treasure, it seems made for you like a perfectly tailored suit.”

With a dismissing tilt of her chin, she looked past him. “I think I shall go chat with a few of the other guests.” And with that, she walked away.



* * *

Sarah took the chance to escape from Denbigh’s watchful gaze. She had absolutely no intention of doing well at Steal the Loaf, and was only glad Julia wasn’t there to win the prize.

However, when the game began, she played along. Who could resist trying to creep up on someone and then freezing when they turned? It was good fun. Lady Macroun’s paramour was the first to be “it,” and he held a candied shortbread as his treasure. Within moments, Lord Devonstone was caught creeping and became the next one to be “it.”

“A treasure,” he exclaimed, standing at one end of the room, gazing at the party-goers. “Let me think on that. What do I have?”

As he reached into his pockets, Sarah felt her heart briefly stop then begin to patter like a galloping horse. *Dear God!* Sure enough, after fumbling around in his pockets for a moment, the elderly gentleman drew out the ring she’d managed to slip in at dinner.

At the time, nearly desperate to succeed, inspiration had suddenly struck, making her knock over her wine glass as a diversion. Then, snatching up her napkin, which she’d clutched to her chest, she’d been able to recover the ring from her décolletage. While leaning toward Lord Devonstone and away from the attentive footman—not to mention Denbigh—she had wriggled against the earl, so he’d not noticed her hand sliding into his pocket, depositing the gold and amethyst jewel. And now...

“Gad-so!” The earl now held it up to a small gasp from the onlookers, even though they had no idea why it was confounding him. He wandered closer to the oil lamp. “Can it be? It is! Why, how astounding! It was in my pocket all along.”

Sarah’s heart began to slow to a normal beat. That was exactly what she’d

hoped he would believe.

“Is that your treasure?” someone called out.

“No, most definitely not. I mean, yes, it most certainly is, but I’m not willing to give it up as ‘the loaf.’ No matter, I shall find something else for you to steal.”

He sounded so happy, Sarah couldn’t help smiling. When she turned away, she noticed Denbigh staring at her, frowning again. Trying to look less pleased, she shrugged as if as bewildered as anyone, which only made him narrow his eyes, cocking his head, trying to figure out what she was about.

Another guest rushed forward and pressed what turned out to be a chess piece into the earl’s hand, and the game of Steal the Loaf began anew.

Relief stole over Sarah when, in another hour, they were allowed to retire. It was probably the earliest evening they would be in their beds for the entire Twelvetide. With everyone sleeping soundly from the long day and the copious amount of mulled wine, she was determined to complete a second task that very night and have only two left for the remainder of the Yule gathering. She might actually get to enjoy herself.

Yawning broadly, for she, too, had traveled and spent a full day of merriment, she let Dorie remove her blue silk gown with all its trappings, assist her into her nightshirt, and take down her hair before dismissing her maid to her own room. Still, she had to wait at least an hour, maybe two, to be assured everyone was asleep.

Remaining on top of the counterpane and laying her head upon the pillow, almost instantly, Sarah knew it was a mistake to have done so. Just as quickly, she fell asleep, only to awake with a start, unsure of the time, but relieved it was still dark outside. By the size of her candles, she would guess nearly three hours had passed, and she’d best hurry.

Deciding to roam the house in a state of extreme undress, Sarah slipped on her fine flannel dressing gown of the softest wool and braided her hair into one plait. Then donning her slippers, she went to her trunk and lifted the lid of a small, hidden compartment to retrieve the brooch belonging to Lady Burtram, who was at Forde Hall with her husband. Studded with sapphires, it was a gorgeous piece, which perfectly matched both Sarah and Julia’s eyes, although that wasn’t the reason her sister had taken it.

Sighing, she opened her door in the unmarried women’s section of the wing. Luckily, married couples were staying there, too, with only the single gentlemen being in another wing on the other side of the second-floor

landing. For a moment she wondered why there wasn't an ace of spades section for widows, as surely, most were more promiscuous and active than the never-married single women with whom she'd been situated. She supposed such a situation would have been practically an invitation for widowed women to invite the single men back to their rooms.

After glancing in both directions, she began a silent journey along the wide and chilly hallway. This return would engender more courage and cunning than the last one, as she intended to go into Lord and Lady's Burtram's private rooms. She knew they'd been given a larger suite of rooms as the lady's husband often had dizzy spells and needed to sit quietly away from the public at various times during the day.

Sarah had followed them after the last round of parlor games and noted their two doors. Now, with her heart pounding, she hovered around the one leading to the small, private sitting room. Her fingers on the handle, she was about to go in when the distinct sound of footsteps caused her to startle. She was too far away from her own room to return to it, and for a moment, with the large staircase nearby, the footsteps were echoing strangely so she couldn't tell from what direction they came.

Why would anyone, even a servant, still be up?

There were no candles or lamps burning, only the moonlight coming in from the front hall, and shining on the large longcase clock against one wall. The footsteps were either coming from behind her or from the gentlemen's quarters. In either case, at any moment, she would be discovered.

Without thinking, she dashed down the staircase, her dress and gown flapping about her legs. However, at the foot of the stairs, she heard voices coming from the open drawing room—a man and a woman—and they were coming closer. *Blast it all! Didn't anyone sleep in this house?*

Then she recalled their hostess's mention of writing down one's wish for the Christmas day fire. Surely, these guests had decided to join in the silliness, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. She couldn't blame them. It was a custom she hadn't passed up either, although she'd felt a little foolish when, hours earlier, she'd written a few words on a scrap of paper. And now she could simply curse the whole notion of Christmas wishes, for it might get her caught in a suspicious situation.

Looking around wildly, there was nowhere to which she could vanish. Except...

At her elbow was the massive longcase. Yanking its cabinet door open,

she slipped inside. It thumped closed behind her on a well-oiled hinge with only the tail of her dressing gown getting caught, making the door fit snugly. Too snugly.

She gave it a push, but the door was stuck fast. Immediately, she hated her hiding place, as it was stuffy, nearly airless, and as dark as pitch.

Worse than that, the thick wood cabinet muffled any sounds from the outside. She'd even stopped the clock with her body crouched against the massive pendulum. Pressing her ear to the longcase door, she tried to hear if the late-night wish-makers had passed, but could detect nothing.

Sighing, she decided to count to one hundred and then exit the clock and attempt the jewelry return again.

Chapter 4

“We have two mysteries, Lord Denbigh,” the butler told Miles at half past nine in the morning. While frightfully early for Town, it seemed late for Christmas morning in the country, particularly when they’d gone to bed early—all except for himself, who’d roamed at all hours to make sure no one was stealing anything.

After a few hours slumber, he’d paced the front hall and even taken a walk outside to sort out his thoughts, wondering at the lack of any other guests enjoying the frosty air. He’d half hoped to run into Sarah.

Upon reentering, Miles encountered Lady Macroun’s *pantler*, as his father always called their butler, coming from the direction of the dining room, and making his odd statement.

“Two mysteries, is that so? Do tell.”

The butler sniffed, his expression woeful. “The mysterious disappearance of Lady Sarah, and the loss of Christmas morning.”

While the first immediately concerned Miles, the second had him utterly confounded.

“What on earth do you mean?” The butler was usually a sensible fellow, especially one who ran a large country manor.

“Lady Sarah’s maid has announced her bed not slept in and her mistress missing.”

“Yes, I figured as much. I meant what do *you* mean about the loss of Christmas. Is today not the twenty-fifth of December?”

“Yes, sir. However, the longcase clock did not chime the hour, so I failed to rouse Lady Macroun and her guests, including you, for her ladyship’s traditional early Christmas breakfast. She is now most distressed.”

“Surely there are other clocks in the house.”

“Yes, sir. However, her ladyship only abides by the longcase clock, which was her father’s. Its chimes have been awakening her since she was a child. To avoid any disruption, I use the crank to wind it myself every seven days, thirteen turns with a number 10 crank. There is a number 11 key, which also works, but it is rather tedious.”

As was this dreadful conversation, Miles thought “Perhaps you forgot to

wind the clock.”

“Heaven forbid!” The butler’s eyes bulged and his face turned instantly ruddy. “To suggest such a thing! I wound the clock as usual, my lord, however and nevertheless, it did not chime on this most important of all days. When it did not sound, Lady Macroun would not believe it was morning, Christmas or otherwise. Until...,” he trailed off.

“Yes? Out with it, man,” Miles urged although he had begun to lose interest as it was time to address the first mystery. *Where had Sarah got to?*

“Until her ladyship desperately needed her commode and realized something was amiss.”

Shaking his head at the vulgar information, Miles blinked at the man. “Cannot breakfast be served anyway?”

“Yes, sir. There is food recently laid out in the dining room, and the guests have begun to gather. Still, her ladyship says Christmas morning as she likes it has been stolen from her this year.”

Instantly, Miles knew the culprit. If anyone had stolen anything, it was Sarah. Leaving the butler to his duties, poorly performed apparently, he glanced over to the aforementioned clock on the landing. As the man had stated, there was no movement.

“I am about to address the issue of the longcase,” the butler said. “I must go retrieve the crank from the pantry.”

Ignoring him, Miles had already taken a few steps closer, eyeing the enormous longcase with its massive, polished body complete with ivory inlay, looking perfectly normal except it was silent. No ticking, no tocking, and definitely no chiming.

Giving it a brief inspection, the hair on the back of his neck prickled when he noticed a little tail of soft cream-colored fabric sticking out near the hinge of the clock’s cabinet door. Tugging it open, which took a deal of force as the door had jammed, he discovered the answer to both mysteries.

Sarah in a state of undress! Of course, she would have to be as she wouldn’t have squeezed in the cabinet if she was wearing any sort of decent gown. As it was, she barely fit in the longcase, which was hot and stuffy. *Was she sleeping?*

“Sarah,” he said tentatively, touching her shoulder. Her head lolled to the side.

Sweet Lord! She had passed out in the stuffy compartment, stopping both the pendulum and the weights from moving.

Unmindful of who might come upon them, he dragged her out of the longcase, causing her to stir.

“What? Where?” she began, her eyes briefly opening then drifting shut once more, but her hands were clutching at him as she tried to regain her footing.

Sliding a hand behind her waist, he swept his other arm under her legs, hefting her against his chest and cradling her there.

“Breathe deeply,” Miles encouraged, knowing some smelling salts would help get her to take large, restorative breaths. He would take her directly to her room and her whey-faced maid.

As he staggered toward the staircase, glancing up at its great height with dread, he wondered why carrying a woman to bed was an easy, exciting thing when she was awake and a daunting task when she was a dead weight. Halfway up the stairs, he staggered and nearly went to his knees before recovering.

Blazes! Had she been into the Christmas pudding and cakes already?

With the early morning feast now underway, guests were in the dining room, and he met no one while making his way along the hall to her bedroom. At the same time, her eyes fluttered open again, and deep-blue sapphires blinked up at him.

“Put me down,” she ordered.

“I will, on your bed.”

He’d arrived at her door and struggled to get his fingers on the handle while holding her. With all the noise he was making, banging it with her shoulder and his foot, the door popped open, and for the second time, he nearly fell to his knees.

Her maid exclaimed, “Oh, my lady!”

“Set me down, Denbigh,” Sarah insisted, but he was determined to see this through.

Pushing past the portly maid who was blocking him and practically under his feet, he reached the bed and dropped Sarah unceremoniously upon the counterpane, where she bounced.

“My apologies,” he muttered. “That was rather rough.”

“Sometimes rough is fine,” her saucebox mouth retorted, sending memories of looking down into her flushed face racing through him. Sarah looked the way she had in his townhouse, directly after he’d feasted on every part of her. They’d made good sport together, that was certain.

Licking his dry lips, he couldn't help noticing how her silken dressing gown molded against the curves of her body, with the nightshirt beneath doing little to obscure his view. He recalled every inch of what was under the thin fabric—dusky nipples, which peaked when he blew lightly upon them, and at the apex of her thighs, soft curls, which dampened when he touched her

Desperately, he wanted to kiss her, but her maid was at his elbow, and even loyal servants liked to gab at these house parties.

Addressing the maid, he said, "Your lady may need smelling salts."

"I don't," Sarah said. "I am quite recovered."

He straightened. "I don't suppose you wish to tell me why you were hiding in the longcase."

"I don't suppose I do," she agreed. Then she gasped, opened her hands, stared at her empty palms, and closed her eyes again.

He longed to know what she'd hoped to see, but he couldn't very well demand an answer.

"You are an excellent hider," he praised. "But then you've had a lot of practice, I suppose, slipping in and out of people's houses."

She didn't respond to his banter. Instead, she rose upon her elbows, which caused her cream-colored gown to gape open and her chemise to slip farther down her chest, exposing the top swell of her breasts.

"Say what you will Denbigh, but I was loyal to my husband until the moment he breathed his last."

"You mean the entire one week of your marriage?"

"Precisely," she said, unsmiling. "But it was two weeks."

"Then he was a lucky bastard. For I predict by week three, you would have cuckolded him."

Her eyes flicked toward her maid. "Don't be crass. My heart is as loyal as anyone's."

"I would trust my favorite hunting dog's loyalty over yours any day, and he scampers off and leaves me if he catches scent of a bone in the next county. In any case, I was referring to your thievery, not your fidelity when I mentioned your slipping in and out of homes. I suppose both would cause you to become adept at deception."

"My lady, let me get you changed into a morning gown," her maid said, sounding worried. "They're serving Christmas breakfast."

Miles straightened. "They would have served it on time if you hadn't

stopped the longcase from chiming. The butler swears you have stolen Christmas from her ladyship.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Sarah said, and then she sighed. “You have to get out of here, Denbigh, or my reputation will be shredded.”

“Agreed. I will leave you to your maid’s capable care if you tell me why you were in the clock.”

For a second, her lashes shuttered her brilliant gaze before she stared right into his eyes.

“It was the first place I thought to hide when I heard first footsteps and then voices.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. That was an answer, but it told him nothing.

“Why did you need a place to hide?” he shot back when he’d gathered his wits.

“It should be obvious by my state of undress. I am indecent, and I didn’t wish to be seen.”

“Why were you roaming the manor like that?” he shot back.

She hesitated so briefly, he almost missed it, then she answered, “I’d forgotten to write down my Christmas wish for the new year, and I was determined to do so before morning.” She swung her legs over the bed and sat up. “I am famished, aren’t you?”

Actually, he was more tired than hungry, not realizing how the little sleep he’d had combined with the sudden nervous energy of finding Sarah unconscious in the longcase, and then staggering through the manor with her would sap his strength, making him weary to the bone. He wished he could lay himself down beside her and take a nap.

Alas, there was a long day ahead of him, and ten more after that.

“Will you tell me what you’d been holding in your hand?”

She looked surprised but shook her head. “You are very observant. But the answer is no. Ladies are allowed to have their private thoughts and secret doings, are they not?”

He considered this. “Do you want to end up riding the three-legged mare?”

She paled and put her hand to her throat. Immediately, he felt churlish for having suggested she might end up on the gallows.

“Never mind,” he added. “I shouldn’t have said such a thing.” And he considered his relationship with the Prince of Wales, who was growing into a

capable regent for his father. “I wouldn’t let it happen in any case.” If it ever came to anything like that, he would go to Prinny and ask a favor.

Her gaze softened. “Really? Why?”

Because the thought of never seeing her look at him in such a fashion again was too much to bear.

He merely said, “It’s my turn not to answer. Men are allowed to have their private thoughts and secret doings, too, my lady.” He strode to the door. “I’ll escort you downstairs, dressed and, hopefully, not looking as if you spent hours inside Lady Macroun’s longcase.”



* * *

Sarah could almost believe Denbigh cared for her, thrilling and unexpected as that notion was. He’d been her savior, rescuing her from the ridiculous entrapment in a clock, and then carrying her to her room like a knight. While as yet a little woozy, she’d been aware enough to know how agreeable it had been to be held in his strong arms, to feel his warmth, to breathe in his familiar fragrance, so clean and sensual, and to lean against his broad chest for support.

She’d nearly put her arms up and around his neck. If it had been nighttime instead of morning, and if Dorie hadn’t been there, she would have. She might have invited him to her bed, too.

Moreover, she would dearly love the time to simply reflect upon such an outlandish idea as him caring for her, especially after his callous treatment following their previous night of intimacy. However, all she could think of was her latest predicament—she’d lost the blasted broach. She could only pray it was in the longcase, perhaps having fallen out of her hand when she’d passed out.

When Dorie had dressed her hurriedly, Sarah thanked her, wished her a merry Christmas, and headed downstairs. All the other guests were in the dining room, but she ran directly to the longcase, which was now making its comfortingly familiar tick-tock sound. Glancing behind her, she opened the cabinet door. It looked smaller in the daylight, and she scanned the bottom

panel, where her feet had been crunched for hours.

Empty!

“An odd fascination,” came a voice behind her, making her jump.

Denbigh! The Devil take the man!

She whirled around. “Are you following me?”

“Naturally,” he confessed. “This mystery of your obsession with the inside of Lady Macroun’s longcase is too great to relinquish.”

“There is no mystery,” she insisted, taking in his handsome appearance in a gray morning suit, his brown hair combed, and his face clean-shaven. “I told you, I didn’t want to be seen in my dressing gown.”

“You are fully dressed now. Thus, why are you here, peering in there?” He pointed at the open cabinet of the clock.

She closed it swiftly. “I was simply looking at it in the morning light, trying to discover how I could possibly have fit inside. That’s the real mystery.”

With that, she nodded her head and skirted past him to the dining room. Later, when Denbigh wasn’t at her shoulder, she would have to ask Lady Macroun’s butler, who would have to ask his staff, for undoubtedly, someone had seen—and taken—the broach. Sarah could only hope it was safely below stairs, and a maid was awaiting the right moment to mention having found it.

Entering the dining room, Sarah looked for a friendly face amongst those already seated. Finding none, she went directly to the sideboard, which was nearly sagging with goodies to break their fast. Even so, since there would be a massive Christmas feast after church, this was considered a small meal. With Lady Macroun’s hospitality, Sarah feared she would gain a stone at least by the time she returned to London. Or she would if she had an appetite. Her earlier happiness at thinking Denbigh cared for her was greatly diminished by the loss of the broach.

If she’d only waited, that morning would have been the perfect opportunity to return it. Once she knew everyone was already downstairs, it would have been a simple matter of stopping in Lord and Lady Burtram’s suite of rooms. If she’d come across a maid, she would have claimed she’d become confused and entered through the wrong door. As it was, the other guests’ personal servants were all below stairs enjoying their own Christmas cheer with the staff of Forde Hall.

Starting at one end of the sideboard, Sarah helped herself to a roll, glancing to the table to make sure butter, preserves, and marmalade were

present. Then she added some coddled eggs, and a slice of ham. Whether she could eat it all was in question, but she wouldn't insult Lady Macroun by not giving it a try.

By the time she reached the end of the buffet and glanced around for a footman to pour her chocolate, Denbigh had already taken a seat and was being poured coffee. When his gaze fell upon her, she offered him a smile. After all, he'd been gallant before he'd grown annoying again. Nevertheless, she chose a seat on the opposite side of the table. There was no need to start rumors since they'd sat next to each other the night before and spent the evening at each other's elbows playing parlor games.

As soon as she sat, a footman offered her a choice of beverage, and she finally had her cup of chocolate in hand. Taking a sip, she sighed. It was so delicious and fortifying. She hardly drank tea or coffee when chocolate was available. Sometimes, truly, it was gritty or greasy, but Lady Macroun, as expected, had superior cocoa.

A gentleman stood at her elbow, and she glanced up. One of the unmarried men if she recalled rightly, with a particularly bow-shaped mouth and smart-looking moustache.

"May I?" he asked.

"Please do," she said.

"I am Mr. Asher," he said without pretention. "I'm sorry we weren't properly introduced yesterday. My father is Baron Asher, and I'm his eldest, somewhat wayward son."

"Oh, dear," she said, smiling slightly at his introduction and sheepish expression. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Asher. I am Lady Worthington, widow of the late Lord Worthington."

"I didn't know him, but my condolences on your being widowed so young."

"Thank you." It was actually a relief he hadn't known her husband and, thus, wasn't in a position to cast any judgment upon her.

"Quite a spread for breakfast," he said, nodding to the footman who offered coffee. "I vow, our hostess's servants are gems, to be sure. How did the man know I wanted coffee rather than chocolate, as you're having? He must have recalled from yesterday. Isn't that amazing, with so many of us?"

"Indeed," she agreed, glad to have an amiable fellow beside her for breakfast, even if it wasn't Denbigh, who was now looking at her with curiosity. *Did he think she would filch the man's cravat pin right from under*

his nose?

“Good servants are hard to find and train,” she said, although she truthfully knew little about it. Her husband had a full staff when she’d moved in, and she’d retained most of them after his death except his personal valet and a few footmen, as it seemed she had more than enough servants under foot. She nearly laughed at her own little pun.

“If you’re looking for any servants,” Mr. Asher continued, “sadly, I’ve had to let a few of mine go. Good folks down to the man and to the woman, but my accounts have dwindled, and it was either them or me.”

At first, shocked by this intimate disclosure, she spread far too much butter on her roll while attributing the vulgar words to youth and to his being comfortable in the fact they were strangers to one another. They might never meet again, and thus, he didn’t hide his innermost thoughts, unlike Denbigh.

“What a shame,” she offered.

He shrugged. “Mostly my own fault, trusting the wrong sort, but I’ll remedy the situation somehow.”

“Perhaps your father,” she began.

Mr. Asher laughed. “Oh, Lady Worthington. If you only knew how infinitesimally small the chance of my father lifting a finger to help me.” He sipped his coffee. “On the other hand, here I am at this wonderful house party, and who knows what opportunity lies just around the corner? No one, that’s who.”

“Very true,” Sarah murmured, turning her gaze toward Lord Miles Denbigh, rewarded when he, in turn, looked toward her at nearly the same time, making her catch her breath.

Chapter 5

“One never knows what opportunity may arise,” Sarah agreed, trying to tear her gaze away from the man whom she found irresistible.

After all, while she had been sitting in the kitchen of the Chislehurst parsonage one day a little over two years earlier, how could she have known her father was busy arranging her marriage to an earl right outside the door? In the same manner, she’d been at a party in Town a few months earlier when she and Denbigh had locked gazes for the first time over glasses of scandalously strong sloe gin.

Half an hour later, she’d had her skirts up and her back against an uncomfortable sofa in their hostess’s sitting room while Denbigh pleased her, giving her not only her first taste of passion but her first climax. The sheer excitement of their liaison had kept her floating for a week. Denbigh was all she’d ever wanted in a man. When she’d run into him the next time, she’d hadn’t hesitated before going back to his townhouse with the hood of her mantle drawn up over her head for discretion. Her cheeks warmed at the recollection of everything they’d done that night.

When would they be in the same place again, with bedrooms in abundance and opportunity aplenty? Probably never. Sarah’s heart sped up. She had accomplished only one task and bungled the second one. But it was Christmastide, and she was cleaning up after her sister, who was probably not giving any of this messiness a second thought.

In that instant, staring across the table at Denbigh, she made a decision—if the situation arose with the man who’d taught her about desire and pleasure, she would enjoy his lessons again while she could. And a happy Christmas to her!



* * *

Miles tamed his wicked thoughts while in church, a mere half a mile from Lady Macroun's manor, but something about the way Sarah had eyed him during breakfast had caused his pulse to race. In the quaint stone building, although they weren't sitting near one another, she was all he could think of while the Anglican vicar mumbled his way through the Christmas service. Even the short but excellent spectacle of carols from the local boys seated in the west gallery did not deter him from gazing at her and wondering if she, too, were thinking constantly about their exquisitely passionate encounters.

On the chilly walk home, Lady Frances was suddenly beside him, her maid walking close behind as chaperone. She prattled on about mummers plays and the woes of having been sent to Great Oakley while her father and mother were in Kent, but he lost the thread of it because he was focused on the swaying hips of the blonde-haired woman in green velvet who walked ahead of them on that crisp afternoon.

Back at Forde Hall, he didn't realize when he'd had the good luck to lose Lady Frances—he might have simply wandered away whilst she was still talking—but he found himself seeking and finding Sarah in the conservatory.

“Did you enjoy the service?”

She frowned slightly. “Compared to one of my father's, it was a little wan and uninspiring, if you'll forgive my speaking unkindly of a man of the church.”

“Forgiven,” he said. “I would like to hear one of your father's sermons.” Those words came out of his mouth before he thought about them, but he spoke the truth. The interesting daughters begat from the loins of Parson Sudbury would be reason enough to meet him.

“Perhaps it can be arranged some time,” she said. “I would be there this Christmas if other matters hadn't come up.”

“*Other* matters?” he asked, hoping she would explain herself.

She smiled, taking a glass of egg flip offered by a footman, who waited while Miles did the same before moving on.

“Lady Macroun's invitation for one thing,” she said. “I would have been foolish to turn it down. It's not every day someone like me from humble origins is invited to a Twelvetide party with such illustrious guests. I've met a decorated captain who fought against Napoleon, and Lord Saumner, who is in Parliament and assures me he's quite important, and the Evingdons, who've all but invited me to their home in Brighton next time the Prince Regent is there.”

He didn't believe her for an instant. After her mourning period, she'd taken London by storm, or at least by a spitting rain. She'd never let something like her lowly beginnings stop her from entering salons, drawing rooms, and ballrooms once those doors were open to her. Moreover, she'd dragged her sister along with her.

"Besides," she added, "I shall find my sister in London after the Epiphany, and then we'll visit with my father. He'll be less busy in the new year, in any case."

Now that, he believed. They sipped the delicious, foamy concoction before finding seats side-by-side for the piano recital. He counted them extremely fortunate Lady Macroun had an accomplished musical guest for the duration of the stay and hadn't inflicted some talentless niece or spinster daughter upon them. Out of politeness, they would have had to listen while she was trotted out each afternoon, and he'd endured such a dreadful experience at more than one party.

Leaning toward Sarah, he whispered, "Do you play the piano?"

"No," she confessed. "A little violin in fact, but not well enough so I would want to exhibit myself in public."

He realized he would very much like to hear her, no matter how skilled she was.

Seated in the back of the room, he thought it acceptable to continue a quiet conversation and leaned closer to whisper, "I recall you—"

However, at the same time, she turned and leaned close to say something to him. Briefly, their noses brushed and their lips nearly met. Wide eyed, they stared at one another their mouths inches apart, and her pulse visibly fluttering at the base of her throat. He longed to put his lips upon it and had to turn away so she wouldn't see how her presence had undone him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her slowly face forward, and then sip her drink. For the rest of the recital, they remained silent. At its completion, she said, "I believe we are to spend time in our rooms gathering our thoughts and resting, before changing for Christmas dinner and games."

"Indeed," he said, standing and offering her his hand. Something had changed between them. He took her reaction as an unspoken agreement they would renew their previous relations sometime over the Yuletide. He hoped he had understood correctly, even though he didn't think anything would happen on Christmas day. They weren't heathens, after all.

However, tomorrow, on the second day of Christmastide, the servants

would be given the day off, or most of them at any rate, with gifts of money and donations. Of course, all those maids, valets, and footmen brought to the manor would not be able to go home for the day and treat their own families, but they would spend most of the day being left to their own devices.

As would Lady Macroun's guests! It would be a grand day for calling upon Lady Worthington in her private bedchamber without fear of her maid spying on them.

First, there was the interminable rest of the evening to be endured. Sarah had been right. They'd been given some hours on Christmas for quiet time and reflection on this holy day. Some guests strolled the grounds until their fingers and noses turned blue, returning to drink hot mulled wine or tea. Some read books in the library. And some, as Sarah predicted, returned to their rooms.

Yet when he passed the conservatory, which they'd vacated an hour earlier, he found Sarah in it. Alone. He went in quietly. Her back was to him, as she rifled through a stack of papers.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Why are you lurking in the conservatory? What valuable object can you tuck up your skirt?"

He wished he hadn't said it, for when she turned around, slowly, not with haste or guilt, she looked annoyed.

"How dare you!" she said without much heat to her words. "I was only examining what carols our hostess had on hand. As it turns out, Lady Macroun has only a few, and I suppose the small church choir was all we are going to hear this year."

"You came to look for written music for carols?" he asked. "For the violin, no doubt," he said in jest, for to his knowledge, there wasn't any such thing.

She pursed her lips, and still managed to look downright peppery and so attractive, he wanted to draw her to him and ravish her.

"Apart from Lady Macroun's foamy egg flip, carols are my favorite part of the Yuletide festivities," she insisted.

"I would have vowed your favorite thing was the gifts generous people tend to give this time of year," Miles said, "some of which they carelessly leave lying around for you to scoop up with your nimble fingers."

At this, she rolled her eyes. "You are discourteous. I love carols. My father made us learn every one."

"Prove it," Miles said, feeling a bit like the Devil. "Sing me something."

“Do you play the pianoforte?” she asked, glancing at the recently used instrument.

“Sadly, no, and I don’t see a violin, so you shall have to sing unaccompanied, like those boys in church today.” He wondered if she would rise to the challenge.

To his amazement, Sarah circled the room and went to the piano after all. She pressed one ivory key and then another.

“Very well. Even without lyric sheets, I can recall nearly all of them.” Clapping her hands in front of her and closing her eyes, she began to sing Tate’s “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks,” which had been paired gloriously with music by Handel if only someone were there to play it.

Her voice was pure and pleasant, and it wound its way into his soul as he stood there, watching her, feeling almost as if he were intruding. Unmoving, staying silent, Miles listened to her sing the entire carol, unable to stop himself from clapping when she completed the last line, “Begin and never cease.”

“You have a lovely voice,” he said, and her cheeks went pink. He hadn’t known a woman to blush in many a day, and that in itself charmed him. Sarah was a gem! “Will you sing another?”

“Any requests?” she offered, appearing pleased by his praise.

“Christians Awake,” he said.

She made a face. “It’s rather long. We’ll be here until they serve the Christmas goose or whatever we’re having.”

He couldn’t help laughing. “In that case, I choose ‘Joy to the World.’”

Nodding, she closed her eyes and began the lively and happy hymn, reminding him of childhood and his parents love.

When she finished, he wanted to kiss her, which was now his constant state of being. But all he said was, “Thank you.”

She beamed. “You’re welcome. Now do you believe me?”

“You came in here looking for carols even though you know them all by heart. Of course, simply because it’s a tale as full of as many holes as a fisherman’s net, why would I not believe you?”

“There is no pleasing you,” she muttered, shaking her head and making her way past him.

Unthinkingly, he reached out and stayed her passage, with his hand upon her forearm.

“On the contrary, you know very well how to please me.”

Sarah turned slowly to look at him. Even more slowly, he gave in to the impulse to draw her closer, until his boots disappeared under the front of her gown and their bodies were pressed together.

“I have wanted to do this since I laid eyes upon you.”

She sighed. “As have I.”

Her admission brought his body to the peak of awareness. Knowing she desired him flooded his veins with heat.

Lowering his head, he claimed her lips, feeling her heart beating against his chest, undoubtedly as swift and hard as his own. Slanting his head, he fitted his mouth to hers and felt her open beneath him. Granted such access, Miles didn't hesitate to sweep his tongue into her mouth, a torturous mimicry of how he wanted to explore the rest of her.

He felt her hands come to rest upon his shoulders, as her hips tilted toward him. This was exactly like their first time, when by unspoken agreement, they met in Lady Dauschande's sitting room while the rest of the dinner guests were still at the table, both having left the dining room on different pretenses.

Her flashing blue eyes had called him hither, and when he'd kissed her, she'd moaned, exactly as she did now, making his loins throb. At the time, thinking her an experienced widow, he'd let his hands roam over her filmy evening dress, cupping her buttocks and pulling her core against the fall-front of his buckskin breeches, so she could feel his longing. He'd even been so bold as to push her neckline down and suckle her pert nipples, thinking she would stop him at any moment. Instead, her legs had collapsed, taking them both to Lady Dauschande's sofa, and then she'd let him draw up her gown. He'd never intended more than a kiss, but her fingers had laced behind his neck, holding him close, while she panted, eyes glazed over, and he'd wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman.

Moreover, he'd replayed their encounter in his brain a hundred times, how it felt to palm his member, fit it to her opening, already damp with desire, and thrust inside her.

She'd arched and cried out, and he'd covered her mouth with his own, until she'd muttered an apology, which made them both laugh given the circumstances. And then he had set a quick but thorough rhythm. As soon as she'd shuddered beneath him, he'd withdrawn and spent into his handkerchief. That had made them laugh again, albeit a little nervously.

Could he shut the door and make love to her again in Lady Macroun's

conservatory? It was past the pale, against all reason, madness! And yet...

Lifting his head, he looked around him, but the infernal room held only chairs, candelabras, the piano, and a small chest with sheets of music.

“Do not even think it,” she warned and moved out of the circle of his arms as if coming to her senses. Good thing one of them had.

Shrugging, he grinned. “Not even a divan, comfortable or otherwise.”

She lifted her chin slightly. “I would prefer something more comfortable and less public, in any case.”

“Agreed.” *Glad indeed she wasn’t turning him down entirely.*

“It is Christmas, after all,” she added, and he wasn’t sure of the significance but assumed it was not the right day for a tryst.

“The second day of Twelvetide, perhaps?” he mused.

“We’ll see,” she said. “For now, you’d best pluck a berry.” She pointed to the mistletoe over the door before gliding gracefully out of the room, as if they’d engaged in a civilized quadrille instead of kissing, groping, and planning an assignation.

“I shall see you at dinner,” he called after her, hoping he didn’t sound as desperate and besotted as he felt.

Chapter 6

Sarah could hardly wait for dinner, and all because she wanted to be in Denbigh's company again. As Dorie dressed her in red silk that only a married woman or widow could pull off without disaster, she realized her focus for the Twelvetide was definitely unraveling. When she'd walked out of Denbigh's townhouse in London after the best night of her life, she'd done so out of self-preservation. While he slumbered, she'd done up as many of the wretched buttons as she could, tossed her mantle over the utter déshabillé, and rushed home hidden in the confines of her carriage.

As much as her body wanted him, her heart had already begun to grow fond of him in an absurdly short amount of time. That morning, after what they'd shared, if he had looked at her with the smallest glimmer of disrespect, it would have shattered her.

Thus, she'd escaped, head high, although mantle firmly over it, and waited for his next missive. It hadn't come. And he'd had the nerve to call her an ice queen!

Why, he hadn't even sent her a bouquet of flowers. Not even a little posy!

Nevertheless, his desire for her was as conspicuous as the first time she'd recognized it in his devilish eyes at Lady Dauschande's dinner. It had knocked her back a step, especially when she felt the answering sensations in her own body. Outrageously, she'd met him for a tryst—her first—and found it to be terrifying and exceedingly wonderful at the same time.

And now, she had all but decided to do it again, even though he thought her capable of stealing the crown off sweet King George's mad head.

But first, Christmas dinner. Lady Macroun had outdone herself. The guests all met in the drawing room, dressed in their most festive, like Sarah. She was paired with Mr. Asher, which bothered her not at all until she saw Denbigh coupled with Lady Frances, who wore a pale green gown with cream trim, fittingly demure for an earl's daughter.

For a moment, Sarah felt garish in her cheery red gown, until Denbigh's eyes swept over her, seeming to burn with inner flames. Then he winked, and she didn't care with whom either of them sat at the table as long as he looked at her in such a way.

After they all partook of Widow Clicquot's best bubbly wine, Mr. Asher escorted her into dinner. The saving grace of watching Denbigh ahead of her with Lady Frances was noticing how stiffly he held himself, practically leaning away from the young lady.

A general gasp of delight occurred over and over as each of the guests got close enough to the dining table to see the parade of sugar carvings running down its center. So artfully done, not only were there the expected sugar swans and cherubs, deer and horses, there was a three-foot high pastillage sculpture with its own small star-shaped and ball ornaments dangling from hooks. When each person sat down, the sculpture trembled, causing its sugary adornments to sparkle and glisten in the candlelight.

Even their individual place cards were set in small pastillage baskets. How clever!

When they were all seated, the many courses began at once. Sarah had been correct in guessing goose—or in this case, geese, as there were so many mouths at the table—although there was also venison. Sham brawn was served, which Sarah had never cared for, and also boiled cod with oyster sauce, every imaginable jellied dish, which made her think of Julia, who liked to poke them and make them wiggle.

There was also an array of cheeses, and a garden full of vegetable dishes, including honeyed carrots, one of Sarah's particular favorites. Indeed, each type of seasonal food she could remember having at a Christmas meal appeared before her, as well as some unseasonal ones, designed simply to show off Lady Macroun's wealth, including pineapples and grapes.

Mince pies would be made from some of the heartier remains of the meal, and she knew they would be dining on them through the next eleven days to bring good fortune all year.

Naturally, an array of pastry-encased fowls had to be eaten, too, and some succulent lamb before they indulged in the rich puddings. These had been "curing," as her father called it, since stir-up Sunday in late November when they'd been made in her ladyship's kitchen, baked, dried, then soaked in alcohol. She especially loved a warm piece of pudding with custard poured over the top.

While she savored the dessert, Mr. Asher told her comical tales of his own misfortune that would take a multitude of mince pies to counteract. His self-deprecating manner was designed to entertain, and she listened and smiled. What's more, as she'd done through the entire meal, Sarah tried to

keep from glancing down the other end of the table to see how Denbigh was enjoying his Christmas dinner.

Afterward, the guests returned to the main drawing room for cups of spiced wassail and charades amongst the decoration of apples wreaths, clove-studded oranges, and ribbons festooning the room's mantle. Although some guests considered it odd not to have a dance that night, Lady Macroun had decided to wait until Twelfth Night, when not only the guests of the manor would attend the ball, but also local gentry, nobility from close by manors, and perhaps even a few more from London. It would be a splendid affair. Meanwhile, they were promised two other nights with opportunities for dancing.

Warm and fed, drinking strong wassail, Sarah ought to consider it a rather grand Christmas, except for being among strangers. She missed her father and sister terribly. Perhaps that was the reason she was cleaving to Denbigh, as the only person there with whom she had the mildest of friendships, if one could declare a fiery passion to be such.

And then, boldly, in front of all the gathered company, he chose her to be his partner for the charades when other women sat closer, particularly Lady Frances, whose mouth dropped open at the cut.

Sarah wished he hadn't drawn such attention to her, especially since her face, under the scrutiny of the other guests, was probably flaming to match her gown. She would hardly look the part of a sophisticated countess with cherry-red cheeks. Besides, if Denbigh had asked her first, she would have confessed to not being adept at figuring out the riddles. On the other hand, she was pleased as Punchinello that he'd not shown an ounce of timidity in showing his favor. He was a brave and intriguing man!

"My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings" began the wordplay, and despite the wassail and Denbigh's distracting nearness, for he'd taken the seat beside her, Sarah tried to concentrate and solve the riddle.

Alas, as expected, they did not win at charades. The ladies cried off Hoodman's Blind as it would leave their coiffure disheveled, but they did enjoy Hunt the Slipper. To Denbigh's annoyance, when he was "it," he did not detect them passing the slipper, although Mr. Asher did upon his turn.

"Bravo, Mr. Asher," Lady Macroun said. "You are certainly an observant fellow."

"Indeed," he said, with his usual humility. "I suppose it is one of my few skills. Not very useful, wot wot."

Sarah thought it particularly useful and wished there was a little less observant folk at Forde Hall.



* * *

“Tell me why you are really here,” Sarah said to Miles, catching him off guard when they were all seated by two and threes, spread out around the drawing room and in the parlor next door. As midnight had come and gone, and without lively music to keep them going, many were starting to droop.

Some guests still played at Fox and Geese or Spillikins. Others played card games because Lady Macroun didn’t hold with the latest concerns that card-playing was a vice unsuitable for ladies, and therefore, she had decks readily available. Some declared themselves unfit to engage in anything mentally challenging, even cards, and merely drank wine and watched the others. Lady Frances had finally received his message of disinterest, at least for the time being, although she’d continued to glare daggers at him, particularly when he approached Sarah and invited her for a quiet *tête-a-tête*.

Taking her arm, Miles and Sarah had wandered into the parlor, sitting just out of reach of any of the circles of candlelight and simply conversed. He found it a singular occurrence to have time to speak with a woman privately.

“I don’t think I’ve done anything like this before. Ever,” he said, feeling somewhat astounded.

“You’ve never lost at charades and Hunt the Slipper in one night?” she asked. Her eyes caught the little candle glow that reached them and reflected it back like glittering jewels.

“You are amusing yourself at my expense,” he said, “but I meant I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to a member of the fairer sex while not in a theatre or at a ball or a dinner party. This is how it would be if we were a couple at home.”

“Do you mean like a married couple?” she asked, her mouth quirked slightly.

And he startled at the notion of marriage, but yes, he supposed that was what he’d intended. It would be rather nice to be able to have quiet,

thoughtful discussions whenever one wished, whether in one's nightshirt or over breakfast in one's banyan.

"I suppose it is old hat to you, being as you are a widow."

She lifted a delicate shoulder in a pretty shrug. "My husband was stricken with heart congestion nearly as soon as we returned from my father's home, directly following the wedding. The earl only met me in the dining room a few times before taking to his bed to succumb to cardiac insufficiency, the doctor called it. Dear man. No heirs, either. Someone in Parliament is still trying to figure out if the earldom will die out or if there is some distant relative who can inherit it."

"What will that mean for you?" Most women would be scheming to hold onto the fortune of an earl.

But again, Sarah shrugged in a way he was coming to realize was entirely artless.

"I am not worried. The earl has provided for me to live comfortably. My father made sure of that before ever he agreed to the marriage."

Miles nodded, trying to remember which way their conversation's thread had been weaving. "Thus, you didn't get to enjoy this type of easy conversing with your husband?"

"No, not once. I don't think I have done anything like this either, except for the short time you and I spent talking at your townhouse before..." she trailed off, keeping her brilliant gaze upon him.

He swallowed. "Yes, I recall clearly, but we didn't actually do much talking that evening."

"To be certain, we did not," she agreed, her mouth bowing in a smile he longed to kiss.

"It's after midnight, the second day of Twelvetide," he reminded her. "No longer Christmas day with all of its most holy reverberations."

"True," she said lightly, which was when she asked him her unexpected question. "Tell me why you are really here."

She deserved an answer, and he could think of no reason not to tell her the truth, especially if it would discourage her should she be up to something, as he suspected.

"There have been a number of thefts in London. Some have made the newspapers, while others have been kept quiet. Believe it or not, it's easier for Bow Street to handle such a thing if every Tom Fool doesn't know about it, muddying up the waters."

She nodded, looking unconcerned. “Have someone’s baubles and trinkets gone missing?”

“Some very expensive baubles and some irreplaceable trinkets to be sure. I don’t intend to let it happen here.” He fixed her with his gaze, hoping she understood if she were behind it, he intended to stop her.

“How can you prevent it?” she wondered. “Are you going to give us all a curfew and play nanny? Perhaps you’ll check our rooms at night and make sure we’re all tucked in our beds.” Tilting her head, Sarah seemed to be challenging him.

“There’s probably only one room I need to check and one person whose bed will be empty unless I’m there to tie her down.”

She grinned, and his loins stirred. She was shameless but not a tease. That made her even more desirable, knowing she would follow through with what her eyes and her smile indicated. Whenever she had tempted him in the past, they’d enjoyed a mutual seduction right to the glorious end.

“It stands to reason Lady Macroun doesn’t want such happenings going on here at Forde Hall,” Sarah agreed. “Hence, your presence. But if you intend to deter villainous behavior, shouldn’t you tell everyone what you do when you’re not being a dashing handsome viscount?”

He would if he hadn’t hoped to catch the sneaking budge in the act. Deterrence was not his aim so much as utterly stopping the blighter in his—or her—tracks. Now, having dined, played games, and even worshiped with these people for two days, it would be practically a betrayal to tell them he thought one of them a jewel thief.

She leaned forward, opening her mouth to speak again, and a necklace, previously nestled between her shapely breasts, swung free. A single ruby pendant, as red as her gown, caught the candlelight, gleaming like a flame.

Unthinkingly, Miles reached out, making her gasp as he snaked a finger around it, pulling the chain taught.

“Whose is this?” he asked.

“Unhand it, you rascal,” Sarah demanded, trying to lean away from him. “It’s mine, of course. A remembrance of my poor, deceased mother.”

“Evidently not so poor” he said wryly, “if she had a ruby. When I return to London, I’ll find out which lady of the *ton* is missing it, so you may as well confess.”

“I tell you it belonged to my mother,” she fumed.

He nearly laughed at her expression, like that of a stubborn child, but

there was nothing truly amusing happening. If someone caught her in the act, she could hang or, at the very least, be transported to the land of convicts down under, Botany Bay. And plainly, he would miss her like the Devil.

Releasing the pendant, he let it fall back against her chest and she jerked away from him.

“I have a great disrelish for criminal activity,” he told her.

“As do I,” she agreed, infuriating him.

“Then why were you creeping around the manor, getting stuck in a clock?”

Shaking her head, she looked a little sad. “Still gnawing on that old, dry bone, are you, Denbigh?”

“On the contrary,” he said, “I find the bone to be quite juicy.”

“I assure you, it is not,” she insisted, rising to her feet. “I believe I will retire.”

He stood, realizing with lancinating regret he’d ruined his chances of an assignation that night, and maybe any other, too.

“You’ll be attending the hunt later today, will you not?” she asked.

He hated how her question made him doubt her instantly. With all the men out of the manor, and most of the women following along in carriages, she could pick the guests’ rooms clean like a hungry falcon, especially as it was the day most servants had off.

“I may or I may not,” he said, wanting to keep her on the hop. He had fully intended to be present when the brass Chevy was blown, as he enjoyed the sport tremendously, but duty came first. “It will be a late start, and I prefer an early morning hunt with mist still on the land.”

“Such is your choice,” Sarah said with a sniff. “I fully intend to go and enjoy myself. I bid you happy Christmas, my lord. Good night.”

She turned and walked away, appearing a little stiff and not at all like the relaxed lady with whom he had spent the evening. With a sense of loss at the change, Miles hoped he would quickly discover someone else was the jewel thief and be able to fall at Sarah’s feet and apologize.

While he was down there, he would caress her ankles and stroke the sensitive spot behind her knees, before working his way up to the heaven between her thighs. With that thought, he retired to his own chamber, feeling as frustrated and conflicted as every other moment since being in her company at Forde Hall.

He never should have said yes to Prinny for this favor!

Chapter 7

At two in the morning, Sarah decided to venture out, even if only to get her bearings and learn which servants might roam the halls at night and how much lighting there might be. Naturally, she wore her dressing gown with handy pockets and had a stolen necklace wrapped in a handkerchief in one of them, in the event opportunity arose to return it.

Treading softly along the upper hallway, she passed a seemingly endless line of doors to her right and left. When she'd counted five of them on either side and nearly reached the main landing, she heard footsteps approaching from the other wing. There was nowhere to hide, and it was too far to return to her room.

Pressing herself against the wall, she held her breath, grateful a marble bust on a pedestal stuck out farther than she did. She even closed her eyes, cleaving to an old childish notion—if she couldn't see the man, for by the bootfalls, it was most certainly a man, then he couldn't see her. She could only hope he turned left and went down the stairs.

Suddenly, the steps strode past her, and she opened her eyes. *Denbigh!* All at once, he ground to a halt and turned, a grin on his oh-too-handsome face as she looked right at her.

“That is the worst hiding place anyone's ever chosen,” he quipped, moving closer. “And what are you *not* wearing? I'll tell you. A proper housecoat for running around these drafty corridors. Instead, I can see through your gossamer gown precisely how you feel the chill.”

Following his gaze, she spied her nipples at full mast.

“A gentleman wouldn't look or comment,” she said, wishing she knew at least one gentleman.

“A lady wouldn't be running around the halls at this hour. But I must admit, seeing you like this has reminded me once more you are the jammiest bit of jam.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Why are you doing that?” he demanded. “Don't you care for a compliment?”

“At least you didn't say I was a diamond of the first water.” She'd heard

the insipid phrase rolling off the tongue of half a dozen men since she'd arrived in London.

"What if I had? You are," he insisted, and he was so close, she could see the gold flecks in his brown eyes.

"Terribly clichéd," she insisted. "I would have screamed if you'd said such a trite and overused term."

"You may scream anyway," he warned, placing a hand on the wallpaper on either side of her head, rocking the marble bust which he knocked with his arm and then quickly steadied with his broad hand.

"Careful," she warned, even as her mouth went dry at his words. She'd screamed at his touch before, out of her mind with pleasure.

Denbigh smirked. "I know how you care for valuables."

"Nonsense, but if it goes crashing to the floor, even if your oafish foot doesn't get broken, then everyone will be out in the hallway in a flash. And I was hoping for a little quiet time. In fact, I was heading to the library for a book. If you'll excuse me."

She tried to push past him, but he didn't lower his arms or move an inch. Instead, he got closer, pressing himself against her, his hips tilting into the cradle of her hips.

A familiar tingling danced down her spine. Placing her hands on his chest, she intended to push him away but instead grabbed his coat with her fingers and drew him closer.

When he bent low, his gaze on her lips, she closed her eyes, feeling his warm breath on her mouth. At the last moment, she turned away. She was not his little trifle, or at least, not in the hallway.

Undeterred, he chuckled and kissed the edge of her mouth, and then her jaw, trailing more whisper-soft kisses down her neck, which she arched as well as she could with the ugly wallpaper behind her head. He didn't stop his sensual assault, but nibbled over the swell of her breasts.

"Denbigh!"

He raised his head. "You make my name sound like a vicious oath."

"At moments of extreme exasperation, you do come to mind," she confessed.

"Tell me why you were roaming Lady Macroun's hallways, and don't give me any library nonsense."

"Tell me why you were coming over to the single women's side of the house."

They stared at one another in the dim light, their noses practically touching.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll confess first. I was coming to see you.”

She considered his words, which were unlikely. Yet she could certainly push him for the truth. “And now you see me. What do you want?”

His experienced mouth spread into a smile. “You know what I want.” And he tilted his hips against her again. While she could feel his interest in her, she knew that wasn’t his true goal. He’d been patrolling the halls on duty.

“Liar,” she said, although without vehemence. “You’ve been fighting your attraction to me since we arrived.”

“Mayhap I gave in and stopped fighting.”

For a moment, she wanted to do precisely that. With her body clamoring for his touch, growing a little damp in places and reminding her of how good it felt when they were joined in bread and butter fashion, she sighed. He was trying to hoodwink her.

“Very well.”

He froze, then he frowned. “Very well what?”

“Very well, let us retire to my room and do this properly. While a good fuddle against the wall is sometimes welcome,” not that she’d ever experienced it, “it’s probably best if we be discreet. It’s the Yuletide, after all.”

His eyes had grown a little wider with each word she spoke. The next move was his. If he took her back to her room, it would be bliss between the covers. If he walked away, it would be disappointing, and she would retire to her bed to dream of him.

“It had best be in my wing of the house,” Denbigh suggested. “There are too many nosey, humpty dumpty maids roaming around your wing. I don’t have my valet, and neither does the nib next to me.”

She felt her mouth drop open. Did he really think she was going to stroll along to the bachelor’s hall, spend the night with him, and then come out in the morning like a fusty blowsabella? She might be new to the *ton* and to the title, but she had her pride.

She would resist his magnetism until he was as desperate for her as she for him. With a grimace, she ducked under his arm and hurried away.



* * *

“Do you enjoy riding out to the hunt?” Lady Macroun asked Sarah as she tugged on her warmest fur-lined gloves.

Sarah considered telling her the truth, that she’d never participated in a fox hunt before in her life, but with Lady Frances standing nearby, she hated to mark herself as an outsider. Lord Worthington had hunted as a younger man, but certainly no longer at his age when they married, and then he ran out of time. There had never been an opportunity for her to participate in a hunt.

In answer to her hostess, Sarah replied, “I am looking forward to it today, to be sure.”

However, as the day wore on, she decided if this was how hunts usually went, then she might never participate in one again and could truthfully say she did not enjoy it.

It started out miserably and ended in disaster.

At the Master of the Hounds’ command, the male guests, who’d had a little tipple of tawny port in their stirrup cups, rode away with a great deal of vim and vigor, although not much speed. Denbigh was among them. Lady Macroun’s two huntsmen, who held the hounds’ leashes, started off next, running along behind for a few paces. Soon, however, they released the hounds from their leashes, and let the dogs go. Amazingly, the dogs stayed out from under the horses’ hooves and the horses appeared unbothered.

Sarah was bundled into one of four open-air carriages. In hers, with incredibly bad luck, was Lady Frances and two of the younger wives, Lady Clayson and Lady Hollingsworth. With two able-bodied horses apiece, the four carriages followed in the general direction the men had taken. Since they had to remain on cart roads for the most part, they lost sight of the hunting party on a number of occasions, and then the carriages abruptly turned into a relatively flat field.

Besides the ride being bone-jarringly bumpy, the sky was gray, and the air, being extra cold, held the promise of the long-awaited snow. The temperament in the carriage was even chillier, at least as it was directed

toward Sarah. The two wives didn't care for having an ace of spades in the midst of the house party, as far as she could tell, from their flared nostrils and the way they eyed her askance. Young widows had a nasty reputation as a threat to the home, hearth, and happiness of the wife. As a married man at a ball once said to her, "A slice off a cut loaf is not missed." Sarah had refused to let him enjoy a slice of her. Still, the ladies looked at her as a salty bitch-dog in heat.

And Lady Frances had her usual sour expression whenever she glanced in Sarah's direction. The earl's daughter had sussed out that Denbigh preferred her, a fact made evident from the moment Sarah and he had arrived together.

The three ladies kept up a steady stream of chatter, never once including Sarah or inviting her to respond to anything. They were firmly in the pink of the mode, and she was just as firmly an outsider. She didn't care to, in any case. She was planning how to return a necklace to Lady Abingley.

"There they are," Lady Macroun called out from the carriage ahead of theirs.

Unclenching her gloved hands inside her muff, Sarah withdrew one so she could raise the collar of her burgundy pelisse against the chill and looked out over the landscape to her left. True enough, the men were scattered across a field, dogs ahead of the horses, their noses to the ground, apparently not yet having picked up the scent of some poor half-starved fox.

If it knew what was good for it, it would stay in its den. Sarah decided she, too, ought to have stayed back at the snug manor. She could have returned the last two pieces of jewelry, as Denbigh had assumed she would.

If she hadn't gone on the hunt, however, he probably would have remained at Forde Hall with her. Then, not only would she not have accomplished her tasks, but they probably would have got into mischief of the amorous sort. That wouldn't have been such a bad thing. Quite the opposite—the notion excited her, imagining his hands caressing her and his lips nibbling at all her sensitive parts. Mayhap she was a salty bitch!

Even then, she was looking for his dashing form and found it among the group. He was magnificent astride his borrowed horse, sitting ramrod straight on the fine, durable hunter from Lady Macroun's stables. The hounds were going into the low undergrowth, attempting to flush out any foxes that might be hiding.

Lady Clayson, who'd been discussing the merits of a pearl tiara over a single pearl draped over the forehead, all at once spied her husband and

volunteered some information. “Lord Clayson says it’s a struggle between whether the fox can find a hiding place sooner than the hounds can wear him down and overtake him.”

“Or *her*,” Sarah said.

They all looked at her.

“Pardon me?” Lady Clayson said.

“Can the fox not be female?” Sarah asked.

“Why, I don’t know,” the lady replied. “I never thought about it.”

“And what is the place of the rider then, if the struggle is between the fox and the hounds?” Sarah wondered.

Lady Frances gave a snort. “You ask as if you’ve never ridden out to the hunt before, Lady Worthington. Obviously, the skill of the rider is essential during a long ride, especially with the demands of jumping brooks and logs. Not to mention keeping one’s seat even when faced with growth and branches.”

The earl’s daughter was undoubtedly correct, having attended more hunts than a parson’s offspring ever would. All Sarah could do was nod and take another look toward the field of riders. She hoped Denbigh knew what he was about. She would hate to think of him taking a spill and getting injured. However, she wouldn’t venture to say any such thing, as it would draw a measure of ridicule from Lady Frances and speculation from the other two as to Sarah’s ignorance.

They lapsed into silence since the other ladies had run out of inanities, and Sarah could think of no topic she wished to introduce. “*My sister is a jewel thief*” came to mind but seemed inappropriate. Besides, Julia meant well, finding buyers for baubles she thought the nobility wouldn’t even miss, and then giving all the proceeds to the poor who lived in the Mint, Devil’s Acre, or the Rookery.

Their father had instilled in his daughters the importance of charity and assisting those who couldn’t help themselves. But trying to explain to Julia the utter futility of her actions against the overwhelmingly vast problem of poverty had proven difficult. After Sarah’s first tour of London when she became the Countess of Worthington, she’d witnessed for herself the population of a million souls, many of them destitute. Trying to help them with a few coins—or even bags full of them—was like trying to dry up an ocean with a gentleman’s handkerchief. Impossible!

And giving to the established charities was even worse, as most of those

were run by crooks who could make 600 guineas a year pretending to run homes for the poor.

Sarah sighed. Her sister had promised to stop the dangerous practice when Sarah took her to task in her drawing room, pointing out in the newspaper how upset poor old Lord Devonstone had been at the loss of his beloved ring.

“And do you want me to get caught returning jewels?” she’d asked Julia, who’d shrugged and told her to stop doing so.

“As a widow, I have more freedom to make the returns, and if discovered in a man’s room, my reputation is not at stake.” Then she’d beseeched Julia once again to stop.

“All right,” her younger sister had promised rather vaguely, only after Sarah agreed to help her charitable causes in other ways. They would throw at the problem the weight of the Worthington name—which Sarah couldn’t help feeling she was only borrowing—and try to come up with a productive measure. Perhaps Denbigh might have some good suggestions, if only he would stop trying to pin the robberies on her.

Meanwhile, the three other occupants of the carriage now had their gazes trained on the hunters, occasionally glimpsed in the fields beside the carriage road. Thus, except for keeping her eye on Denbigh whenever possible, Sarah thought the hunt to be a boring affair, at least while trapped with her companions. Ahead of them, Lady Macroun was in high spirits, with much laughter floating back to their melancholy, quiet carriage.

After another half hour, feeling stiff with cold, Sarah yawned broadly. If the ride weren’t so jarring as to nearly spill her from her seat every few yards, she thought she might have already fallen into a deep sleep due to the tedium of the hunt. All three ladies stared at her as she belatedly clamped a gloved hand over her mouth. Lady Frances rolled her eyes.

And then, the huntsman blew his horn. Sarah perked up. At last something was happening. But what?

The men on horseback went toward the sound. Lady Macroun’s driver turned her carriage to follow and the rest of the ladies’ drivers followed suit. However, instead of a fox, it turned out the excitement was a gentleman who’d been thrown from his horse when he jumped an obstacle.

Seeing Denbigh still in his saddle, Sarah’s immediate concern turned to mild interest until someone identified the man who’d broken his arm as Lord Hollingsworth. His wife, who sat opposite, moaned, went pale, and

immediately appeared faint.

Lady Clayson, seated beside Sarah, pulled a corked vial of smelling salts out of her reticule and, withdrawing the stopper, leaned forward to wave it under the unfortunate wife's nose. She roused, eyes wide and coughing.

"Help me down," Lady Hollingsworth demanded as soon as the carriages came to a stop.

One of the huntsmen was putting down the step before she even rose. He assisted her to the ground, and she ran toward her husband who was now sitting, looking a little dazed, cradling his arm.

The Master of the Hunt, the leather strap of the horn now slung over his shoulder, issued orders in a loud, clear voice. The other huntsman gathered the dogs. Sarah, Lady Frances, and Lady Clayson also alighted from the carriage, as did all the other women. Thus, suddenly, in the midst of the dogs, horses, and hunters were sixteen women. Chaos reigned.

At least it was no longer boring, Sarah thought, while hoping Lord Hollingsworth wouldn't meet with any permanent injury as a result. Nevertheless, she couldn't help thinking this was exactly the type of distraction she needed back at the manor so she could return the rest of Julia's ill-gotten gains.

"We must take his lordship back to Forde Hall at once," Lady Macroun insisted. "There is an excellent doctor about an hour away by fast rider, and I shall send for him at once."

"Oh, no," Lady Hollingsworth protested, "my husband would prefer his own physician in London."

However, the man in question, wincing with pain, disagreed.

"No, my love," Lord Hollingsworth said, his tone tight. "If our hostess has a good doctor in mind, that's fine."

In short order, Denbigh and Mr. Asher assisted the man into the carriage Sarah had vacated. Quick as a whip, the other occupants scrambled back to their seats, Lady Hollingsworth taking the one beside her pale husband and Lady Frances seated opposite next to Lady Clayson.

Before Sarah knew it, her ride left without her, the injured man in her place.

Those remaining glanced at one another.

"It is unthinkable to continue after such an inauspicious incident," Lady Macroun declared.

One rider taking a nasty fall hardly seemed inauspicious for an entire

hunt, but Sarah was not consulted so she kept her mouth closed. Glancing at Denbigh, who frowned, she had cause to believe he agreed with her thoughts. After all, they'd all come out for a hunt. The dogs were ready, the horses were saddled, and the Master of the Hunt looked as ready to chase down a fox and dismember it with his own hands as any of the barking hounds with their teeth.

"Besides," Lady Macroun continued, "I must head back so I can assure my doctor is summoned and Lord Hollingsworth's care is handled properly."

With a frown line denoting her concern, most likely over her reputation as a hostess, she let a footman assist her into her carriage. Injury at a house party was considered bad form, to be sure.

Standing still, Sarah was growing colder, the frozen ground seeping its chill right up through the soles of her boots. Wondering if anyone had brought extra blankets, she wished she was back at the hall with a cup of chocolate or a glass of brandy.

As if reading her thoughts, Lady Macroun said, "I suggest you all follow me back to Forde Hall." Her suggestion left little room for disagreement.

A general groan arose from the menfolk. Even the dogs started to whine more loudly, straining up on the leashes to which they'd been reattached.

The ladies, despite having been eager to attend and with picnic supplies stowed somewhere at the ready, dutifully climbed back into their carriages. When they'd departed and the dirt and grass bits had settled, Sarah still remained. The riders who had dismounted regained their saddles and, along with those who hadn't bothered to get off their mounts, turned their horses toward Forde Hall.

"Um," Sarah said. And then, "Oh bother!"

One of the huntsmen still held the bridle of Lord Hollingsworth's riderless horse. Plainly, she had little choice—walk a very long way and probably freeze to death or ride.

"Are you going to mount up?" Denbigh asked, a measure of humor in his voice.

"It would seem so," she said, glad he hadn't abandoned her.

"And does a parson's daughter ride?"

She ground her back teeth. *Was he mocking her?*

"As well as a pampered earl's daughter," she snapped, then added, "Perhaps I've never been on so fine a horse as this one. Ours tended to be broader in the hips, and certainly never jumped a hedge."

His expression turned serious. “Hopefully, you won’t be doing any jumping either. Hollingsworth certainly shouldn’t have, and nor should you.”

“Gracious, I hope not,” Sarah said, looking up at the roan horse. “Sitting sideways, how would I remain atop the beast?”

“You wouldn’t,” he agreed, “which is why women don’t hunt.”

“I suppose if I had some type of bifurcated gown and could ride astride as you do.”

They smiled at each other at the ridiculous notion. Then she sighed. No reason to tell him how up until she reached the age of twenty, she’d regularly tucked her loose day dress up and ridden facing forward on the horse as God intended, at least for the quick journey from their tiny parsonage in Kent county to their equally tiny village. It had occurred to her then, not for the first time, men were the ones who should sit upon a sidesaddle for noticeable reasons of what might get banged up and damaged.

Again, better not to mention that, either.

In any case, wearing her current walking dress of thick wool with its form-fitting coat, sitting astride was an impossibility. Unless she removed her skirts entirely! As it was, she didn’t know how she was going to keep from showing quite a bit of leg even riding sideways on the saddle.

“Hold it still,” Denbigh ordered the huntsman. “Her ladyship is going to ride.”

Bending down, he interlaced his gloved fingers and created a step. Looking down at his bowed head, she hesitated. Ultimately, she had no choice. Hoping she didn’t make an ungainly fool of herself, she put her foot into his hands.

“On three,” he muttered, glancing up at her with a smile.

“All right. But I get to do the counting. I don’t want you pushing me up and over when I’m not prepared.”

“Do get a move on,” Denbigh said. “Even the fox will have died of old age before we get you in the saddle.”

She nearly said something saucy about having already been in his saddle—twice!—but held her tongue.

“One,” she said, giving a little bounce on the toe of her other short boot on the firm ground. “Two.” She had her hands up and reaching for the pommel. “Three.” She pressed her booted foot down upon his gloves as he lifted her, and she sprung high and landed in the saddle, grabbing for the horse’s neck to steady herself.

Immediately, she realized being seated sideways on a gentleman's saddle was most uncomfortable. Her hips were tilted and squashed, and she felt she could simply slide off at any moment. She didn't know how she would make it all the way home.

"This is awful," she decried.

Denbigh looked up at her. "Many ladies use a regular saddle," he said, and she fixed him with a withering glare. "Well," he amended, "some do, I'm sure."

Fidgeting, she turned more toward the horse's head and hooked her right leg up and over the pommel. That was a little more comfortable, although it was pulling her thick blue pelisse and her dress tightly across the saddle, not to mention all the other layers now riding up her left leg, which was swinging perilously free. She was discomfited.

"Why didn't you wear a riding skirt?" he asked, referring to the thick wool skirt the fashionable ladies wore in Hyde Park, voluminous and comfortable when in the saddle with yards of extra fabric to drape across the saddle, covering everything one could wish to hide for modesty's sake.

"Because I wasn't supposed to be doing anything more than sitting in a blasted carriage," Sarah reminded him, feeling cross, "and walking on the grass, and perhaps eating a sandwich if one was offered. I certainly was not anticipating being atop this brute."

"It's not a brute, but a fine hunter. All Lady Macroun's horses are tip-top."

"I must undo my pelisse, at least at the bottom," she said, and began to do so, but her fingers weren't working, either due to the chill or the slight nervousness of her situation.

"Let me," Denbigh said and, in front of the huntsman, began to undo the cloth-covered buttons of her wool coat and the extra decorative frog closures.

Good God! More than once since they'd arrived at Forde Hall, she'd imagined him undressing her, but hardly like this. He went as high as her knees, until she could move again and didn't feel like a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

"High enough?" he asked, and she could feel the weight of his hand on her leg.

Nodding, she wriggled around to secure herself.

"Can you adjust my stirrup, too?" Sarah didn't want to sound demanding, but it came out as if she were addressing a groomsmen and not a viscount.

“Please,” she added.

His hand clasped her exposed ankle.

Taking in a swift startled breath as all sorts of pleasurable memories flowed through her, warming all the parts of her that had frozen on this infernal outing, she swayed and nearly fell off her horse.

Chapter 8

Feeling unbalanced, Sarah realized she'd closed her eyes, while enjoying his touch, and she hastily opened them. Glancing down, she found his chocolate brown gaze staring up at her, smoldering. *Yes, she was definitely warm now.*

"I was merely ... checking ... the sole of your boot," he told her, "to see if it would stay in the stirrup." Then he released her leg. Unfastening the stirrup buckle, he pulled up the leather strap. This time, she was prepared for his hand upon her ankle again as he guided the toe of her boot into the metal ring.

"Is that better?" he asked, his tone gruff, while he tugged her pelisse, as best he could, down over her calf and ankle.

"Better," she agreed, licking her dry lips. Each new touch was becoming a torturous titillation. What's more, she could tell Denbigh was affected, as well.

With her heartbeat starting to race, and being a country girl at heart, Sarah could imagine them riding away from prying eyes and finding a nice patch of grass under some sheltering tree. That would be more comfortable than their first act of intimacy upon Lady Dauschande's sofa. If only it were July instead of December! The hard, frozen ground didn't exactly entice her, no matter how heated her body currently felt.

Sighing, she straightened her shoulders, aware of her breasts feeling overly sensitive, and her nipples now grazing the cotton fabric of her chemise as if her bodice were suddenly too tight. This was going to be a long ride back.

The huntsman, who'd remained silent through the entire exchange, now drew the reins over the horse's head so she could take hold of them.

"Thank you," she said, her voice coming out as a choked whisper. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "Thank you."

He tipped his hat and went back to handling the hounds. In a moment, the Master of the Hunt, and the two huntsmen with all their dogs, had disappeared between the trees.

Denbigh mounted his horse. "I suppose we should get moving. If we return long after the rest of them, tongues will wag."

“Not if I don’t have twigs in my hair and grass stains on my back,” she quipped.

That broke the tension, which had been almost tangible from the moment he’d touched her, and he smiled.

“Besides,” she added, still trying to get the horse to do as she wanted, nudging it with her left foot, “Lady Macroun will owe me an apology for leaving me out here. It was not well done of her.”

“Agreed. You were not treated as your station warrants.”

Sarah couldn’t help but shrug. “Most of them know my humble beginnings—if not the details, then at least how I did not come from their ranks. I am an outsider, and I was never properly introduced before my husband died as his countess. Then I had a year of mourning, and half-mourning. Since then, I have been making my own way in society.”

Mostly due to following Julia round, trying to keep her out of trouble.

“And yet, here you are, spending Christmastide with some of the upper echelon of the *ton*.”

“Forgotten by them at the hunt,” she added, definitely not admitting how she’d pulled strings for the invitation. “It doesn’t matter. I am not here to make friends.”

She nearly bit her tongue at having said such careless words.

“No, I didn’t think you were,” he agreed. And just like that, they were back to him trying to pry her secrets out of her.

“No more than you are here to do the same, I would wager,” she said.

“On the other hand, you might find yourself a new beau.”

For a moment, she hoped Denbigh meant himself, but that was dashed when he added, “Mr. Asher seems to be paying you some interest, as well as Lord Saumner.”

Games, including making someone jealous through false pretenses, did not interest her. “I have no interest in either of them.” She might as well cap her thought: “I have no interest in any man here in that way, except one.”

His head swung around sharply. There, she had caught his attention and stated her peace. Now, it was up to him to make of it what he would. As long as he left off digging into her purpose for being there, she could think of no reason why they couldn’t be ... friendly.

And her body was giving her a hundred reasons why they should.



* * *

Miles stared at her. Once again, Sarah had surprised him, this time with her frankness. Apparently, he'd been forgiven for his oafish, intrusive behavior of the previous evening, and there was still a chance—and a good one—they could indulge in a passionate encounter.

He wanted to urge his horse into a gallop, reach the manor house as quickly as possible, and get her alone in his chamber. Silk stockings and petticoats would fly! But she would be unable to keep up, perched as she was. He was nearly ready to help her sit astride and forget the nonsense of riding like a lady.

They both fell silent, concentrating on picking out the trail and finding their way back.

At last, when the house was in sight, Sarah spoke. "I thought we'd gone much farther. My time in the carriage felt longer, interminable actually, but I believe it was the poor company."

"I prefer your company to anyone else's," he blurted, deciding he could be honest since she had. "At Forde Hall," he amended, although even that limitation bespoke of his admiration for her.

She remained looking straight ahead for a long time. At last, she looked at him, her cheeks were red, and not only because of the cold, he was sure.

"I wonder if there will be some quiet time when guests retire to their rooms before the next planned event." Her question was softly spoken but full of meaning.

Swallowing, he fervently hoped such was the case. This was precisely like the first—and the second—time he and Sarah had come together. An overwhelming desire raged, causing flames in his blood, making his pulse race. The ride was becoming more uncomfortable with each passing moment as his loins throbbed, and his cock hardened against the fall-front of his pants.

Tilting his hips up, he managed to keep his now-proud hair-splitter from being pinched between his body and the rigid saddle. In the past, upon occasion, he'd felt a slight tenderness to his drummers when landing awkwardly after an unexpected jump. But this was a new sensation. He could

not recall ever being aroused while in the saddle.

Miles was ready to dismount and walk the last hundred yards, but restrained himself. Finally, they passed the carriage-house and reached the stables beside it, and a stable hand met them. Leaping from the saddle, Miles hurried to help Sarah down.

It was simple, he held his hand up, and she unhooked her right leg from the pommel before sliding into his arms. He nearly drew her to him right there, but the manor house had a hundred eyes—windows behind which important members of the *ton* were undoubtedly peering.

Stiffly, he moved back and formally offered her his arm.

“A smart choice,” she murmured, keeping her gaze upon the footman who held the door for them rather than looking at Miles.

“Indeed.”

As soon as they entered the house, they were greeted by pandemonium. It was still the day after Christmas, a day most servants had off, which might have explained why some of the female guests were carrying teacups and a tea tray toward the library, laughing as if it were a silly game.

When Miles and Sarah marched steadily up the stairs and past the upstairs drawing rooms, two gentlemen were attempting to light the fire in the hearth. As they walked along the hall, Lady Clayson appeared, dashed past, stopped, and turned back to them.

“Where on earth did you get to?” she directed her question to Sarah.

“You all left me at the hunt,” she said, sounding ever so factual and not the least bothered. “I rode a horse to come back.”

Lady Clayson offered a nervous giggle before clapping a hand to her mouth.

“I am so sorry. Not that it was my fault, of course. Besides, who could have guessed you wouldn’t catch a ride in one of the other carriages? Lady Macroun has sent me to find out how long the doctor will be, but I don’t even know whom to ask.” She turned away, heading for the stairs, then she called back, “Such a bad idea having the hunt on a day when the staff are slacking. No one is where they should be.”

And she vanished from sight.

Miles turned to Sarah, who looked back at him. Then he asked the question he’d been dying to ask for the past hour, “Your chamber or mine?”



* * *

It was improper, entirely wrong, and might even be cause for regret later. Sarah ignored the warnings in her head and agreed to his wicked invitation.

“Yours,” she declared. *Who knew when Dorie might pop in?* Besides Lord and Lady Hollingsworth were on her side, so people would be coming and going whereas ... “I believe the single gentlemen’s quarters will be quieter.”

“Agreed,” he said.

Sarah liked it when he answered simply in such a way. It was an intimate gesture, indicating no need for long, overly polite speech.

Since they were going the wrong way, they spun about and headed past the grand staircase toward the bachelor’s wing. Immediately, Asher and another man came into view, and Miles and Sarah pivoted once again.

“You should go to your room and at least remove your coat and hat,” he suggested. “I’ll ask after Lord Hollingsworth and show myself, and you should do the same, and then—”

“Then I’ll meet you, as quickly as possible, in your room.”

“If someone should come out of one of the doors,” he began.

“I’ll say I’m returning a book you lent me and rush in the other direction.”

“But you’re not holding a book,” he pointed out.

“I’ll bring one,” she said, and swift as a sparrow, she absconded down the hall at a trot.

It wasn’t more than a quarter of an hour when she hurried toward Denbigh’s room, carrying a copy of—she glanced down at what she’d taken from the bookshelf in the upstairs sitting room and grinned at the fitting tome—*Clarissa*, Richardson’s masterpiece of a young woman forced into a loveless marriage, who then fell for a rake.

Luckily, she met with no one, and before she could even raise her hand to tap, the door opened, he yanked her inside, and swiftly closed it again. Then he turned the key.

That small sound was the single most alluring one she’d ever heard. She

shivered as desire danced its way down her spine. In the next instant, he took her into his arms.

“I always suspected these country parties were places of unbridled passion,” Denbigh confessed, “but I never experienced it before.”

“You always kept your bridle on,” she quipped, pleased this wasn’t a usual occurrence for him. “It’s hard to fathom how such an attractive man, also a viscount, wouldn’t have ladies knocking at his door at all hours.”

She felt him shrug under her hands. “Some knocked, but I didn’t have to answer, did I?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“A lovely sound,” he said, catching her face in his hands before kissing her thoroughly, causing the tingling to start again in anticipation of what was to come, and then he released her.

Walking farther into the room, she barely glanced at the size and furnishings, similar in opulence and comfort to her own, yet with more reds and pinks befitting a virulent man, whereas her own chamber had more of the soft blue attributed to the weaker sex.

Her focus went directly to the bed, a four-poster with a boxy cloth-draped canopy and curtain hangings drawn back for easy access. It looked far more comfortable than the divan in the corner or the sofa upon which they’d had their first melting moments in London.

Without coyness, Sarah decided to get to the matter of their mutual obsession and, with a foot on the tuffet, hardly needed but a little hop to gain her seat upon the bed. Much easier than mounting a saddle!

She began to unlace her boots. In an instant, Denbigh was on the floor at her feet.

“Let me,” he said.

She nearly protested for expediency’s sake. If he were taking time with her footwear, he could hardly be undressing himself, and she longed to see him unclothed. Nevertheless, she let him remove her boots and toss them toward the door. However, when he reached his hand up her skirt, she shivered.

“Why haven’t they lit the fires?” Denbigh muttered, turning toward the hearth. “It’s like we’re at the bloody frost fair in here.”

“The servants are off for most of the day,” she reminded him, glad it wasn’t quite as cold as the winter before when the Thames had frozen. Moreover, the previous year, they’d had so much snowfall, she doubted any

of them would have made it as far as Lady Macroun's manor house. And at that moment, she was exceedingly happy to be at Forde Hall in Denbigh's room.

"Never mind, let's get under the blankets," she urged, "and I'm sure we'll be warm soon."

Their eyes met. "You're right, my lady. I'm a pudding-head. On the other hand, I will take a minute to light the fire for us while you start to disrobe. Seeing your breath while you pant in my arms does not exactly spark passion. More like chilblains!"

While he busied himself at the hearth, she removed what she could, which was, in fact, only her stockings. She couldn't even remove her pantalettes since the waist strings were tightly bound under both her petticoat and the long stays she'd chosen for warmth.

When he turned to find her still fully dressed, she shrugged helplessly, lifting her hands in defeat. He grinned and having already removed his coat, easily discarded his braces and his shirt as he crossed the chilly room.

"If I still dressed as a parson's daughter, this would be much easier. But Dorie always chooses dresses with the buttons in the back." In her room, naturally Sarah had a long button hook and an eyelet fastener, so she was quite adept at handling her own dressing and undressing if she chose.

"Job stability," Denbigh quipped. Placing his hands upon her upper arms, he smiled at her, then turned her away from him, so she had nothing to look at but the bed.

The bed!

"Hurry," Sarah urged, knowing he was skilled at playing lady's maid from their last passionate interlude when she'd found herself in a similar situation in his bedroom. However, on that occasion, he'd teased her terribly, until she was so desperate, she nearly tore off her own clothing. "No dilly-dallying," she pleaded.

His nimble fingers worked upon the few buttons from her neck to halfway down her back, and then, with her raising her arms, he lifted the fine wool over her head.

She shivered again, and he briskly ran his hands up and down the gooseflesh covering her upper arms to warm her. Then, to her amazement, he chuckled.

"Even your petticoat has hooks to hold it closed—at the back!—as well as ties. Your maid is determined to keep you chaste during the day. That

much is certain.”

She blushed at the notion Dorie was thinking about her chastity while dressing her.

“This is what all the noblewomen are wearing,” she said. “In fact, given the season and the fact we were supposed to spend hours outside, you’ll find I have on two petticoats.”

He chuckled again as he helped her out of the first one to find the second, which he quickly dispensed of.

“Stays next,” he said, untying and then loosening the laces until she could squirm out of the corset.

“You realize, don’t you, you’ll have to help me back into all this, for I can’t possibly dress by myself?”

“And do you realize,” he asked, “no matter how well I perform the task, when your maid eventually undresses you again, she’ll know it isn’t her handiwork?”

Oh dear! “I hadn’t thought of that.”

He paused, although it was too late. “Should I...?”

“Yes, of course. After all, the last time I left your residence and went home, Dorie knew I’d been a wayward soul. She didn’t run screaming from my employ then, and I doubt she will do so now.”

He let her long stays drop and then, although she could do it herself, he unfastened her pantalettes. By now, she had turned in the circle of his arms. Looking down, she watched his hands at her waist undoing the ribbon, and heat shimmered in her body, concentrating low between her hips.

Her pantalettes dropped to the ground, lying on top of the rest of her clothing. Nothing remained but her cotton chemise, which she knew he could see through. He was already staring at her nipples, pert with anticipation over what was to come.

Without warning, he bent and took one into his mouth, fabric and all.

“Mm,” she breathed out. But she wanted to feel him on her bare skin and touch him as well.

As soon as he straightened, she whipped the chemise over her head and, finally, stood before him naked. Instantly, the room’s cool air caressed her, and gooseflesh rose over her body. *That couldn’t be attractive.* She probably had the appearance of a plucked partridge.

Despite her doubt, his eyes darkened and his lips parted, while his arousal pressed discernibly against the front of his breeches. Scooting backward,

Sarah climbed onto the bed, feeling a little ungraceful as she gave him a view of her bottom before she vanished beneath the linens.

“Argh!” she exclaimed. “A bed warmer would be appreciated, but barring such, you’d best hurry under here before I turn into a block of ice.”

He’d already removed his boots. Now, his pants sailed across the room, and then his stockings hit the floor, and like a flash of lightning, he was next to her. Both on their sides, they faced one another.

“Bollocks! It’s cold,” he said. And then his arms wrapped around her, and she was instantly on fire and breathing in the heavenly scent of his Floris cologne.

Wordlessly, he drew her to him, and she relaxed against his tall, muscular frame. Letting her hands creep up around his neck, she laced her fingers behind his neck. This was her favorite place to be, she decided, feeling his palms skim up and then down her back.

When his lips claimed hers, she wanted to sigh with relief. At the same time, she wanted to pull him between her thighs and get on with it. After all, she’d only ever had two of those most exquisite experiences, both because of him. *What would it be like to have him permanently in her life? Hers to pleasure. Hers to love.*

While deepening the kiss—penetrating the space between her lips with his tongue and stroking hers—his hands skimmed her shoulders and down her back to grasp her bottom. Drawing her hips against him, sliding his hardness against her soft, aching spot, he groaned into her mouth, and her body became liquid. Dampness between her legs was expected, but she felt as if molten fire was flowing through her.

He grasped her lower lip gently with his teeth and then rolled her beneath him. She spread her thighs willingly, and he settled between them to begin teasing her further. He trailed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, before making a circular path around each of her nipples, until she sank her hands into his soft hair and made him stop.

“Please,” she said.

Chapter 9

Denbigh didn't say anything. He simply licked his warm tongue across first one taut bud and then the other before beginning to suck.

"Mm," Sarah was humming again, and she couldn't keep her hips still, as she writhed against him. Fortunately, he could no longer deny either of them, not even for the purpose of prolonging their pleasure. Instead, he lifted off of her slightly and then she felt the head of his rod at her entrance.

"Yes," she hissed.

"Yes," he agreed and slowly filled her.

She'd learned, especially from their second tryst, which had lasted throughout an entire night, that the little nubbin between her legs, especially liked it when he drove into her and then drew out slowly. And to her delight, Denbigh started the same rhythm now, angling his hips so each inward thrust and outward retreat dragged across her spread lips, right against the pulsing nub.

Gasping, she closed her eyes. Pent up sensations swirled and grew, even as the heavenly bay and bergamot scent mixed enticingly with her own spicy orange and jasmine. She knew she wouldn't last long before an overarching intensity caused her to clench her muscles and, barely breathing, gloriously release.

Even as she thought it, she felt his hand between their bodies, his fingers touching her most sensitive place, and she crashed over the edge of her climax.

Too quickly! She bemoaned her over-eager body, which had barely let him get started before it was over, even as she relaxed into languid gratefulness.

At last, she could open her eyes and watch him. For a second, their gazes locked and then he lifted high with his hands pressed into the mattress on either side of her, his back arched, and he drove into her. It was a delight to watch him, knowing her body was causing all these wondrous reactions in his.

At the last moment, he closed his eyes as he sought his release. After making an exquisitely rough sound, which echoed deep inside her, he

withdrew and spent upon the bed linens. It was almost a disappointment to lose their connection, except she appreciated his attempt to protect her.

A pregnant widow did not make for a good impression! She would lose any of the ground she'd gained in society and be considered a pariah amongst the *ton*. Not to mention the fear it would engender among the ladies, each and every one wondering if her husband were the father.

Shoving the damp sheets to the side, he rolled onto his back beside her, and, to her surprise, caught hold of her hand.

"By Jove's beard, I needed that!" he said, and she wasn't sure if his words were an insult or a compliment.

He hadn't said he needed *her*. And she was fairly positive he could achieve the same release with just about any woman. On the other hand, he could have chosen another if he'd wished. And she, too, had wanted the relief of such glorious spending and of having her body relax. It was the first time in days she didn't feel like crawling out of her own skin.

"As did I," she said, deciding to be truthful.

He turned his face toward her. "Most women would slap me for my words. Only you would utter them back to me."

There was nothing to say to that. Each time she was with him, and not only while tugging, she liked his company even more. Their long conversation the night before had been a novel experience.

"What are you thinking behind your sparkling eyes?" he asked.

Should she reveal her burgeoning feelings?

"I hope you're thinking how nice it is to be together," Denbigh added before she could answer. "Because I should tell you I've never felt this precise way about anyone. I know we've had three abrupt assignments, and I have not treated you as you deserve to be treated," he trailed off and squeezed her hand.

"Meaning with posies sent to my door along with invitations for outings?"

"Flowers? No, I suppose not, but as to the invitation, I did try, if you recall."

Sarah couldn't help frowning. Turning on her side, she drew the blanket up to cover her breasts in belated modesty. Then she fixed her gaze on his.

"I don't recall anything about an invitation."

He frowned in return. "After our last ... enjoyable encounter, when you decamped into the dawn's mist like a soldier leaving the battlefield, I sent a

missive round to your door, checking on you, inviting you to let me escort you somewhere.”

This information changed if not everything, then something—a little blossoming notion inside of her that maybe he did care beyond the obvious joy of how they danced the blanket hornpipe.

“I never received it,” she said, watching his reaction.

A stunned expression crossed his handsome features. “I see.”

After a moment, he added, “I thought you were a rather calculating female, to tell you the truth.”

“Calculating?” she asked, when he stroked the side of her face.

“Actually, I thought *heartless*. After we had such a night of passion, the way you could walk out and then ignore me, well, it seemed as if you behaved more like—”

“A man?” she supplied, doing a little stroking of her own, exploring the muscles of his shoulder with her free hand.

“Precisely,” Denbigh agreed with a grin. “Although not like *me*, I beg to differ. I have never made love to a woman and then discounted her presence.”

“How gentlemanly of you,” she teased. Then Sarah told him truthfully, “I’m sorry I didn’t receive your note.”

“How do you suppose that happened?” he mused. “Poorly trained staff?”

“I have no idea.” The only thing she remembered at the time was feeling hurt by his disregard, and being happy Julia was staying with her to keep her distracted. “If I’d received your invitation, I would have accepted it. And gladly. For, I, too, have never felt this way about anyone.”

By the squeezing of her heart, it was love. *Did people fall in love so quickly?* She assumed they usually went on outings and to dances and parties, getting to know each other better before letting their heart take over.

But she still recalled Lady Dauschande’s dinner. Sarah had seen many a handsome lord since moving to London, mostly through the black lace veil of her mourning outfits. However, she would swear a jarring jolt had gone through her at first spying Lord Miles Denbigh. When his eyes met hers, she’d wanted nothing more than to get to know him. Moreover, they’d communicated wordlessly that entire evening until they’d ended up on the hard-backed sofa.

She hadn’t regretted it for a moment for she’d found newfound happiness in his arms and, finally, an understanding of what magic a man and a woman could share.

“You should probably get back to your room,” he said, surprising her with his abrupt dismissal.

She had hoped, after a few minutes rest, they would enjoy themselves again.

Keeping her tone light, she asked, “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

His eyes darkened again. “No.”

With that, he kissed her once more, stealing her breath, and making her heart beat a quick tattoo. Kissing him had rapidly become her most preferred thing, next to...

He tilted his head, slanting his mouth across hers, while his hand slipped below the blanket to caress her breasts, then lower to stroke the smooth flat skin of her belly, and below.

While she was still wondering at his mercurial mood, his strong fingers dipped between the petals of her woman’s core, stroking and teasing her nubbin.

“Miles,” she breathed against his mouth.

“Sarah,” he returned. He said nothing more, but simply caressed her, lightly at first until her hips bucked against his hand, and he quickened the pace. Then his fingers slipped inside her wet passage.

Her own hands now gripped his shoulders.

“Together,” she demanded, knowing she could come from his skilled touch, but wanting him with her.

“As you wish, my lady.”

She found herself drawn on top of him, looking down into his wicked eyes.

“Will you ride me better than you rode the horse today?”

His naughty words thrilled her. She pressed herself up, hands on his chest, watching his fascinated gaze take in her breasts hanging in front of his face.

Lifting her hips, she took hold of his firm shaft, and—ready for him—impaled herself.

“Ah,” she sighed, hearing him do the same. Sarah began to rock in the natural motion of a cantering horse, feeling both in control and also entirely out of it. His hands palmed her swaying breasts, and she rested her fingers upon his shoulders to give herself some leverage as she rose and fell, milking his arousal with infinite care, watching the emotions play across his face.

When her woman’s core tightened, she arched her head back and closed

her eyes, before quickening her pace.

His hands, now upon her hips, assisted her movements, as she rose and fell, up and down upon his rigidity.

And then, when she wondered if she could handle the building tension a second longer, one of his hands left her waist and touched the throbbing center of her desire, stroking it. She feared she had cried out loudly, but wasn't sure if it was merely in her mind. Then, she shattered into deliciously fulfilled pieces, before he practically shoved her aside as his answering climax overtook him.

For the second time, they lay upon their backs and stared at the canopy.

"You really must get going," he said.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" she teased for the second time.

"I'm trying to save your reputation. If the excitement over Hollingsworth's clumsiness has died down, and the doctor has come and gone, then someone might notice our absence. If you were to be caught leaving my room," he trailed off.

"Then I guess you would have to marry me," Sarah quipped without thinking.

They both froze. Time stood still, as if she were inside the infernal longcase clock again, blocking the pendulum.

Then she expelled a breath. "I was speaking in jest," she felt the urge to explain, in case she'd made it incredibly awkward.

"I know," he said. "But it's not outside the realm of possibility. Is it?"

In another long moment of silence, she digested his words.

"No," she said at last. "It most assuredly is not."

"Robbery most foul!" came a female shriek from the landing at the top of the stairs.



* * *

Miles turned and stared at her.

"What?" Sarah asked with utmost innocence. "You can't possibly think it was me. I was with you riding upon that blasted horse," she said, sitting up,

holding the sheet to her breasts. “And then, I can most assuredly vow you’ve had your eyes and your hands upon me for the last hour as we took turns riding each other.”

He sighed, hating being forced to switch from lover to bloodhound again.

“On your way to my room, perhaps, while feeling peppery, your fingers itched.”

She raised a beautifully arched eyebrow. “Is that what you think women do when feeling peppery?” Her tone was mocking, and she pushed herself to the edge of the bed, her feet dangling over the side. “We decide to steal something on our way to meeting our paramour?”

“Not necessarily any woman.”

She stood, completely naked, her back to him. “You must help me dress, and quickly,” she said, her tone no longer warm or friendly.

“I’m merely saying you had time and means,” he said, but got to his feet and began the arduous process, starting with her chemise.

“As did many of the others. What about Mr. Asher? He had to let all his staff go. Did you know that? He said he would somehow remedy the situation. Perhaps robbery is his remedy.”

She had a point. He was about to tell her so, as she tied the string of her pantalettes, when there was a knock at the door. They froze momentarily. With no other option, he asked where she wished to hide.

“In the wardrobe or under the bed?”

In response, she grabbed the rest of her clothes in a bundle and ran to the thick draperies where she disappeared behind them, proving herself a woman experienced in concealing herself.

Slipping into his banyan, he answered a second rap upon his door. Yanking it open, he was faced with Lady Macroun’s paramour.

“Sorry to disturb your ... uh, nap,” Lord Fenway said, his eyes flitting past Denbigh to take in the utter disarray of the bed. “There’s a bit of bad bread going on in the green drawing room. The viscountess is requesting your presence at once.”

“Please tell Lady Macroun I shall be there upon the instant.” And he closed the door, hoping he hadn’t been rude. When he turned around, Sarah had already reappeared.

“You must finish dressing me first,” she said, “or I shall be trapped here.”

“Agreed.” With all due haste, he laced and hooked until she was passingly robed, and hopefully, only her maid would be the wiser.

“Go straight back to your room,” he urged, “even if all the excitement is happening in the drawing room.”

Her expression turned to exasperation. “Of course. I’m not a fool. I only hope Dorie is there to tidy me up.”

“Ready?” he asked, feeling the mad urge to kiss her, which he denied himself, given the now-stiff set to her shoulders.

Nodding, she let him open the door a crack while she peered out, barely hesitating before she stepped into the hall, moving to the far side of it before swiftly walking away. He shook his head at the ease with which she handled furtive maneuvers.

Miles had never dressed so fast in his life. Three more minutes and he was hurrying into the second-floor drawing room.

“There you are, Lord Denbigh,” Lady Macroun began. She was standing between two ladies, both unmistakably uppish and crabbed, with Lord Fenway leaning by the fireplace, and other onlookers standing in clusters.

He rolled his eyes. If the viscountess wanted discretion, she’d gone about this all wrong. Nevertheless, he approached the trio of ladies.

“I heard the cry of robbery,” he began.

“Most foul,” Lady Burtram added.

Miles wondered if there was any other kind in the eyes of the victim.

“Indeed,” said her husband from a safe distance by the window, seated and drinking brandy.

“Lies!” Lady Totterly exclaimed. “I *found* it. How do I know it’s yours?”

“How do you know?” spluttered Lady Burtram. “You know because I am telling you.”

“What did you find?” Miles addressed Lady Totterly, who had her hand clasped over her chest. Slowly, she peeled back her fingers to reveal a stunning sapphire broach.

Lady Burtram sighed. “I haven’t seen it in over a fortnight.” She looked to her husband. “When was the Huntingdon party?”

“The sixth of December,” Lord Burtram intoned.

“How do you know that?” his wife asked, surprised. “You don’t even recall the date of our children’s births.”

His face reddened at the insult. “I know because it was the St. Nicholas Day party.”

“Oh,” she said, chastised, since St. Nicholas Day always fell upon the sixth. “So, it was. That was the last time I wore it.”

Miles frowned and addressed Lady Totterly again. “You found the broach at the Earl of Huntingdon’s townhouse?”

Lady Totterly shook her head, then lifted her chin defensively. “I’ve never been there.”

Miles set his confusion down to having been pulled so recently from the arms of a goddess after having two climaxes that had him seeing stars.

“Where exactly did you find it?”

“Why, right downstairs. In the front hall.”

This time, it was Lady Macroun who gasped. “Cecelia, it was very wrong of you. You ought to have brought your discovery to my attention immediately, so I could have asked my other guests.”

Lady Totterly began to remove the broach, whose sapphires reminded Miles of a certain saucy widow’s sparkling eyes.

“I only pinned it on for the afternoon,” Lady Totterly explained. “I knew if it belonged to someone here, then she would let me know.” She glared at Lady Burtram. “However, before I could even say as much, you started screaming about robbery.”

Lady Burtram had the grace to look chagrined. “It was such a shock to see my broach on your gown,” she said. “I do apologize.”

Miles shook his head. No one cared how puzzling it was that a broach last seen a hundred miles away had turned up in Great Oakley. Just then, Sarah arrived, dressed impeccably, in a deep-blue gown, with her hair redressed with curls and pearls. She looked as if she’d spent the day reading a book and not mixing giblets with him for the past hour.

Taking up a position right inside the doorway, she stood off to one side. Briefly, their eyes met. It was impossible to believe the failed hunt had been only that morning. Even their afternoon of passion, when she’d ridden rantipole on him, seemed as though it had occurred ages ago. And considering the last time he saw her, she was in utter disarray, with even her hair in a snarled if charming mess, he had to tip his hat to her maid.

After another guest leaned close to fill her in about the surprising appearance of a lost broach, he watched her glance at her fingers, pick at some lint on her sleeve, looking bored. *Hm*.

“Everything has worked out splendidly,” Lady Macroun said, her relief palpable. Not only had there been no case of thievery that could darken her reputation as a hostess, quite the contrary, a second guest had recovered jewelry.

What a coincidence, Miles thought, not believing such a thing for a moment.

Chapter 10

The following day, the Hollingsworths left as soon as his lordship, his bandaged arm in a sling, was comfortable enough to do so and before the snow started. The rest of them settled in for a day's worth of diversions, with the promise of another attempt at a hunt in two days.

Knowing the luxury of another week was before them, Miles tried to keep from devouring Sarah with his eyes—and with his mouth. His perception of her had shifted from an opportunist to a delightful woman with whom he could allow his feelings to grow. Moreover, if he could fight the sensual pull of her, he would treat her as a lady ought to be treated.

At least for a day or two, until she begged for his wickeder self to come out and play.

Meanwhile, no one stole anything or screamed about robbery for a day, and they enjoyed charades, rounds of card games, backgammon, chess, checkers, and another game of Steal the White Loaf. Someone even decided to count the remaining mistletoe berries and announced a shocking depletion of them.

That evening, on the eve of the new year, as Lady Macroun had promised, there was an opportunity to dance with the same accomplished guest playing the piano while the men and women lined up in Forde Hall's spacious ballroom. The gathering was informal, wine flowed freely, and everyone laughed until the wee hours. Afterward, they had a late light supper.

Miles had danced with all the single ladies, even Lady Frances so as not be rude. Yet when she pressed against him, he found nothing exciting about it, feeling a little sorry for having duped her on her father's behalf. Firmly, and as politely as possible, he increased the distance between them until the music stopped.

During each dance, he kept his gaze upon Sarah, taking note of her partners and whether she preferred any man. It seemed she didn't. Even Mr. Asher had been favored with only two dances.

When it was his turn to dance with her, staring into her glittering cerulean eyes and admiring the joyful curve of her mouth, it was difficult not to think of her naked beneath him, and his vow to behave like a gentleman was sorely

tested.

Given their past, it had not been particularly surprising when Sarah had been willing to engage in an ardent hour in his bed. It had confirmed their lovemaking was beyond the pale, beyond anything in fact he'd ever experienced. And discovering she'd not received his missive allowed him to think well of her again.

In fact, his mistaken notion of her as a loose, conniving woman was precisely that—mistaken. He couldn't recall her name having been linked with any man's since her husband's death. She wasn't a lightskirt, although she was definitely light-fingered.

His own diamond tie tack was still missing, and he'd had no one else in his bedroom since her, except his valet, whom he trusted more than he trusted himself. And she'd been at every single party where jewels had gone missing in the past two months, including the Earl of Huntingdon's St. Nicholas party. Directly after the scene in the drawing room, Miles had confirmed her name on the list of guests he'd created for all the parties in the past two months.

But why? She had plenty of money from her dead husband. It made no sense unless she stole for the thrill of it.

At the end of the evening, when it was already the following morning, he escorted Sarah no farther than the top of the stairs.

"I know what you're doing," she spoke like a mouse in the cheese so no one else could hear.

He tilted his head. "I am not doing anything except treating you like the lady you are."

"I know, and I appreciate it. You're on your best behavior, not at all like the man who first swept me off my feet, literally, at Lady Dauschande's."

She had a twinkle in her eye. Without touching him, her presence enveloped him along with her soft, floral fragrance. He nearly leaned closer, forgetting momentarily where they were.

"Good night, Lord Denbigh," she said and walked away.



* * *

A brief snowfall blanketed the gardens and fields around the house. With no travel to worry about, Miles didn't mind in the least, and Sarah proclaimed it "As fine a Christmastide adornment as any of the festive sprigs and garlands in the house."

He invited her, along with a small, intrepid group, to take a stroll in the new snow, which they did, with a reward of mulled wine when they returned to the manor. That day and the next passed without incident until late afternoon.

"Wicked thievery," he heard a woman's voice. *Not again!*

Rising from the desk in his room where he was writing to his parents, wishing them happy returns of the Christmas season, he glanced down to see only one line of his neat scrawl and, below it, the sketch of a woman's face. Clearly, he'd been doing more wool-gathering over a certain blue-eyed widowed countess than writing. Shrugging into his jacket, he left his room and hurried along the hall to find Lady Evingdon in great distress.

By happenstance, coming from the other direction and her own room was Sarah.

"Oh, Lady Worthington, lock up your valuables!" the older lady declared.

Sarah appeared to falter but quickly recovered. "What has happened?"

But her ladyship now turned to him. "Lord Denbigh, what will I do?"

Before he could respond, they were set upon by guests coming out of their rooms and up the staircase, as well as Lady Macroun, looking downright peevish at the notion of another unpleasant scene.

"What is the matter, my lady?" he asked, having to raise his voice above the others, but taking the trouble to narrow his eyes at Sarah, because he feared she was the cause of the latest disturbance.

Instead of growing quieter so the countess could reply, the guests, particularly the female ones, were becoming louder, all squawking at once, each sounding as distraught as the next.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please, calm yourselves," Denbigh commanded.

Everyone hushed this time, and then he asked Lady Evingdon once more, "Are you saying you have been robbed? If so, what was stolen?"

The countess lifted her chin. "I noticed I was missing my favorite shawl."

A shawl! All this fuss for something his granny could have knitted. Miles noticed Sarah raise her head and shoot him a disarming grin.

See, she seemed to be saying, I didn't do anything.

"It had a ruby brooch attached to it," Lady Evingdon added, getting his

full attention. “Otherwise, I might not have noticed the broach’s absence.”

“Do you know when the shawl and broach went missing?” he asked, glancing at Sarah again, who now appeared a little less cock-sure.

Countess Evingdon looked to her husband, who shrugged. Obviously, the man didn’t give a damn about the shawl or the broach.

“Did you have it this morning?” Miles tried again.

“I am not entirely sure,” the countess said. “It may have been missing since yesterday. I do know where I left it, and now, it’s not there.”

He sent a questioning look to Sarah, whose eyes widened, looking affronted.

Lady Macroun stepped forward. “Perhaps we have a guest who felt the chill and, seeing your shawl left lying around, thought it the perfect remedy.”

Denbigh had to hand it to the viscountess. In a heartbeat, she’d managed to put together a tale that would save face to the guilty party and keep her gathering a congenial one.

“But I didn’t leave it lying anywhere except over a chair in my room,” the wronged lady protested.

Denbigh considered for a moment.

“I suppose if the shawl’s borrower would return it immediately, I’m sure all will be forgiven. After all, the house is particularly drafty this time of year.”

“I beg your pardon,” Lady Macroun rebuked him. “My home is not drafty. Ever!”

He sighed. “I am only agreeing this wasn’t an act of intentional larceny. Someone might have walked past Lady Evingdon’s room, where the door was ajar, and this person, feeling chilly as *you* said, especially with the frosty day we had yesterday and then the snow, decided to borrow the shawl for a brief period.”

“And then?” Lady Evingdon asked, her voice as cold as his portrayal of Forde Hall. “*Borrowing* usually indicates returning. And it has not been returned. Moreover, I did not leave my door open.” She turned again to her husband for confirmation, but Lord Evingdon merely crossed his arms.

Miles sighed. “We’ll give the borrower a single hour to return the item, privately, so there shall be no embarrassment. Otherwise,” and he looked around him at all the gaping faces, “rooms will be searched.”

At this, Lady Macroun gave an exclamation of dismay and fanned herself. “I hope that isn’t necessary, Lord Denbigh.”

Other guests looked equally unsettled, including Sarah—to his consternation. No one wanted their personal belongings rifled through, and it would take him the rest of the Twelvetide to get through all the rooms. He fervently hoped the threat of such an unpleasant action was enough.

Moreover, if it came to that, he would start with Sarah's room and discover what other treasures he could dig up, although it would give him no joy.

But first, he had to give the thief the opportunity to come forth.

"I shall wait in the library for the full hour, and I hope the borrower comes to see me, knowing this will be handled with all due discretion."

Trying not to look over at Sarah, he turned heel, pushed his way through the onlookers, and went downstairs, feeling all their eyes upon him. By a happy fluke, he ran into the butler.

"Bring a glass of wine," he began. "No, make it brandy, to the library. Actually, anything other than the overly sweet eggy cream stuff," he added. "It's starting to give me a toothache."

"Yes, sir. Brandy, sir."

With the promise of such a perfect fortification, Miles headed to the library. Taking the most comfortable chair—an upholstered and winged reading chair—he propped his feet upon the tufted ottoman and awaited his drink and, with any luck, the beautiful twitcher. If she knew what was good for her.

As he hoped, the door pushed open a few moments later. However, the lady who entered was Lady Frances. Miles frowned at the unexpected apparition of the earl's daughter.

"You're not the thief," he said, rising to his feet in the presence of a lady, no matter how unwelcome.

"Of course not, but how do you know?" She thought it a particular compliment by the way she made a moue of her lips and looked up at him from under her lashes. How he detested simpering!

"Because it would be entirely out of character, and your father can buy you a hundred shawls and at least three ruby broaches."

She smiled. "True. Five broaches, I believe. But I think you're certain I'm not the miscreant because you already know who it is. Am I right?"

He shrugged. *Precisely whom was she judging and condemning?* He wasn't going to answer her, nor ask what she thought she knew. "Why are you here?"

“Why, to see you, naturally. This seemed the perfect opportunity to speak with you privately. I’ve been thinking of us.”

“Us!” his tone alarmed, although she didn’t appear to notice.

“I haven’t come across anyone I like spending time with as much as I did you. And even though you’ve been a little standoffish since Christmas eve, I suggest we make amends and keep company again.”

Sighing, he wasn’t sure how to go about getting her to leave him alone. He couldn’t humiliate her with the truth, that she’d been merely a paid assignment. Yet nor could he allow her to keep any kind of hope in his regard.

He needed to make himself utterly unappealing. *Was such a thing possible?* he asked himself with a terrible lack of humility. In all honesty, though, women had always fallen all over him. Hence his overblown reaction to the mistaken notion Sarah had ignored his invitation following their lovemaking.

“Lord Denbigh,” Frances said, and he realized he’d forgotten her again while thinking of Sarah.

“I am too old for you,” he began.

She grinned. “Men tend to die at a younger age, so that signifies nothing but a blessing. Should we marry, I could be a widow on the younger side of life and find another mate.”

His mouth dropped open, and he closed it closed it with a sharp clack of his teeth. What a bean, she was. A veritable shrew, calling his early death *a blessing*.

“You are too young for me,” he tried again.

She frowned, not taking his meaning that she was childish and shallow. The next instant, the butler arrived with his brandy.

“I’ll have another one, good man,” Miles said, taking the glass from the silver tray.

The butler barely blinked. “Very good, sir.”

“But you haven’t even started that one,” Frances pointed out.

Keeping his gaze on her, Miles tilted the glass and swallowed every drop in one long draught. It was a superior liquor, and he would have to thank Lady Macroun for stocking it. Managing to set the glass back upon the butler’s tray before the man turned away, Miles hoped this was evidence of his unworthiness. He would try to make it even plainer.

“I drink too much,” he stated. “And I stay up too late. I gamble, and I

enjoy many women. At the same time,” he added, hoping to shock the little princess out of his life. “I would never be a suitable husband for you, unless you don’t mind being made the object of derision.”

Unfortunately, Lady Macroun entered at the tail end of his words, and Miles feared she’d overheard him through the door left ajar by her butler.

“Your father would be most unhappy to find you in here alone with Lord Denbigh,” their hostess said, addressing Frances. “Besides, you heard the man as plain as day.”

Lady Macroun didn’t reiterate to which of his disreputable failings she referred, but Frances, who’d lapsed into stunned silence, having undoubtedly never been spoken to in such a frank manner by a man, turned heel and fled.

Thank God!

He and Lady Macroun shared a moment’s awkwardness, but she was a widow and a woman of the world, with a lover who was married, so ... she offered a sardonic smile.

“How is the investigation going?” she asked, brushing aside her friendship with Lady Frances’s father and not bothering to reprimand Miles for his inappropriate words.

“Unless you’ve come to confess,” he quipped, “then my sleuthing is going nowhere presently. But the hour is young, and there is plenty of time for someone to step forward. Not, however, if the perpetrator hears you in here. She, or he, will want confidentiality.”

“Naturally, you’ll tell me who it is once you discover the scoundrel.”

He stared hard at her. “My lady, there was no part of our agreement either demanding or suggesting I disclose anyone whom I might discern has been up to nefarious purposes.”

She blinked. “Of course, once you discover the scoundrel, you’ll tell me,” she repeated.

Sighing, he merely nodded. Ultimately, he would tell her nothing but could think no other way to get rid of her other than to lie. Satisfied, she nodded and departed, pulling the door closed behind her.

Taking his comfortable seat again, he even closed his eyes. A moment later, when the door opened once more, he expected his second glass of brandy. Instead of the butler, Sarah came into view.

Chapter 11

Miles's sliver of hope at her innocence shattered, although he felt a measure of pride at her honesty and courage for exposing herself to him.

"It was you," he said, rising to his feet for the second time.

"It was me, what?" she asked, the slight smile she wore vanishing instantly.

"You are the robber."

She drew herself up, looking insulted. "Of a shawl?"

"And a ruby broach," he reminded her. "It would go nicely with your necklace, I suppose."

She clasped a hand to her chest where the thin chain rested.

"You have not let me out of your sight," she said softly, now sounding hurt more than affronted.

He preferred her offended to wounded.

"Not the whole time," he pointed out, "You've had plenty of opportunity."

"After what we did together," she said, a little too loudly, precisely as the butler entered again with another glass of brandy.

Without hesitating, Sarah took it from the tray and downed a large swallow, then began coughing. Miles stepped forward to pat her back, but she held up her hand, keeping him away. After choking on the strong liquor and having a few tears squeezed out of her, she coughed politely.

"Another glass, please," he said to the butler, who sighed and departed. Then Miles gave her his handkerchief.

"Please recall you've given me this," she snapped, brandishing it in his face before dabbing at her cheeks. "I would hate for you to accuse me of stealing it later."

Waiting for Sarah to gather herself, he hoped she wasn't going to fall into a great tweague. After all, she'd known of his suspicions from the start.

Putting her free hand on her shapely hip, she glared at him. "After what we did together," she began again, "I cannot believe you would accuse me so readily."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other," he said, no matter how

splendid that one thing had been. “I don’t want to accuse you, not of anything. If you need ... assistance with your financial accounts or if you simply like other people’s pretty things, perhaps I can help.”

Her eyes opened wider and wider as he prattled. Looking horrified, she shook her head.

“Stop, please. You’re ruining everything. Tell me, why aren’t you considering the other guests?”

“Why would I?” he asked, “when I have you as my prime suspect?”

“Argh!” she exclaimed. “Don’t be a blunderbuss, Denbigh, or you’re apt to miss what’s really going on here.”

“Why did you come to the library, then?” he asked. “If not to confess?”

Rolling her eyes, she took another sip, smaller this time. “I wondered if I could help,” she said at last. “I noticed when we left the drawing room Lord Evingdon—”

There was a tap on the door, too quick to be Lady Macroun’s beleaguered butler with the brandy. Sure enough, the very man whose name had been upon Sarah’s lips entered.

As soon as the Earl of Evingdon saw Sarah, he blanched, halted, and looked over his shoulder, but he continued into the room, nonetheless.

“May I have a word with you? Alone?” Lord Evingdon asked, glancing sideways toward Sarah.

“Of course,” Miles said. “Lady Worthington, thank you for your concern.”



* * *

Sarah shrugged slightly, but what could she do except leave? She supposed Lord Evingdon would make clear to Denbigh what she’d been about to tell him. With a nod to each of the gentlemen, she left. In the hallway, she realized she was strolling along with a brandy in hand, probably something a refined lady didn’t do.

They certainly didn’t spend a lazy hour in bed with a man who wasn’t their husband, no matter how charming and salty a dog in the doublet he was.

And Miles Denbigh was all that and more.

Sighing, she finished the drink and set the empty glass on a plant stand before making her way upstairs.

She needed to cease being bewattled and baffle-headed over the viscount and figure out how to rid herself of the last two pieces of jewelry. With all these hysterical claims of thievery causing Denbigh's threat to search their rooms, if he actually did so, she would find herself begging out of Newgate.

Perhaps she should attempt one of the returns that instant. *Where was Lady Abingley's room?*

Mr. Asher materialized in front of her, and she gave a startled gasp.

"My apologies, Lady Worthington. I'm no bugaboo. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Quite all right. My fault. I was lost in my thoughts."

"Good ones, I hope," he said politely.

If he only knew. Still, his presence and the reminder of how many guests were milling about thwarted her idea. Tomorrow, the men had determined to try the hunt once more. All the women had agreed to go again, too, but Sarah was determined to have a sudden headache or upset stomach at the very last moment, when it was impossible for Denbigh to bow out.

By the time they returned from tormenting some fox or vixen, she hoped to have returned everything to their rightful owners. In the meantime, she expected Denbigh to come crawling and begging her forgiveness for suspecting her in the matter of the silly shawl.



* * *

Sarah had half-hoped, half-dreaded the tap at her door late that night.

During a festive hour of drinks before dinner, Denbigh announced the matter of the stolen shawl with attached broach had been solved. Into the immediate rush of questions, poured out like scandal broth from a teapot, he declared it had been a misunderstanding. Everyone noticed, however, that the Evingdons had departed Forde Hall.

After another evening of amusements, when all the guests were retiring,

Denbigh had caught Sarah's eye and nodded his head, giving her a clue he would be knocking at her door.

Quickly yanking it open so he could slip inside before being seen, she took a step back, immediately overcome by his presence and his heady scent, which would always remind her of their lovemaking.

"I suppose you've come to apologize," she guessed.

"In fact, I have." With his expression sheepish, he bowed his head. "I accused you wrongly. Evingdon had given his wife's shawl to one of Lady Macroun's parlor maids for, shall we say, services rendered, not knowing the broach was attached."

"What a cork-brained cod's head!" Sarah declared. "How could he think his wife wouldn't notice when an article of her clothing went missing—broach or not?"

"Indeed, I suppose, as with most men, including myself, a shawl seems a trifle."

She shook her head in disgust. "He confessed to you his transgression?"

"He did, man to man, of course. I sought out the appropriate maid and retrieved the shawl and broach, which she'd already put in a keepsake box."

"I bet she had. It was well-earned, poor thing." Sarah recalled the portly figure of Lord Evingdon, who suffered from a constantly dripping nose and dry lips, which might have been due to the cold, but nonetheless made him less-than-ideal as a paramour.

"She's lucky she didn't lose her post," Denbigh pointed out. "She would if Lady Macroun had become involved. I returned the shawl to the earl, who gave it to his countess, who is *not* a cork-brained cod's head and announced she was leaving upon the instant. Everyone knows Evingdon has a mistress in Mayfair, but to flaunt his sugar stick here in the country was too much for her ladyship, especially when he did so with a mere maid."

"I suppose if he must have a mistress," Sarah surmised, "the countess prefers her husband betray her with a high-flier. I can see how she might be insulted by his dalliance with a servant."

He shook his head, which she hoped indicated his disapproval of the earl's transgressions, for she, like Lady Evingdon, wouldn't take kindly to such goings-on, neither with a maid, nor a well-heeled mistress in Town.

"Not all men act thusly?" she said, although it came out as a question. She hadn't had a chance to find out if her erstwhile husband kept a mistress.

Denbigh looked astonished. "Certainly not. I like to think the majority of

men do not. Perhaps there is a higher percentage of rakes and bucks in the ranks of the *ton* than in the general population, but it is not a requirement, I assure you. You simply hear of the worst offenders.”

“That’s true,” she said with relief. His outrage bespoke his condemnation of the indecorous behavior.

“I learned of the maid’s receipt of the shawl from Dorie,” she offered.

“Which is why you came to the library,” he said, then offered another apology.

She waved it off. “And Lady Macroun believes this was all a misunderstanding?”

“Just so,” he confirmed, “and her reputation as a hostess is still of the highest caliber.” He took a step closer. “I, for one, think this is the best Twelvetide I’ve ever attended.” Ending his words with a grin, he took her into his arms.

With her pulse racing and her insides melting, she looked up into his adorable face. She’d decided she wasn’t going to make him grovel. The fact he’d come to her door and admitted his mistake was sufficient.

“It’s passing fair, I suppose,” she conceded.

He put his head back and laughed. “If that’s the case, my lady, let me try to make it the absolute tip-top of Yuletide events.”

Leaning down, he claimed her lips at the same time as his broad hands slipped down to her bottom, each grasping a round cheek. Squeezing gently, he tilted her hips against him.

“Mm,” she murmured.

“Is your pudding-faced maid liable to interrupt us?”

“Don’t be unkind,” she admonished, “and definitely not.” Sarah sank her fingers into his hair and felt him shudder.

But he drew back a moment. “You know you hardly need a lady’s maid. When the staff was off the day after Christmas, you managed to recover and get all prinked up directly after our ... dalliance, looking as fine as ever you do.”

She felt her cheeks warm. Having lived most of her life as a parson’s daughter, she could certainly do her own hair, but she supposed it was a skill those of his class never mastered.

“I am a woman of many talents,” she told him.

Instantly, his eyes darkened. “Oh, I know that. And I love each one you’ve demonstrated.” He led her toward the bed. “If there are any others

you'd like to share, please, feel free to do so.”
Sarah let him begin to undress her.

Chapter 12

Why was she being such an addle-pated ninny? Wandering the hallway, Sarah attempted to recall the door she'd seen her next lucky recipient go in and out of. She could hardly ask a servant which room belonged to Lady Abingley, yet short of doing so, Sarah was at a loss. The lady, herself, was fairly forgettable, too. A baroness who enjoyed needlepoint and sherry, and little else. Somehow, the woman had acquired a breathtaking necklace of emeralds and pearls, which had inevitably caught Sarah's sister's eye. If only the baroness's room was as easy to determine.

That morning, Sarah had managed to evade another torturous carriage ride with ladies who despised her for being a young widow. Or for being one of the dreaded *nouveau riche*. Or both. In any case, after the gentlemen mounted their hunters for the morning's escapade, and all the women had been assigned a carriage, she fell terribly ill with both a stomachache and a megrim, being unable to choose.

For one dodgy moment, Lady Macroun had offered to stay. However, it was a half-hearted offer as their hostess desperately wanted to attend the hunt and enjoy the picnic with her guests. The countess hadn't put up a fuss when Sarah insisted she should go.

"Don't get up to any mischief," Lady Macroun had called back to her.

Oddsbodkins! Sarah shivered. What a perceptive thing to say! And now here she was, doing her best to move swiftly since she was all but certain Denbigh would return to spy on her as soon as he realized she was not in any of the carriages. Still, it could be a full hour, at least, before he appeared.

In a quarter of an hour, she'd managed to surprise two maids-of-all-work and a ladies' personal maid. She'd found out none of those bed chambers belonged to Lady Abingley, but was no wiser as to where the baroness lay her grizzled head each night.

Tapping lightly on another door, upon hearing no answer, Sarah pushed it slowly open. No maid—that was a relief.

Having taken note of the gown the lady was wearing the night before at dinner, she was determined to place the necklace in the room in which that gown was hanging. Moving swiftly to the armoire, Sarah swung open the tall

double-doors. A brief perusal yielded nothing in the way of the familiar dress.

Quick as a July cricket and in hurried succession, she slipped out of the room, knocked on the next door, and entered. Her luck was holding with no one in the room, not even a maid. However, the instant she opened the armoire, she heard someone at the door behind her.

More annoyed than scared, she stepped inside the large wooden cupboard and pulled the door closed behind her. Unlike the longcase in the hall, she was able to peer through the crack between the doors to see a man enter—Mr. Asher. *How strange!*

For a moment, she considered confronting him, and swiftly disabused herself of the idea. Firstly, he ought to be hunting with the rest of the guests. Secondly, he must be a thief. Thirdly, he might be violent and not take too kindly to her popping out of the armoire denouncing him.

Mr. Asher glanced around the room, looking squarely at the armoire for a moment, making Sarah nearly gasp—when his gaze passed over it.

Then he strode to the draperies and pushed them aside. Next thing she knew, he was upon his knees, looking under the bed. He seemed to be searching for something ... or someone. *The Devil take him!* He must have spied her entering the room.

When he started toward the armoire, she cringed. There was no hope now. She would be caught, and no amount of pressing herself back into the lady's gowns would hide her.

A maid's voice came to her rescue. "Here now, what are you doing in her ladyship's room?"

Sarah was as eager as the servant to hear Mr. Asher's answer.

"I thought I heard someone in here as I was passing by," he began, and Sarah rolled her eyes.

"I thank you kindly, but it appears there is no one here, sir, except you."

Sarah was impressed with the maid's no-nonsense tone. Along with all the servants, the young woman had probably been told to keep an eye out for anyone suspicious and probably thought she'd discovered a sneaking budge.

"Perhaps I should call upon a footman," the maid added.

"No need," Mr. Asher said, and he ran, harum scarum by the sound of it.

"And good riddance," the maid muttered, mirroring Sarah's exact thoughts.

After taking another look around and smoothing the counterpane, the

servant left. Still, Sarah waited another minute before pushing open the armoire door, unfolding herself, and stepping out. Turning, she realized she'd been crouching against the very gown for which she'd been searching.

Sighing with relief, she drew the necklace from the watch pocket of her dress, in the seam directly under her right breast, where it had caused an unsightly bulge. *Now, where to hide the wretched sparkler?* Glancing again at the armoire, she realized the lady had three shelves of shoes on the left side—half-boots and ankle-length boots made of kid leather, taller leather boots with a wool lining, and at least a dozen pairs of pointy toed silk and satin slippers in every color.

Gracious! It was doubtful Lady Abingley could wear them all before they left Forde Hall. Additionally, she was wearing yet another pair even then while seated in a bumpy carriage.

Hoping she chose correctly, Sarah slipped the necklace into the small toe-section of a green and silver slipper with coral-colored trim. By happy chance, the lady wouldn't wear it until she got back to Town. And then, it would be a mystery indeed!

Considering it a job well done, she went downstairs and asked one of the staff for a cup of coffee and a few biscuits to celebrate her success. Then, she chose a book from the library. Happily, Lady Macroun's collection wasn't all boring history books and ancient Greek and Latin tomes. She found Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and settled in for an enjoyable half hour of peaceful leisure.

Denbigh strode into the house at about the time she expected, undoubtedly having raced as if the Devil were at his back, to catch her in the act of whatever he imagined she was doing. After she heard his footsteps criss-cross the foyer and then their echoes fade up the stairs before returning again, he finally stuck his head around the open library door.

"Ah-ha," he said.

Maintaining her expression of perfect placidity, she asked, "Are you well?" And then she took a sip of the dregs of her now-cold brew.

"The question is, Lady Worthington, are you well?" he returned. "I heard from Lady Macroun you had every known malady under the sun, and feeling as ill as Dick's hatband. Yet here I find you the pinnacle of perfect health. What's that you're drinking?"

"Coffee. Shall I ring for a cup for you?"

"And what are you eating?" he pressed.

“Sweet almond biscuits. Divine.” There was nothing left but crumbs.

“Those are hardly the nourishments for an invalid. You should be tucked up in bed with slippers and simples. What about your head and your stomach?”

“Much recovered. Thank you for asking. What about your fox?”

“Still alive at this moment, I expect.” With that, he sank into the chair opposite her.

She blinked and smiled at him. “So why are you here? I thought you loved to ride and to hunt, to follow the horn and hound, and all that manly stuff.”

“You know I do.”

“Then why—?” she began again.

Denbigh held up his hand. “Don’t you dare ask me.”

“Very well. But I am going to continue this wonderful book. I’d always meant to read it, and now I have the chance. I’m not going to leave this seat until the hunting party returns. And I’m certainly not going to go upstairs, nor anywhere near your room, nor let you near mine. That way lies the ruin of my reputation. In fact, it would be best if you went right back outside, mounted your spirited rum prancer, and returned to the hunt so as not to cause suspicion.”

He offered her a wry smile. “How do I explain my hasty desertion?”

She shrugged. “If asked, you can tell them you needed to return to the manor to make your waters somewhere private. Perhaps you considered it too chilly outside to do what men usually do behind a tree.”

His shocked expression had been worth the gibe.

“Or you can tell them when you heard of my distress, you were so deeply disturbed you rushed back to check on me because you care about me so very much. In fact, you are madly, deeply in love with me.”

She’d kept her tone light, but his expression turned serious. To her surprise, he reached across the small reading table between them and took hold of her hand, where it rested upon the open book.

“I do, in fact, care about you, Lady Worthington. And in a mad, deep way, too.”

Those few words rendered her speechless. She blinked.

“Have you nothing to say?” he asked.

Truly, she didn’t. The Viscount, Lord Miles Denbigh, whom she found entirely desirable in every possible way, was holding her hand and declaring

he cared for her.

She stared at their joined hands, then back at Denbigh. She'd never had a man tell her anything like it, except her father, who professed his affection even while telling her it was for the best if she married the ancient Earl of Worthington. And when she'd had a few selfish tears, her father had explained how truly lucky she was to have caught the earl's eye.

"Any woman would be thrilled," Parson Sudbury had said.

Most definitely, she had not been thrilled, but she was a dutiful daughter. When he'd pointed her toward the altar, she'd let him marry her to the old earl. And while Lord Worthington had kindly professed her to be "a pretty, clever young woman," he had never said anything about caring for her.

While she'd been fully prepared to live with and obey the earl and to give him her body, the good Lord had taken him home to rest. And then she had felt lucky, indeed.

Lifting her gaze to Denbigh's rich brown eyes, she bit her lower lip. Perhaps he felt the need to declare his affection for her because of what they'd done during the Christmastide so far, either as a token of his gratitude or to ensure she would do it with him again.

"I ... that is, is this about our swiving?" she asked lamely. "Doing the rantum scantum?"

Chapter 13

Miles was so shocked he nearly released her hand. Naturally, their copulating—glorious as it was—gave him warm feelings for her, but there was definitely something more happening. Something less in the region of his cock, and more to the north.

“I think you to be an exceptional woman,” he said finally. “And not merely for the *rantum scantum*.” He could hardly say the silly phrase without smiling, but he didn’t want her to believe he was making light of anything they did.

“I know we started our association rather in the middle of things. That is, I should have simply told you how fascinating I found you at Lady Dauschande’s instead of tugging you on her sofa.”

“Oh, no,” she interrupted. “The tugging was quite welcome.”

She was utterly remarkable in her frankness.

“Still, I should have immediately courted you and paid you your due in compliments. I shall start now. You are intelligent, thoughtful, beautiful, and have the perfect peppery passion to suit me.”

He watched her cheeks stain red. Amazing, a lady of the *ton*—and a widow, to boot—blushing like a new maid.

“I think we should keep company in Town after this endless party is finally over. Exclusively, if you understand me, and with an eye on *our* future.”

“Our future,” she repeated, her voice hardly above a whisper.

When he squeezed her hand, she offered a small smile.

“You know, I didn’t get to choose the first time. I was an obedient daughter, but everything worked out for the best. It is much more satisfying, I must say, to be given a choice with whom I wish to keep company.”

“Then are we in agreement?” Miles felt a sense of urgency that they came to an understanding, for he could see how easily she might be swept away by some other man, right out from under his nose. Even here in the relatively small pool of eligible single ladies, the men had paid her much attention.

“Yes, I believe we are.” But Sarah withdrew her hand. “Nevertheless, I think it best you go back to the hunt before too much time has passed. It

wouldn't do for them to start wondering, and if the whole household begins to watch us carefully, then....," she trailed off.

Then they would have a much harder time with the rantum scantum, he surmised.

"As you wish, my lady," he said, standing. "You've given me a lovely Christmas so far."

Again, her sweet cheeks turned pink. *What a delight she was!* However, he mustn't let his affection for her cause him to forget her one glaring flaw.

"Please don't do anything disagreeable. Don't get in the suds, as they say. Nothing that will end up in a trial with your getting put in the pillory or sent across the herring pond at the king's expense."

"You have my word," she said, sounding sincere. "By the way, did you know Mr. Asher didn't go on the hunt either?"

"I hadn't noticed. Why?" For a moment, he wondered if the man was a threat to his happiness with Sarah, a competitor for her heart.

"He's snooping about the manor, seeming a little unsavory."

Miles couldn't help barking out a laugh. Perhaps Asher was the reason she was on her best behavior, reading the in library. In which case, he would tip his hat to the man.

"I shall take my leave, and I'm holding you to your word."

When he left her, his spirits were much lifted from what they'd been when he'd arrived.



* * *

Miles remained in a joyful mood after an invigorating ride and a successful hunt. Even the rustic picnic was enjoyable, with plenty of bread, meat, cheese, and fruit, as well as wine and beer. No one made remark of his disappearance, and he hoped it was because they hadn't noticed, too involved in their own festive pleasure.

The only thing missing was Sarah. And the nagging worry returned as to why she'd remained at the manor when, plainly, she was well. She'd given him her word not to get up to anything, but he had no proof it was a solemn

vow, nor that she would keep it.

Soon, his good mood had soured.

“Why do you look so crabbed, Lord Denbigh?” Lady Frances was trying again. He had to hand it to her, she was persistent.

“Not at all, my lady. Merely ready to head indoors out of the cold. Have you enjoyed the hunt so far?”

“Yes. And right from the start, too. The ride was pleasant, and everyone in the carriage was extremely agreeable, much more so than on the first hunt.”

He knew she was speaking about Sarah. The earl’s daughter had never hidden her enjoyment of roasting another. And Lady Worthington probably frightened Frances for being an outsider who’d shown up unexpectedly in her pampered world. But he didn’t have to let her get away with it.

“How so?” he asked, tightly, wondering if he should defend Sarah when it would only draw attention to his burgeoning admiration.

“I don’t want to say more,” Frances said, showing uncharacteristic restraint.

Good, he thought and started to turn away. With the picnic over, they were nearly ready to return to Forde Hall.

Yet Lady Frances wasn’t done. “I would rather ask why you were so hateful to me in the library yesterday. I know you didn’t mean any of those awful things you said. When we were a couple, I would have seen some indication, at least of the drinking, if you were a tippler or a wet soul.”

He sighed. Strangely, he’d never thought of them as a couple because she’d been another duty he’d been obligated to fulfill. Before he could try to explain in a kindlier fashion how they would never suit, she added, “If, as I believe, you are growing a *tendre* for the Widow Worthington, I must caution you from doing so.”

Frances’s restraint had been short-lived, but she had his full attention.

“Must you?” Miles asked.

“She is *not* one of us,” the earl’s daughter said conspiratorially, her voice lowered.

He sensed that had been the exact topic of her carriage ride conversation on the way to the hunt, and probably her picnic talk, too, although Frances wanted to give the impression of being the epitome of discretion.

“Your meaning?” he prompted, feeling his jaw muscles tighten. The truth was, if Sarah hadn’t been elevated to the station of Countess Worthington,

and therefore invited to Lady Dauschande's dinner party, Miles would never have met her. He wondered how many other diamonds in the rough had never been mined because they simply weren't part of the social network of Mayfair's thousand acres.

"Not that I mind, of course," Frances continued, as if she were the sole of magnanimity, "but she came from nowhere, from some place no one has ever heard of."

He'd gone out of his way to learn the name of Sarah's birthplace, Chislehurst, probably best known for its large chalk and flint mines—and to him, for being Sarah's home.

"And what of it?" he asked, realizing he didn't know where Frances had been born, nor the birthplace of most of his acquaintances.

She blinked. "Her title is by marriage, and very recently, too. She's the worst sort of mushroom. I've heard she wore a ruby necklace while in mourning, and that her half-mourning wardrobe was a little too bright. The grays were nearly violet, which is practically purple!"

"I see." *Could his class truly be so petty?* And how had he not noticed it before? "In that case, Lady Frances, I wonder you remain at this Twelvetide party in close proximity to such a level of pariah. The widow's lack of refinement might rub off on you."

"Oh, I don't think it could," she said with utter seriousness.

"If you'll excuse me," he glanced around for someone with whom he could converse—anyone else—who wasn't quite so starched and dim, even his horse. Yet all he saw was more of the same.

"Lord Denbigh," she continued, plainly not realizing his desperate attempt at escape. "I heard her father *sold* her to the Earl of Worthington to fund his parsonage in a regular Smithfield bargain, as they say. Can you imagine such a thing?"

For a moment, he saw a red haze. It addled his brain, he was positive of that, or he never would have spoken the next words. "I'm not sure the parson did any worse than *your* father who paid me to spend a Season with you."

Her face paled, and her mouth opened in a shocked *O*. Then, as any entitled, privileged, pampered lady, she lifted her chin.

"That's ridiculous. Why would he do such a thing? I have had plenty of suitors. He had no need to pay for one."

"He didn't trust you to maintain your refined taste long enough not to let some fortune-hunting swell diddle you into thinking you were a diamond of

the first water.” He raised an eyebrow to indicate he thought her nothing of the kind.

“Why! I...I...!”

He wouldn't be so hard on her if she had a whit of kindness. After all, she was an earl's daughter. She would, indeed, make a good match someday, even if it wasn't a love match. And she had nothing to gain by cutting down those around her who were absolutely no threat to her happiness or her future.

“Personally,” he said through gritted teeth, “I would rather be with a woman for whom someone was willing to pay handsomely in order to gain her hand, than with someone who could only attract men trying to obtain her wealth.”

With a nod of his head, knowing he was going to face an earl in high dudgeon at some point in his future, he walked away.



* * *

Sarah hadn't dared attempt to return the last piece of stolen jewelry after Denbigh left, not with Mr. Asher under foot. Besides, there were still many days to go, and only one pilfered dazzler remaining.

Moreover, Denbigh had confessed to a mad, deep feeling for her. She could think of nothing else after that. She'd been giddy with delight for the past few hours while awaiting the return of the hunting party.

They came streaming into the manor in small groups, except Lady Frances who looked nettled, wearing a more waspish expression than usual. She strode in alone and went straight upstairs to her room.

Not bothered in the least, Sarah welcomed them back, feeling lighter than she had felt since ... since she'd married Lord Worthington and moved to London.

If Denbigh cared for her, and made his choice public, then she would finally belong in a way she never had when appearing out of nowhere in the Worthington townhouse, only to have her husband die mere weeks later, leaving her unknown to everyone.

With Denbigh, she would stand proudly by his side.

There he was, eyes glittering with exhilaration from the ride, searching the foyer and catching sight of her before his generous mouth spread into a smile, warming her all over.

She sighed. She could certainly become accustomed to this feeling of ... love.

Love! It was exactly that. As soon as she acknowledged it, she knew it for the truth. The man she loved was heading straight for her. So much for discretion.

Right before he reached her, Lady Macroun's formidable figure stepped in her path.

"There you are, Lady Worthington. Your cheeks have a glow. Have you fully recovered?"

"I have. Your staff took excellent care of me."

"Perfect. Speaking of the staff, they will be serving refreshments in the upstairs drawing room. You shall hear all about the hunt." She took a step away, then glanced back. "You look lovely in dusky rose, by the way," she added before moving on as any good hostess, to make sure all her guests made it to the right place at the correct time.

And then Denbigh was in front of her.

"Lady Worthington, you look well."

"So everyone keeps telling me," she said, drinking in the sight of him. "I've only just learned about a gathering in the upstairs drawing room."

"Yes, and you aren't allowed to beg off with a megrim."

"I have no intention of doing so, I assure you."

He cocked his head. "And did you keep your promise?"

She couldn't help rolling her eyes, but more than a little pleased he trusted her to tell him the truth.

"I did nothing that would get me transported."

His smile turned into a broad grin, and he offered her his arm. "Can you believe we aren't being made to change for this gathering?"

"You say that, sir, as if men have anything to do but step out of one pair of breeches and into the next, and then shrug out of one coat for another," she scoffed.

He looked surprised. "You don't change all of your layers each time, do you?"

She laughed at his expression. "No, but it is a little more complicated than

your clothing. Some underthings do not work with some dresses, and then there are the shoes and the shawls—”

“And we know how much trouble shawls can get one into,” he quipped.

Shoes, too, she thought, hoping Lady Abingley didn’t pick the gray and green for later in the evening when they changed for dinner.

Chapter 14

As it turned out, Lady Abingley wore peacock blue shoes to perfectly match her gown when they gathered for their eight o'clock meal. Even better, Lady Frances and her superior stares weren't at the dining room table, overflowing with minced pies. Only afterward, did Sarah learn the earl's daughter had departed the way of the Evingdons.

Their Twelvetide gathering was shrinking.

Much later, after a lively turn at Buffy Gruffy, the party broke up for the night. Denbigh stared at her, and she smiled back, guessing they would get together again later when the household had gone to bed. Sure enough, at two in the morning, he tapped upon her door.

As soon as he entered, he scooped her into his arms and deposited her upon the bed. Raised on his elbow, he gazed down at her with his brown eyes, so deep, like burnished walnut wood.

"I think you have the finest, most expressive eyes," she blurted.

They crinkled a little at the corners as he smiled, and then, he leaned down and kissed her.

For each of the remaining days of the Yuletide, Denbigh stayed by her side during the day. They listened to recitals, played card games, and strolled the grounds. When darkness fell, all the guests played charades and once or twice engaged again in the dramatic and slightly dangerous Snap Dragon. Sarah and Denbigh discussed every topic they could think of late into each evening, by the drawing room fire. He no longer looked sideways at her or hinted she might possibly get in the suds with misconduct. In fact, the more time they spent together, the more she loved him and the more he trusted her.

Sarah even went along on the next fox hunt, finding herself in Lady Macroun's carriage. She had a far pleasanter experience than the previous excursion.

And in the wee hours when the rest of the household slept, Denbigh came to her room, or she went to his, until she could hardly imagine how she'd gotten through each night of her life without him.

She also couldn't stop yawning.

"Are you finding your mattress to be uncomfortable?" Lady Macroun

asked when Sarah clamped a hand over her mouth, which felt to be practically splitting open at breakfast.

Lifting her bleary gaze from her coddled eggs and thick bacon, she blinked, feeling muddled. What exactly was their hostess asking and why? *Did she know about the viscount's moonlit visits?*

“Only you are looking a little peaky and worn,” Lady Macroun clarified.

“Oh,” Sarah exclaimed. “The bed is fine. I fear it is simply too much of your fine entertainment in the evenings. I am used to retiring earlier, I suppose.”

“*Hm,*” the countess said. “Maybe you should partake of a little *less* evening entertainment, Lady Worthington, and get some needed rest.”

Sarah felt her cheeks warm. Lady Macroun had assuredly guessed about her and Denbigh's nightly escapades. How mortifying! But then, it was expected their hostess would have knowledge in her own house of her guests' comings and goings. Every one of her staff would be like another set of her own eyes. Nonetheless, with only a single night left before the Epiphany eve and Twelfth Night ball, Sarah could deny neither of them the pleasure they'd found in each other's arms.

She'd even stopped worrying about her final task, having decided the ball would afford her the perfect distraction. With an extensive guest list, it was sure to be a long and exciting event, going right through until the following day. There would be ample time for her to slip away to Lord and Lady Belmont's room while the couple was dancing.

When Denbigh came to her room that night, he hesitated at the edge of her bed.

“Are you certain you wouldn't like me to let you have your sleep?” he asked, already brushing the back of his knuckle across her pearled nipple. “You should have told me to stop scratching at your door like a bothersome grimalkin.”

The image of him as a ram cat made her grin, and she opened her arm in welcome.



* * *

The Epiphany eve was clear and crisp with no snow to stop travelers arriving at Forde Hall. Most of the guests for the Twelfth Night ball were staying at nearby inns or with other aristocratic families in manor houses dotting the surrounding Essex shire.

Waiting for Denbigh to collect her and escort her downstairs to the ballroom, Sarah felt the same butterflies she'd felt when first she'd seen his handsome face in London. It was a revelation to still feel such excitement, even *after* swiving with the man for so many nights. In fact, she would vow each time she kept company with him, her pleasure had grown.

When she heard the knock on her door, Sarah quickly drew on her long gloves before letting Dorie open it. Standing in the middle of her room, she presented him with the full effect of the gown she'd brought for this last evening.

As a new wife, quickly widowed and then in mourning, all her gowns for the first year had been the same—black, whether crape, silk, or satin. Then she'd eased into the paler hues of half-mourning. When she'd finally been released from the prison of melancholy, she'd started to purchase and wear gowns she'd never dared dream of when growing up in the parsonage.

That evening, she had on the prettiest dress she'd ever seen or worn—the richest purple-hued lightweight silk, trimmed with the shiniest gold ribbon. The high bodice, generous neckline, and little puff sleeves made her feel like a princess. And peeking out from beneath her hem, perfect gold slippers. Moreover, since she was staying in the manor, she would need neither a spencer nor a mantle, which might spoil the overall appearance.

By the look on Denbigh's face, she had succeeded in her attempt to look as fashionable as any of the *bon ton*.

"You are a gimcrack, and make no mistake," he declared.

She laughed at the term. *A spruce wench*, he'd called her, but she knew he was teasing by the appreciative way he stared.

"Thank you. Turn around, sir, so I may take your measure." Denbigh obliged her and showed her—and Dorie—the back of his black tailcoat before pivoting to face her again.

"And you cut quite a dash," she told him. "Definitely pink of the mode, my lord."

He nodded, looking pleased. If Dorie wasn't there, she would be in his arms already. Instead, with grace, he gestured for her to precede him from the room, and then took her arm to walk along the hall. In a short while, they

would be dancing the opening minuet together.

When Sarah glanced back, her maid was still looking after them, and she could swear Dorie had tears in her eyes. She would put something extra in her pay. After all, she'd not only taken care of her clothes to perfection, Dorie had done Sarah's hair in the latest style, with both smooth and curly sections, adorned with more gold ribbon and the sparkliest of purple beaded strands. She had never felt so beautiful, raising her free hand to touch her ruby pendant. Uncaring of how the red might clash, she wore it always to keep the mother, whose face she could hardly recall, close to her heart.

Then she thought of Lady Belmont's bracelet, safely tucked in the reticule dangling from her wrist, and sighed.

"Is there something amiss?" Denbigh asked with too much perception.

Only that she wished she could simply enjoy the evening without any preoccupation. Determined to relieve herself of the bracelet as soon as possible, she smiled up at him.

"No. It's simply strange to think this is our last night at Forde Hall. Doesn't it feel as if we've been here for much longer than the Twelvetide? On the other hand, all the days are starting to run together, and I'm sure our hostess is beyond ready to see the back of us."

"Agreed. I, for one, am looking ahead to our return to London and a new year with new possibilities."

They smiled at each other and entered the ballroom.



* * *

Forty minutes later, after the dancing had begun in earnest and the ballroom had heated up so Sarah could no longer feel the winter chill, she excused herself to the room set aside for the ladies to primp.

"There may be a crowd already, fixing their hair and tugging up their stockings," she told Denbigh. "Do not concern yourself if I'm gone overly long."

He nodded, but she noticed he watched her depart. There were no potted plants to provide her cover, and the small orchestra was on a raised dais, so

she went all the way to the doorway of the retiring room before ducking behind a pillar with a precariously placed vase full of winter greenery. From there, she crouched low and fled the ballroom.

Like a rabbit in the eye of a falcon, she darted quickly along the hall, up the stairs, and into the Belmonts' room. Taking a deep breath, Sarah calmed her fast-beating heart and considered. They had probably unpacked everything over the course of their stay, emptied out all their bags, and worn all their shoes. She needed a plausible place for the lady and her maid to have overlooked a bracelet? Gingerly, she opened the trunk under the window. It was completely empty. Their maid had not yet started to pack for the journey home tomorrow.

Closing the lid, she spied a smaller box, sitting next to the wardrobe, and thought it must be a hatbox. Opening it, she nearly cried with relief. Gloves and more gloves, many more than the lady could have worn while at Forde Hall, especially since they'd spent the majority of their time indoors and being informal in one another's company.

She pawed through them to the bottom and drew out a satin glove. It could easily have been worn at a party in London, removed taking the bracelet going along with it, and lacking any sign of the glove's mate, abandoned in this box. Perfect.

Fishing in her reticule, she withdrew the bracelet, dropped it into the glove and then—

A firm grip took hold of her still outstretched hand.

"I knew you were a thief," came the dreadfully frightening words as she let the glove fall.

Chapter 15

Gasping, Sarah looked up at the owner of the hand clamped around her wrist. It was Mr. Asher.

Her mouth went instantly dry, and her heart felt as though it would burst from her chest. She hadn't heard him enter, nor sneak up behind her. He was a better sneak than her.

"Of course she's no thief." Denbigh's voice was right behind them, surprising her further.

For the first time in all of the occasions she'd snuck around returning jewels, she'd been caught in the act—and not by one man, but by two!

Mr. Asher startled at finding someone else so close. She felt him jump slightly, but he didn't release her.

Ignoring Denbigh, he asked, "If you weren't roaming the halls preparing to pilfer, and even now in another guest's room ready to swipe, then what are you doing?"

"Unhand her and tell me who you really are?" Denbigh demanded, easing Sarah's fear a little.

Mr. Asher hesitated, but then he did both. When he let go his grip of her, she immediately rose to her feet and moved to Denbigh's side, taking comfort and strength from his presence—for at least, at that moment, he seemed to be on her side.

"I work for Scotland Yard," Mr. Asher informed them both, giving her a hard stare.

Blast it all! She swallowed, as a tremor of worry shook her.

"I work for the Prince Regent," Denbigh said, trumping him, "and occasionally for Scotland Yard."

Mr. Asher's expression was priceless. "Why the deuce didn't they tell me?"

Denbigh shrugged. "Why didn't anyone tell me who *you* were? What a cock up!"

"Then you didn't recently fall on hard times and let your servants go?" Sarah asked.

"No," Mr. Asher said, looking grave. "That story was to gain your trust

while I investigated.”

“Which explains why you’ve been skulking around the halls and going into people’s rooms,” Sarah surmised, looking at Mr. Asher, although she probably could have easily accused Denbigh of similar actions. Nonetheless, it was the baron’s son whom she’d caught in the act more than once.

Mr. Asher gave her a pointed look. “Why were *you* doing the same?”

She opened her mouth, but could think of no plausible explanation that wouldn’t beget more questions.

“Why,” he continued, “are you presently in Lord and Lady Belmont’s room instead of on the parquet floor?” Mr. Asher glanced to the glove box where she’d dropped the bracelet. “I believe you were stealing something, following a pattern of thievery that has been plaguing parties this entire Yuletide season.”

Again, she tried to think of a response when Denbigh spoke.

“The lady is helping me,” he said, causing her mouth to drop open before she snapped it shut.

Staring at him, she tried to regain her composure, which had been sorely rattled by Mr. Asher and further disconcerted by Denbigh’s coming to her aid. However, he didn’t look at her, but instead continued to address his colleague.

“I had recovered much of the stolen jewels before coming to Great Oakley, knowing the rightful owners would be in attendance at Forde Hall. I enlisted Lady Worthington’s assistance in returning them.”

Mr. Asher frowned. “Starting with Lord Devonstone’s surprise at finding his ring in his pocket?”

“Exactly,” Denbigh said. And this time, he did glance at her with a piercing gaze. He had figured out her game. *How extraordinary!*

“I recall the lady was seated next to him during our first dinner.” Mr. Asher looked at her with a measure of respect. “But why not simply give the jewels to the owners outright and openly?”

“Because the Prince Regent doesn’t want his subjects to know there is a master thief in their midst. He wants no undue speculation and certainly no panic,” Denbigh explained, “especially when I’m closing in on the guilty party.”

Was he? She tried to reconcile the notion of her younger sister as a master thief instead of a light-fingered fool who needed a harsh reprimand, but couldn’t.

“Therefore, we are returning the jewelry so even those who were victims think they were mistaken. All for the good of the realm,” Denbigh concluded.

Mr. Asher frowned. “Then why was I sent to suss out the wicked damber?”

Denbigh shrugged.

“And why involve Lady Worthington?”

At this, even Denbigh hesitated, but then, his expression relaxed, appearing confident. “Because I know I can trust her wholeheartedly. We have recently become engaged.”

Sarah had to purse her lips and clench her jaw to keep from gasping again.

Mr. Asher’s face instantly brightened. “Oh, well, in that case, my sincere congratulations.” Then he sighed. “A waste of resources, though, wot wot? I shall have a stern word with the Yard about sending two bloodhounds after the same fox. In the meantime, I wish you both a happy Twelfth Night.”

With a curt nod to each of them, Mr. Asher vacated the room.

“I have never heard you speechless for this long,” Denbigh remarked.

She nodded. There were so many subjects to cover, she didn’t know where to start. But her first question sprang to her lips.

“Are we engaged?”

He didn’t smile as she imagined he would but looked downright serious. “Would you accept if I asked you for your hand?”

She paused at his strange, hedging question. “Why don’t you ask me properly and find out? Bear in mind, I have never been asked before.”

His eyes widened, and then he did, in fact, smile, and her heart melted entirely.

“Lady Worthmore,” he said, deliberately misspeaking her name, “will you do me the profound honor of becoming my wife, giving me your hand and your body and, in return, taking my name ... and my love?”

Without hesitation, Sarah stepped closer, ran her hands up his waistcoat and laced her fingers behind his neck. “Yes—to everything. Take my hand and please take my body, but you also will be accepting my love.”

He lowered his mouth to claim hers in a kiss so scorching she would swear her toes were sizzling in her pretty gold slippers.

“How long does the *ton* require a widow to be engaged?” she asked.

He laughed. “I haven’t the foggiest, but I’ll find out. If we can’t bear the length, we’ll break the rules.”

“Prinny might not like that,” Sarah pointed out.
“Prinny be damned,” he said.



* * *

A little while later, they helped each other with a hurried but much needed mutual tidying of their clothing. With the bracelet safely stowed for Lady Belmont to discover when she returned to London, Sarah and Miles headed back to the ballroom.

As soon as they entered, he picked up on the frisson of excitement. Something had happened.

Lady Macroun came over as soon as she saw them.

“Lord Denbigh, you’ll never guess what has occurred.”

“No, I doubt I shall,” he said. “Tell us, my lady.”

Their hostess glanced at Sarah then, her sharp eyes taking in every hair out of place. When she looked at Miles again, she scrutinized him from boot to necktie.

“*Hm*,” she said, then sighed, dismissing her suspicions for a juicier revelation. “Most exciting news. Another piece of lost jewelry has been recovered.”

He turned to Sarah. She shrugged, giving nothing away.

Lady Macroun gestured behind her in a vague direction. “Lady Abingley ___”

Sarah startled beside him.

“Over there in the green and silver gown,” their hostess continued.

“Green and silver,” Sarah repeated beside him, “with coral-colored trim.”

He stared at her.

“Precisely,” the viscountess said. “Inside the lady’s adorable matching shoes, she found a necklace that went missing after a dinner party in Town. Isn’t it fabulous? Why, I believe people will start vying for invitations to come to Forde Hall to regain lost valuables.”

Laughing at her astounding luck, with her reputation now sealed as a hostess *par excellence*, Lady Macroun left them.

Miles had been waiting for Sarah to ask him, and now she did.

“When did you realize I wasn’t a thief?”

“Certainly not at first. I was a bit blinded by my own moral outrage that a woman with all good fortune at her feet, such as you, would risk her life on nabbing dazzlers. But then, after the London broach ended up here in Great Oakley, and I considered the Macassar oil—”

“The Macassar oil?” she queried, tilting her head in wonder.

“After we started keeping close company, I knew you hadn’t run your hands through Devonstone’s hair.”

He nearly laughed at her horrified expression.

“Thus, you had to have put your hand in his pocket where he is continually thrusting his own oil-covered hands, in order for you to pick up the scent. And the other item in that same oily pocket was the returned ring.”

She gave him a beatific smile.

“Should I worry about Miss Julia Sudbury?” he pressed, as he led her toward the dance floor. “The one you said had quick fingers and who definitely would have grabbed a raisin without getting burned? Or do you have your sister under control?”

“I believe, my lord, everything is under control,” she said a little vaguely. “Shall we partake in the waltz?”

“Gladly.” There was nothing Miles wanted to do more than dance with his fiancée.



* * *

London was gray and cold but, to Sarah, mesmerizingly beautiful now that she was engaged to Lord Miles Denbigh. The city had never looked prettier or more inviting. They’d traveled together on the Epiphany, spending the night at an inn in Chelmsford before completing their journey on the bumpy roads to Town. Dorie enjoyed having her ladyship’s carriage all to herself.

In Denbigh’s carriage, her betrothed surprised Sarah with his romantic notions.

“I will never doubt the power of a wish written on a piece of foolscap and

tossed onto the burning Yule fire.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “You’re not saying your Christmas wish was to be engaged to me?”

“Not precisely. But despite my belief you were a desperate jewel thief, I hoped for some way I could make you mine. And now, you are.”

She snuggled against his side. “My wish came true, too. I think we ought to continue the practice every year.”

“Agreed.”

Their first night back, she entertained him in her home as any ace of spades would, unmindful of the raised eyebrows of prying neighbors. There were benefits to being a widow, after all.

Following a late dinner, settled in her own comfortable drawing room, they discussed their impending marriage and the joining of their households. She’d decided to gift her London townhouse to Julia but decided not to make any more mention of her sister. In fact, they hadn’t discussed her role at Forde Hall. Sarah had steered clear of it, not wishing to implicate Julia in anything, not forgetting for a moment Denbigh had confessed to working at least part-time for Scotland Yard.

He sipped her good French brandy. “When I tried to help Lord Evingdon return the shawl to his wife, I realized returning stolen goods was nearly as difficult as stealing them in the first place.”

“Harder, I think,” she mused, then bit her tongue, wishing she hadn’t confessed to anything. “Not that I would know about such things,” she added, rolling her eyes.

He winked at her. “When I went home today, my valet said he’d found a lost item while doing a thorough cleaning of my room.”

Setting his glass down, he slid his hand into his coat pocket and withdrew a small shiny object, which he held out to her on his open palm—a diamond cravat pin.

She grinned and tipped her wine glass to him in salute. “There you are, sir. Proof I stole nothing at all.”

“On the contrary, dear lady.” He took her glass and placed it on the low side table along with the pin, before drawing her into his arms. “You stole Christmas morning from Lady Macroun, don’t forget.”

Her breath caught in her chest when he gazed at her, the love plainly dancing in the rich-brown depths of his eyes. “And you thoroughly, irrevocably stole my heart,” he added.

And that was something she would never, ever give back.

When Denbigh claimed her lips beneath his, Sarah knew without a doubt she was exactly where she ought to be.

About Sydney Jane Baily

USA Today bestselling author Sydney Jane Baily writes historical romance set in the Regency period, Victorian England, late 19th-century America, the Middle Ages, and the Georgian era. She believes in happily-ever-after stories with engaging characters, passionate romance, and a shiver of intrigue.

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Christmas with a Czar

by Emily E.K. Murdoch



Chapter 1

“And yet you promised to abide by our agreement when we left home,” Anne said with a heavy sigh. A smile was still plastered over her face; they were in public. She was not going to be the one to draw attention to their argument. “After this Christmas, no more talking about marriage. I will remain single, and happy.”

“And I said it was a foolish agreement in the first place.” Sir Thomas Marsh frowned at his daughter as two footmen bowed them through another set of double doors. “I should never have agreed it with you.”

Anne knew it had been foolish of her to think her father would abide by their compromise. The entire carriage ride to St. James’ Court, he had been quiet – a little too quiet.

A footman stared and Anne fought down her desire to blush. She knew she looked ridiculous, dressed up in last decade’s fashions, but that was what Prinny wanted.

The Prince Regent. She must not use his nickname here, at his court! Anne had always hated the pomp and circumstance of the court, but Prinny did not. He loved to feel important, special, loved.

They walked towards another set of doors, and two footmen in the royal family’s livery bowed as they opened the doors.

“Really,” Anne hissed at her father as they walked through, “St. James’ Court, of all places? You think I will find a husband here?”

“You are twenty nine years old,” her father reminded her, not unkindly. “If not now, we are rapidly running out of time.”

Anne rolled her eyes. “I am not quibbling over my age, Father, but your methods. Every young chit of a thing will be here this Christmas, for the Season. Beautiful, young women. You really believe that any gentleman will even be able to notice me?”

“Will there be any girls here like me?” A small voice piped up.

Anne turned to look behind her. Meredith looked uncomfortable in the formal bodice Sir Thomas had insisted she wear.

“Ask Father,” Anne said shortly. “Not many twelve year olds are brought to St. James’ Court.”

She glared at her father for good measure, who protested, “You think I would leave her behind? Besides, you are not unattractive, Anne – ”

“Well, thank you!”

“ – and you have a little charm and wit,” Sir Thomas continued steadily. “If you are determined this is to be your final Season, foolish as I think that is, then I would like the best for you.”

Their little family passed a pair of ladies in the styles of the 1790s, who stared at them. Anne tried to keep her head up high. They may not be highly titled, wealthy, or noble, but there had been Marshes in Romney since the Romans. She belonged here, as the daughter of a gentleman, just as they did.

“Papa, will there be anyone like me here?” Meredith’s voice, a little plaintive now, rose above the growing noise emanating from the double doors ahead of them.

Sir Thomas paused and looked down. “No,” he said finally, “I do not think so, Meredith. But there may be a few children that live around here that you could play with.”

Meredith scrunched up her nose and Anne’s heart squeezed. “I suppose so.”

Anne opened her mouth to speak but they had just reached another set of double doors. Loud chatter poured underneath it, and there was laughter, and music.

Sir Thomas breathed in heavily. “We are here.”

“Yes,” said Anne quietly. “And this is our last fortnight here at Court, Father. You promised. Our rooms may only be downstairs, but this is the last time I am coming here.”

She caught his eye and tried to show him, through the fierceness of her look, that she was in absolutely no place to debate this.

Her father sighed. “You always get your own way eventually, Annika.”

Her heart softened. He only used her pet name when he felt the loss of her mother most profoundly. But before she could speak, the two slightly sneering footmen opened the doors.

The Marshes were hit with the noise and smells of a royal court preparing for Christmas. The room was large, ordinarily a ballroom but today used for the many visitors to the Royal Court to circulate, admire, and be admired. A pair of thrones were situated at one end, at present completely empty.

Anne attempted to hold herself as though she absolutely belonged there, but it was a challenge. It had only been after a lengthy argument that they had

even come here, leaving their warm home in the Kentish countryside, to come to this cold and stiff place – and for Christmas, no less.

The smell of sickly pomades hit her, and she paused, so strong was the intoxicating stench. Her father looked at her quizzically.

“This is my last Season,” she whispered forcefully. “And then I am disappearing from society.”

Sir Thomas rolled his eyes and continued walking into the room, nodding at a few acquaintances as they slowly circulated.

Anne tried not to allow her thoughts to be obvious on her face. She could not wait to leave this place, and they had only arrived twenty minutes ago! To think, they would have to spend Christmas here, amongst the intrigues of Court, when all she wanted to do was celebrate the joys of the festive season with her father and Meredith, at home.

Sir Thomas had consoled her on their journey here with tales of excitement and drama, but Anne knew better. In the last ten years of being trotted out in the hope of securing a husband, she had seen little true excitement. It was all restrictions, rigid rules, and no true fun at all.

“You never know,” Sir Thomas murmured as they continued to walk around the edge of the room, ensuring they were seen by everyone, “you could still get married.”

She could not help but laugh aloud at his words. “After all that has happened, the secret we have kept for...”

It was then that Anne caught Meredith’s eye, and she allowed her voice to trail away.

“I suppose you are getting old,” her father muttered.

Fury rose in Anne’s heart, but she controlled herself. She would not snap at her father, not in public, not over this tired old argument.

Instead, she turned her gaze around the room, and sighed. It was precisely what she had expected: plenty of elderly women, in the fashions from their youth, and a few gentlemen of around her age, all likely married. Their foppish styles looked ridiculous, but she swallowed down the boredom.

This was the last year she would be trotted out to the marriage market, and would have to put up with those idiotic young fools.

Meredith pulled at Sir Thomas’ sleeve. “Papa, my bodice is...I cannot breathe properly.”

Anne smiled. She was not the only one then, who hated the restrictive clothing of the Court.

“Hush, Meredith,” Sir Thomas said quickly, looking around to ensure they had not been overheard.

Anne squeezed Meredith’s hand and spoke under her breath. “I do not like my clothes either, Merry, but we only need stay here an hour or two. We can then retreat to our rooms just around the corner, and you can get into your day gown.”

“But why do we have to stay here at all?” Meredith looked around the room with wide eyes.

Anne sighed. “To be seen.”

The double doors opened once more and a further rush of people entered the room, which grew even stuffier as people started to push their way through. A few gentlemen were in the crowd of newcomers, but they gravitated almost immediately to a small gaggle of young ladies, all younger than twenty if Anne was any judge.

She sighed and tried to keep her head high. This was so foolish, so ridiculous. She had been an ignorant chit ten years ago, certainly not worthy of any interesting conversation. She could probably run rings around those young men, but none of them would look at her twice, and all because she had a little more experience!

“I cannot see any other children my age,” Meredith whispered to her father. “I thought you said...”

But Anne’s attention was distracted away from their conversation. As her gaze had moved lazily around the room, she had spotted a gentleman on the other side in the most formal clothing she had ever seen before. It was almost a military uniform, but not one she recognised, covered in gold trimming and brass buttons.

He was also prodigiously handsome. Tall, with dark hair that was incredibly unkempt, with dark eyes and a closely clipped beard that did not hide his strong jaw. His eyes were bright but he looked just as bored as she felt.

Anne felt a flicker of curiosity well up inside her. Who was this man? Why did he stand so alone, so aloof, away from everyone else in the room. What sort of strange costume was he wearing?

A footman had approached them with a tray of drinks, and her father took one thankfully.

“My lady?”

Anne thanked him as she took a glass for herself, and then added, “Do

you know who that gentlemen is?”

The footman looked in the direction she had pointed, and then sniffed haughtily. “He calls himself Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich. Says he is the true Czar of Russia.”

The servant was called away before Anne could make any further enquiries, but the answers she had received just made her even more curious. He says he is a Czar? What could that even mean?

She looked at him again. He was evidently an important gentleman – or at the very least, self-important. That was not a gentleman who would consider Miss Marsh from Romney a suitable bride, and she did not wish to marry either, but could he be a distraction for the next two weeks that she was forced to be here?

Maxim nodded at a gentleman who passed him, but did not say a word. It would just encourage him to stop, and he was in no mood to speak to anyone.

The formality of the room, the stifled conversation, the reserve; it was too much. It reminded him too much of home, the rigours of the Court, the careful way everyone had to speak – and though there were moments of joy, there were few positive memories.

He had expected Prinny to be here by now. Everyone had told him that the Prince Regent loved to preside over his Court, when in town, and so he had dressed up to – what was it they said here? Ah, the nines. He had dressed up to nine, if that was the phrase, all in the hope of finally conversing with the ruler of this country man to man. But he was not here.

Maxim pulled at the tight collar and sighed. All he wanted to do was get out of these stuffy clothes and let off steam. Jump on a horse, maybe, and ride full pelt to the countryside, to get out of the coldness of London.

But he had to stay. He could not leave now, and hear later from an acquaintance that the moment he had stepped out of the Court, the Prince had stepped in.

A gaggle of ladies passed him by but he did not watch them go. No matter how many beautiful women there were, it did not change the fact that St. James’ Court was more like a prison than a palace, and he knew far too much about the former.

He has to stay. No one can ever discover his secret, and if he left now...

His lazy eye meandered around the room. His gaze caught the eye of a woman who smiled coquettishly. She was rather pretty, in an English sort of

way, and for a moment Maxim considered wandering over to flirt for a few minutes. Anything to take his mind off this boring wait for a Prince who may or may not appear.

But no; he must stay focused.

“I think the food here is absolutely awful.” His companion had returned from the table which had been laden with the best food England had to offer, but his expression was one of disgust. “*Répugnante.*”

Maxim smiled. Well, there was one prince here, but Prince Édouard of Aviroux was not the one who could give him his throne back. They were family, of a sort, and had gained him his invitation to this dratted place.

“You think French cuisine is better?”

Prince Édouard grinned. “Well, yes, actually. I suppose that is of no surprise to you?”

Maxim laughed but said nothing. This fortnight over the Christmas festivities would be much drabber once Édouard returns to his country estate.

“What is on your mind, Maxim – actually no, do not tell me. It will drive you mad, I am sure, if I attempt to guess.”

“All this formality,” Maxim growled. “All this waiting around – I am of royal blood, I should be able to just go and find the Prince Regent and –”

“You, complaining about English formality?” Prince Édouard laughed. “I thought the Russian royal court was the strictest in the world? You’re a Czar, damnit!”

Maxim did not reply.

His friend sighed. “I hate to leave you in a bad temper, but I need to be off.”

Maxim’s attention snapped to their conversation. “Be off?”

“Leave,” Prince Édouard said with a wry smile. “My apologies, but you will enjoy your Christmas here. I do think that everyone should experience Christmas at St. James’, at one point or another. No one does Christmas like the English.”

“It will not be the same without you,” Maxim said honestly. “Where are you going?”

Strangely for his friend, Prince Édouard hesitated. “You would not believe me if I told you. Letters will find me.”

Without another word, he walked away, slipping out of the door.

Maxim frowned. Édouard always had been very impetuous, but he did not have time to consider his strange parting words as an Englishman wandered

up to him.

“You the Czar, y’say?”

Maxim sighed. He had had this type of conversation before, but there was no way to avoid it. These people simply had to know. Where did the English get this sense of curiosity?

“Your servant,” he said stiffly.

The man sniffed. “Don’t believe in royal titles, me.”

Maxim attempted to smile, but it was difficult. “Really? I think the Regent would be interested to know that.”

“Well, when I say royal titles, I mean people like you. Foreigners,” said the gentleman, with seemingly no idea of his own rudeness. “You are just a Czar pretender, if you ask me.”

Irritation rushed through Maxim’s veins but he would not rise to the temptation of shouting at this idiot. “Thank you for your opinion.”

Surely anyone would take the hint, but the gentleman did not seem to have any idea that Maxim did not wish to speak with him.

“And if you ask me,” he continued, “the English crown should not be protecting you.”

Maxim swallowed down the retort that he had not, in fact, asked him, but said instead quietly, “I am here to speak with the Regent, to have him confirm me as the rightful Czar, and then I shall indeed be on my way.”

The gentleman stared, seemingly unable to think of anything else to say, and then walked away.

Maxim watched him accost a pair of ladies on the other side of the room, and considered calling him out for a duel as a defiler of his name, when he was distracted by a tap on his shoulder and a female voice.

“So, you are the Czar, are you?”

Chapter 2

It was impossible not to smile at the surprise on the possible Czar's face, and Anne felt a rush of excitement flow through her. It was evident that this gentleman, in all his finery and gold tassels, was not accustomed to women being so forward.

Anne was hardly accustomed to it either. This was unlike her – not that she was a wilting wallflower most of the time. But young ladies, even those whom society would not class as young anymore, did not walk up to gentlemen they had not been introduced to and speak so boldly to them.

She had never been so bold. Well, not since...

Anne pushed away the thought. She left that part of her life behind, and she had done so a long time ago.

The gentleman described as a Czar recovered quickly. He smiled, charm oozing from every pore, before clicking his heels and reaching out to kiss her hand.

The sudden contact, even through gloves, was alarming and Anne found herself a little flustered but managed to say, "Is that a yes?"

He nodded. "Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich, Czar of Russia. My friends call me Maxim."

Anne raised an eyebrow. "Am I meant to be impressed?"

Maxim – Anne blushed at the thought, and immediately told herself she must think of him as the Czar – grinned. His smile utterly transformed his face, giving it a fresh joy that his laconic boredom simply had not created.

"I would like you to be," he said quietly, "but I think I would have to go far to impress you."

"Perhaps," Anne said with a smile, "but you are the first royalty I have met today, so I am a little impressed."

She glanced out at the crowd for a moment, unable to continue staring without her cheeks pinkening, and saw her father nodding encouragingly.

Anne sighed. Why wasn't it possible to speak to someone, anyone, without her father getting his hopes up?

Her father was alone – where was Meredith? For a moment, her heart stopped, but her searching eyes quickly spotted her, talking to one of the

court musicians. He was showing her the different strings on his violin, and the tension disappeared from her shoulders.

“Are you always this aloof?” Maxim’s voice cut through her thoughts, bringing her to her senses.

Anne turned back and attempted to ignore how handsome he was. “Only when attempting to frustrate a gentleman.”

He laughed, a clipped laugh that nevertheless had warmth in it. “You have already been far more entertaining, Miss...”

Anne tried not to blush. “Anne Marsh. My friends call me Anne.”

“Anne Marsh,” Maxim said, with such intensity that Anne felt her cheeks heat. “Far more entertaining than anyone else in this stuffed court.”

She frowned, trying to ignore the strange desire that was starting to overwhelm her to move closer. “Stuffed?”

“Stuffy,” he hastily corrected, and Anne was surprised to see a little colour in his own cheeks. “English phrases do not come easily to me.”

He certainly had a regal bearing, she could not help but notice, but there was also stiffness there. An unwillingness to be wrong? There was a slight lilt in his voice, but not a strong enough accent that she would have noticed.

“Considering you are speaking in your second language,” Anne said reassuringly, “it is I who should be ashamed to be so uncultured. Your English is impressive.”

“Ah, but culture is not necessary with such radiant beauty,” Maxim said grandly.

The compliment made her smile, but perhaps not for the reason that he expected. “Your Grace, if that is the correct way to address a royal Czar of the Russian court, you do not have to impress me.”

Her words had clearly surprised him, and he took a slight step backwards. “You know, you are the first person to even attempt to speak to me as a Czar.”

“And was I correct?”

Maxim shrugged, his broad shoulders showing their strength as they moved. “There is not really a direct translation for how you would address me, and if we were in Russia, I do not think we would be speaking at all.”

She knew what he meant, and she was not offended by it. “Because my father is a mere baronet?”

His face brightened. “Ah, I did not know – he is here?”

“Somewhere,” she said nonchalantly. She was not interested in a more

detailed discussion of her family history. It was his family, his identity, that intrigued her.

“I would not normally ask such an impertinent question,” Anne said quietly, ignoring the looks she was starting to receive by speaking to a gentleman for so long, “but I must know the truth. You are a Czar?”

Maxim spread out his arms with a smile. “Do you think I am?”

She did not know what made her do it. Before she could really think about her actions, Anne was walking around Maxim slowly, taking him all in. He was far taller than she had guessed from across the room, and was formed as though God had decided to build perfection.

He laughed awkwardly when she returned to face him. “Well?”

Anne shrugged with a laugh. “You know, it is impossible to tell who is a czar, and who is just a well-dressed gentleman these days.”

Maxim laughed and protested, “My dear Miss Marsh, you should know me by my bearing!”

She laughed in turn. “My dear Maxim, how many royals do you think I see every day?”

He chuckled and Anne felt a flicker of something hot and heavy in her heart – something she had not felt in a long time. Now her cheeks were blushing not because of the heat of the room, or something that Maxim – the Czar, the Czar – had said. No, now they were pink because of the deep attraction that she felt.

What did she think she was doing? Whether or not this handsome man dressed like some sort of military leader from another country really was a junior member of the Russian royal family, and even thinking it made her feel ridiculous, he would never consider her a suitable bride.

All she was doing was creating more opportunities to feel pain.

But Maxim was charming. Of course he was charming, Anne reminded herself. He was here, at St. James Court this Christmas with the express purpose of convincing Prinny to support him.

Poor Prinny, Anne could not help but think with a smile. She could not conceive of anyone less suitable for ruling a country, and yet all he ended up doing was getting pulled into political matters.

No, Maxim was here to charm people, and if she were not careful, she could convince herself that he was here to charm her.

“Why come to St. James Court at Christmas?” she said aloud. “Most people prefer to stay at home with their family during the festive period.”

Something like a dark shadow passed over Maxim's face. "My family is sadly not living."

Discomfort rose from Anne's stomach like bile. "I am sorry, I did not mean to –"

"You were not to know," he said shortly. "I am here to prove my royal lineage, of course, and to do that I must be where the Prince Regent is."

He did not seem offended by her previous slip, and something gave her courage to say, "Well, you already call yourself a Czar, you know."

Maxim grinned. "I am the worst kept secret at St. James."

Maxim watched the beautiful woman laugh, as though the words he had spoken were nothing but a clever joke, and sighed inwardly.

If this had been any other time or place, then he would have wooed this woman. Anne Marsh. Her name was so unassuming, and it would have been easy to overlook her. No young spring chit, but not old at all. Maturity without being maturity. Braver than a new girl to the Season, but with all of the elegance that a few years out gave a person.

Yes, he would have wooed her, perhaps even stolen a kiss from her under the mistletoe on Christmas Day. As it was, he must not get distracted.

He already had a huge battle ahead of him, and if he was going to be successful in getting his royal title confirmed by the Prince Regent, he must not take his eyes away from his prize.

Even if the distraction was a dazzling woman...

Who at this point, looked a little confused. "I do not understand. Did you intend to keep your identity a secret, while at the same time attempting to claim your title? How are you meant to be recognised as a Czar if you also want to keep yourself a secret?"

For an instant, Maxim considered just lying. He barely knew this woman; he was not beholden to tell her the truth, and he could not be sure to trust her. But just a glance at her open expression, blue eyes wide and curious, her dark hair piled up in the latest fashion, he felt in his gut that he could trust her.

There was something about Anne Marsh. Something that drew him in. He could tell, though he could not exactly put his finger on why, she made him feel safe – and at the same time, wild and reckless.

He would tell her something. He did not need to tell her the full story, anyway.

"I am a Czar," he said quietly. "But not the Czar. In Russia, titles are a

little more plentiful.”

Anne’s eyes widened. “So, a little like a duke or an earl?”

Maxim shrugged. “I suppose so, although we have those too. The Russian royal family is...complicated. And yes, I have a secret, one that I cannot tell enticing women, even if I wanted to. Enticing as you are.”

He had expected her to simper, to smile at his flattery. But Miss Marsh did not stop surprising him as she threw back her head and laughed.

“Come now, Maxim, I think we are friends now. You do not need to fall back on old habits.”

“Habits?”

Anne’s eyes glittered as she smiled. “Are gentlemen not taught to flatter ladies almost as soon as they are introduced to society? I know I certainly was taught how to accept them, but I am too old to curtsy every time anyone says anything pretty – and besides, you should save your compliments for women who could believe them. Enticing?”

She smiled again, a knowing smile that made Maxim shiver slightly.

How could she not consider herself enticing? Every bone in his body was drawn to her, desperate to be closer.

He looked again a little more closely. Miss Anne Marsh had the kind of beauty that the English were famous for; gentle, elegant, and unshowy. You could walk past her fine eyes and laughing expression and think nothing of her, but if you took more than a minute to examine that expression, you would see more than mere laughter there.

She was beautiful, and Maxim had to swallow down the physical attraction that was welling up within him in a way he had not experienced before. His heart was beating a little faster than he had expected, and he could feel the temptation to step closer, to be nearer, growing in the pit of his stomach.

“You are,” he said with frank honesty, “the most beautiful woman at St. James Court.”

Anne looked around the room and Maxim followed her gaze, taking in the Christmas decorations which had been decked around the room. Holly and other evergreen branches had been brought in, woven with gold and silver bells. Gold ribbons adorned every part of the room, glittering in the weak sunlight pouring through the windows, and there was mistletoe dotted about the room.

Maxim swallowed and looked above him. None there, and it was a good

thing too. He would cause quite a stir if he kissed a lady he was not married to, here in public – let alone one he had met merely minutes before.

Anne was shaking her head. “It is clear, Your Grace, that your flirtation has got the better of you! There are scores of women here far more beautiful – but I thank you. I must admit, talking to you has been the nicest part of my visit here today. Will you be here the entire Christmas season?”

Maxim opened his mouth to answer, but was distracted by an elderly gentleman who was waving at Anne.

His heart sank. Surely she could not be married to that old soul? To be sure, you saw marriages with unequal ages all the time, but that would be ridiculous! And he had called her Miss Marsh, and she had not corrected him...

Maxim’s heart sank even further as a young girl, almost approaching womanhood, wandered up to the elderly gentleman and took his hand. They both waved over to Anne, evidently beckoning her over to them.

A child as well!

Why did he feel so despondent? He hardly knew her, and yet already the idea that she was unattainable had cast gloom over his heart.

“You must excuse me,” Anne said quietly. “I can see that my father wants me.”

Her words caused Maxim’s spirits to lift. She was not married to him, then.

“Your sister is waiting for you also,” he said quietly.

She glanced at the girl and then back to him. “Will you be staying at court for Christmas, Your Grace?”

Maxim nodded. “I shall be a Czar by Christmas, just you wait and see. Officially, I mean. Royally recognised.”

Anne smiled and curtsied low, saying, “Well, in that case, I will see you at the ball tonight.”

Chapter 3

The first yawn was easy to stifle, the second almost managed to escape, but the third forced Anne to raise her hand. Not a single person at Prinny's ball noticed – but then, they were all engaged in meaningless conversations without her.

It was a challenge, not allowing her boredom to show, but then no one was particularly interested in whether she was entertained or not, and she did not think anyone would blame her for feeling so tired of it all.

A pair of elderly gentlemen walked past her, inclining their heads, and she returned the curtsy, using the movement downwards to hide another yawn.

The same old people going round and round the room, ensuring they could be seen and at the same time, look at everyone else.

It was just like the first time her father had brought her here, when she had been presented. A decade ago, now. It was a challenge to remember a time when she was not out in society, it was so long ago – and yet while outside these four walls, the world has made progress, things have changed, fashions altered, St. James was exactly the same.

Anne's gaze moved around the room. Yes, the same dances that were popular ten, almost twenty years ago. A quadrille, perhaps the most boring dance that was ever conceived. The food was the same, no new recipes or exciting spices there.

Even the fashions were the same! Everyone knew Prinny liked his ladies in a slightly older style, and so to please him, everyone kept their oldest gown and brought it out whenever they returned to town.

Anne smiled sadly. It was a time bubble, a moment of history stuck in amber, and it was all in the aid of making one man feel special.

What was worse, the conversation was the same recycled nonsense.

Sir Thomas nudged her. "You are supposed to be enjoying yourself."

"How?" Anne whispered. "I am so excessively bored!"

"Now then, really," her father chided under his breath, his smile never disappearing. "How many people are desperate to be here, at St. James' Court, and at Christmas!"

Anne looked at her father closely, and for the first time, realised that he was really quite an old man. His whiskers were grey, his hair thinning on top, and a slight stoop appearing in his shoulders.

He had become an old man, and she had not even noticed.

“I would be more than happy to exchange places with them,” she whispered instead, “so I can return home, to Romney, and enjoy a quiet Christmas at home.”

Sir Thomas sighed as he shook his head. “I hope little Meredith will not be so troublesome when she is grown.”

The thought of Meredith at her first ball made Anne smile, finally. “She is nothing like me, thank goodness. Now, I am going to sit over here and – ”

“You will do no such thing,” her father said firmly. “You promised me you would take part in this ball, Annika.”

Anne hesitated. She had promised, but she had made that promise when she had thought Maxim – the Czar, she must not be so informal this evening – would be here. Not that she had expected anything more than a pleasant greeting, she reminded herself hastily. He was so entertaining to speak to. She felt truly alive, young even, when conversing with him.

Maxim would have relieved her boredom, making the ball almost tolerable, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She had considered asking a footman where he was, but she had been forward enough in public for one day. She had been wild enough to even ask who he was in the first place.

“It is not down to me whether I dance or not,” she reminded her father quietly. “I have to wait to be asked, and if that does not occur...”

“You could make yourself a little presentable,” he replied, a touch of distress in his voice. “Really, Anne, you put so little effort into your appearance these days.”

Anne took a deep breath, giving herself time to control her impulse to speak harshly to a gentleman who only wished her to be happy, albeit in a very specific way. She would not be getting married anytime soon, and the sooner he learned to accept that, the happier her father would be.

She always was impulsive. That side of her nature had landed her in trouble before, but even after rescuing herself from it – or being rescued – she could not help but be impulsive.

“Father, there are many young and eligible ladies here tonight,” she said, forgetting to lower her voice, “and the gentlemen here will likely as not ask

them to dance, not me. I am bored, Father. Why do I not just return to – ”

“Ahem,” came a voice behind them.

Anne and her father whirled around, Anne’s cheeks red. If she had had any idea she was being overheard, she would never have spoken so, but as it was, she need not have concerned herself.

The woman who had interrupted them was seated behind them, a serious young lady with a book on her knee. Her spectacles were pushed to the end of her nose, and she had a stern look on her face.

Anne relaxed. This was not a woman who would spread gossip about the scandalous thing which Sir Thomas’ daughter dared to speak.

“I do apologise,” the young lady said quietly. “I did not intend to overhear you, but as I do not enjoy dancing whatsoever, I found a nook for myself and therefore did hear you. Miss Mariah Wynn.”

Anne curtsied, and as her father bowed, he said, “Sir Thomas Marsh and his daughter, Anne. Are you any relation to Edward, Viscount Wynn?”

Miss Wynn’s face distorted for the briefest of moments that Anne thought if she had blinked at the same time, she would have missed it. There was a story there.

“My adoptive brother,” Miss Wynn said stiffly. “Miss Marsh, there is a small library down the corridor. Turn left, along until a right turn and then fourth door on the right. All are welcome to visit, and I can personally recommend it.”

Relief washed over Anne. At least, a respite from this tiresome ball.

“I forbid you from going,” Sir Thomas said quietly, able to see his daughter’s thoughts immediately.

Anne smiled wanly. “Do you remember what happened the last time you attempted to forbid me from doing something?”

Her father hesitated, and then nodded.

“Thank you, Miss Wynn,” Anne began, but she had already disappeared back into her book.

Squeezing her father’s arm and reassuring him that she would not return to their rooms too late, Anne carefully navigated her way around the dancers in the centre of the room, and slipped through the door into the quiet corridor behind.

It was cool and calm, precisely what she needed. Turning left, she tried to remember Miss Wynn’s instructions. Was it a right turn and third door on the left, or a left turn and third door on the right?

After meandering down a corridor that looked exactly the same as any others, Anne opened a door and gasped.

There was no library in this room. On the contrary, it was a bed chamber – and inside it was Maxim, half naked.

Maxim looked up at the intrusion and could not help but smile. What did Miss Anne Marsh think she was doing, walking into a gentleman's bed chamber – and at St. James' Court, too!

The gossips of society would have a field day if they caught her.

There was no embarrassment. Maxim had travelled on the road too long to be interested about who saw him in only his breeches, and he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Anne, on the other hand, looked absolutely mortified.

“Come on in, Miss Marsh,” he said in a low voice.

It was a joke, really. He knew enough that any self-respecting English lady would never allow herself to be found in such a compromising position.

Joke or not, Anne stepped forward and closed the door behind her, leaning against it as though for support.

“Make yourself at home,” he said, before turning to look back at the two shirts laid out on the bed he was choosing between.

It was only when he turned his back that self-consciousness rose over him. It was not that he minded being looked at, exactly, but it was more that he knew that she, Miss Anne Marsh, was the one doing the looking.

Did she like what she saw?

Maxim pushed the thought away. He could not think like that. Still, her presence felt right, not intrusive at all. As though she should have been there the whole time.

Glancing around, Anne's cheeks were pink but she was clearly determined not to allow her embarrassment to overwhelm her, and his respect for her grew.

“I feel strange needing to ask this question,” he said nonchalantly, picking up one of the shirts to inspect it, “but what is a respectable lady like yourself doing in here, Annika?”

She gasped. “What – why do you call me that?”

Maxim shrugged, picking up the second shirt. “‘Tis a common enough version of Anne from my country. You do not like it?”

“No, it is not that, it's...that is what my family calls me.”

Heat grew in Maxim's stomach as he considered the shirts. "Well, now I know that, I shall always call you by such a name. But that does not answer my question."

"I thought it was a library," she said, her voice a little unsure.

"A library?" Maxim repeated. "Well, I suppose you can read something in here if you wish, but you might find other things more to your liking."

He turned away, berating himself for allowing his tongue to get the better of him. What did he think he was doing? He could not allow Annika to get the wrong idea.

He compared the two shirts to the two cravats also laid out on his bed, and tried to focus on getting dressed.

How did she have such an effect on him? He could feel his body getting ready for her, desperate for her touch, as though she was the one who was barely dressed. The wild thought took flight, his imagination serving up delectable images of Annika, dressed in nothing but a –

"Do you not have a valet for that?"

Maxim jumped. She was much closer than he realized. "I had to leave all my servants behind in Russia, I am afraid."

Annika moved to the left so she appeared in his line of sight. Her face was curious. "Why did you have to leave Russia?"

He swallowed. Ignoring the question completely, he said instead, "You will have to tell me which you think works best."

She hesitated, but to Maxim's surprise moved closer, her cheeks still a little pink. Every second was an internal battle not to reach out and touch her.

Here they stood: both of them beside the bed, her cheeks pink, and his torso utterly naked. Just one swift movement, and they could both be on the bed.

"This shirt," she said, a little breathlessly, "and the blue cravat."

Maxim could not help but smile. He had the same effect on her that she had on him, then.

If only she was a servant girl, he could put a little silver in her palm and enjoy her – but she was a gentlewoman, and he should treat her that way, or he would get them both in trouble.

It was on the tip of his tongue to instruct her to leave before someone caught them, but then she spoke.

"Why, what medals!" Her eyes had caught sight of the trio of medals by the side of his bed. "Are they all yours?"

Maxim's smile was forced. Telling her this would be strange, crossing some line. He had not told anyone else the meaning of those medals – but Annika was different, somehow.

“The very left was my father's,” he said gruffly. “The central one, my brother's. He...died last year. And the very right, my own. Earned through battle, though I will not say who with for this is an English court with English sensibilities. Just pieces of metal, really.”

He had thought his emotions had been forced down well, but one look at Annika told him he had not hidden his feelings as well as he thought.

“You miss them,” she said simply. “And your country, and your home, I think.”

Maxim nodded, not trusting his voice. Clearing his throat with a cough, he said, “Perhaps I am just here for a pension from the Regent. Perhaps I am no Czar at all.”

Annika smiled. “Perhaps.”

Her fingers reached out for the medals at the same time as his and the moment was electric. Something connected them more deeply than any other connection he had ever experienced. It was like nothing he had ever experienced.

Maxim's eyes met hers, and he read in those eyes everything he needed to know. Acting on impulse, knowing he may regret it in the morning, he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

She had not expected it and she almost gasped in his mouth – but instead of resisting, as he had expected, she moved into his arms and wove her fingers in his hair.

Maxim's body came truly alive for the first time in months. Her lips on his, his arms around her, the passion they shared – Annika was eager for him, for his kiss, and it was incredible.

Who knows what would have happened if at that moment, the door had not opened and a footman had entered.

Chapter 4

“I have invited you here,” Sir Thomas said in a menacing voice, pacing up and down before them, “for a discussion about – ”

“We know why,” Anne said heavily, rolling her eyes. “A footman saw us, he told another footman, he told several ladies maids, they told their mistresses, one of them told – ”

“Thank you, Anne,” her father said sternly.

Anne glared. If only she had thought to change her gown into something a little more comfortable. The court gown was heavy, studded with pearls, and restricted her breathing. If she had known they would still be discussing this three hours later...

The grandfather clock in the corner of the room struck midnight, and each chime seemed to force its way into her head as though the hammer was hitting her. The room was hot, too hot, and they just seemed to be having the same conversation over and over again.

“I think we should sleep on this,” she said aloud. “It is late. We can discuss this again in the morning, when – ”

“I am not letting *you* out of my sight until this is resolved,” her father said fiercely, a finger pointing at Maxim.

Maxim looked at the finger politely but made no other move. Sir Thomas lowered his finger slowly, coughed, and continued pacing.

The heat of embarrassment rolled over Anne and she could not ignore it – but wasn’t this what she deserved? Had she not brought this upon herself, by allowing herself to be found in such a position?

The memory of Maxim’s arms around her, his lips on hers, the desire they had shared...

It was madness! What had she been thinking? Kissing a man, a man who was half naked, to boot, in his own bed chamber – and while the rest of the court was at a ball mere yards down the corridor?

She was fortunate it was only a footman, and not someone far more important who had discovered them.

It was the sort of stupid mistake that young girls in their first Season made; blinded by the bright lights of town, easily led by gentlemen who

knew exactly what they were doing...

But she was not young. She had experienced plenty of Seasons, and only once allowed herself to be overtaken by her emotions.

Anne caught Maxim's eye and her cheeks flamed. It was intoxicating, to think of the kiss – but she must not. She must control herself.

“Anne!”

She jumped, looking at her father who was glaring.

“This may not be serious to you, but it is of great import to me.”

Anne sat up a little straighter in her chair. “I know, Father,” she said wearily, “but I am tired.”

She could not help but look over at Maxim once again, and saw to her surprise that he looked not only as awake as he had done three hours ago, but utterly relaxed. Leaning back in his chair, there was no sign of tension or stress across his handsome face.

How could he stand it? Having to sit here like naughty school children, as though they had done something wrong – but then, they had done.

Anne swallowed. She had to remember that she was in the wrong here. She had allowed herself to be swept away by emotions she did not really understand, and now she was having to pay the price for that.

When she looked up again, Maxim was smiling. “Look, Sir Thomas, you must understand that this sort of occurrence is not the first time – ”

“Really?” Sir Thomas' face became, if possible, even more thunderous as he resumed his pacing. “How many other ladies have you – ”

“ – here at court,” Maxim continued, without any increase of frustration in his voice. “And it happens to people in my position all the time. I will not cast aspersions on anyone in this royal family or others, but believe me, it is not unheard of.”

His hand reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his pocketbook. It was full of five pound notes.

Anne closed her eyes in horror, but when she opened them, the offending items were still visible.

“Put that away,” she hissed. “Maxim!”

He stared, utter confusion on his face. It was clear he had no comprehension of the offence his act had just given.

Sir Thomas sat down in a chair heavily. “My dear boy, you think that's what this is all about? Money?”

For the first time in their conversation together, Maxim looked

uncomfortable. “Sir, where I come from, it is money that is required to alleviate any hint of dishonour. It is money that resolves the upset between two families – I meant no disrespect.”

“Well, that is not how things work here, in England,” Sir Thomas snapped. “Here, ‘tis honour and honour alone that can resolve situations – and honour is the only thing that will rectify this terrible error in judgement on you both.”

It was at that moment that Anne realised what her father was suggested. “No.”

“‘Tis the only way!”

“But it was only...” Her cheeks flushed as she tried to say calmly, “Father, it was only a kiss. Just one, and if the footman had not entered the room, no one would be any the wiser.”

“If the footman had not entered the room, I dread to think would have occurred,” her father snapped.

Shame filled Anne’s heart as she dropped her gaze. She would not have permitted anyone to speak to her like that, but after everything that had happened, her father had that right.

“What are you talking about?” Maxim’s voice was calm, almost curious.

Anne took a deep breath. “My father,” she said, “is thinking of marriage.”

Maxim looked between her and her father. “Well, you are a little old, Sir Thomas, but I will think about it.”

His laughter was cut shortly abruptly by the glare from both Marshes.

“A marriage, even just one for convenience, is the only way to repair Anne’s reputation,” Sir Thomas said heavily. “The only way.”

Anne opened her mouth to argue, but then closed it again. She could think of no other solution, and it was embarrassing to think that at the age of nine and twenty, she had thrown away any chances of independent life because of a kiss.

But, what a kiss...

“Anne’s name will be ruined by breakfast time,” Sir Thomas said, a little harshly. “It will not take long for that footman to tell a few people, and they will tell a few, and before you know it all the gossips in London will know. It will be over for her.”

“And for Meredith.” Anne was surprised to find she had spoken aloud, but as she caught her father’s eye, she knew he had considered it too. “She would never make a match with such scandal in the family.”

Sir Thomas sighed. "It is not a question of if, but when. There will be a scandal, Annika, but what we need to decide is what we can do to reduce the size of the scandal."

But they had forgotten someone.

"Excuse me," said Maxim hotly, staring at the pair of them, "but I think you are forgetting something! I am a Czar, and I should be marrying a princess of another realm!"

Fierce irritation rose up in Anne's stomach, despite her own frustration with her father's suggestion. Did he not believe her to be good enough for him? A gentleman who says he deserves a throne in a country hundreds of miles away, a tale that no one believed?

"Whether you are a Czar in Russia or not, you are no one here," said Sir Thomas cuttingly. "I mean no disrespect, sir, but here you have no title, no nobility, no wealth, no rank. If anything, you should be grateful to receive the hand of an English gentlewoman."

"I am not a cow at the meat market, ready to be parcelled off to the highest bidder!" Anne glared at her father, and at Maxim for good measure. "You have no need to marry me, sir, and I quite understand why you do not wish to."

Maxim opened his mouth and then closed it again. The words he had been about to say now seemed hollow, empty. And why?

Because a small part of him but one that was growing with every minute, did wish to marry Anne.

It was madness! He was a Czar, he should be approached by kings offering the hands of their daughters. Instead, he had this baronet almost beg him to take his daughter off his hands.

It did not make sense, but neither did the fact that his body had reacted so strongly when he had kissed her. And what a kiss: wild, and wonderful, and incomparable to any other kiss he had stolen over the years.

True, marriage could not have been further from his mind when he had arrived at St. James' Court, but he had other pressures to consider. Would a marriage with an English woman be the perfect opportunity to distract the gossipers from digging into his supposed past?

His gaze lifted from his hands to Anne, who pinked slightly under his gaze. She was certainly no consolation prize. Her beauty grew each time he beheld her, and if that kiss were anything to go by, their lovemaking would

be spectacular.

Maxim coughed and shifted in his seat. Was he seriously considering this? What sort of life would he be taking her into? One of lies, secrets, moving around the world, never settled, never safe, never secure?

He would not choose that for anyone, let alone a young lady who is evidently intelligent, witty, beautiful – and with a family that cares for her.

Sir Thomas was staring at him, clearly waiting for a response. Maxim swallowed. He did not need a marriage, exactly – just an engagement. It would satisfy Sir Thomas' desperation, distract the court gossipers from investigating his true lineage, and may even give him some more chances to kiss Miss Anne Marsh...

Maxim swallowed. "I may not be good marriage material, Sir Thomas. I have a secret –"

But Sir Thomas did not permit him to continue, scoffing, "Oh, no such great secret I assure you. Everyone knows you are not the Czar's heir really, and I think you most foolish to continue saying it! You are here for a stipend, sir, you are here for money. Well, I can make this marriage worth your while."

"Enough!"

Both gentlemen looked at Anne, shocked to hear such an explosive word from her lips.

"Money should not be moving in either direction when it comes to discussing my marriage!" Anne glared at Maxim who felt a little ashamed. She continued, "Father, what you are suggesting is tantamount to selling me off to the highest bidder! I should be more than a daughter to you. A precious jewel, one that you would never consider selling, but perhaps would give away to someone who not only deserved it, but knew how to appreciate it!"

Something deep inside him stirred as Maxim heard her words. Did he deserve Anne? It was evident that she was educated, witty, charming, and beautiful. What did he have to offer?

He swallowed. He was usually the one commanding a room, had always been the centre of any discussion back in Russia. It was time to take charge.

"I suggest a compromise."

Anne and Sir Thomas turned to look at him, and for the first time in their conversation, Maxim felt a little discomforted. How would they react to his suggestion?

"I admit, an English wife would open more doors for me across Europe,"

he said carefully, avoiding Anne's eye. "Particularly one like Miss Marsh. Well raised, clearly a gentlewoman, and with such beauty..."

Despite himself, he had caught Anne's gaze, and his voice trailed off. She was not impressed by his words.

"And so I suggest," Maxim said hastily, looking now at her father, "that we announce the engagement in the morning, and plan the wedding for Christmas Day."

"That is just over a week away!" Anne spluttered.

Maxim wavered aside her objection. "We are all stuck here in this St. James' Court you all love so much, with little other company. We will have the equivalent of years to become accustomed to each other, and with the Archbishop of Canterbury here for the festivities, he can give us a special dispensation."

"But you have forgotten," Anne said, a little tartly, "that I have no wish to marry you!"

"But the engagement will restore your reputation," said Maxim urgently. "That is your concern, is it not? We can say it is an engagement of long standing, that we were overcome for an instant at the joy of meeting again here, and that the wedding will be just one week away."

"And if she does not wish to wed you?" Sir Thomas smiled weakly at his daughter. "You do not think I would actually force you to do something that distressed you, do you?"

"Miss Marsh can inform me on Christmas Eve whether she wishes to go ahead with the marriage," Maxim said quickly. "If not, I will disappear to France the next morning – I am due to see some friends there in any event – and Miss Marsh will be a jilted, sorrowful figure. One to claim society's pity, not scandal."

There was a moment of silence, and then Anne said, "Father, you cannot seriously be considering –"

"'Tis an excellent suggestion," Sir Thomas said heartily. "And I think I do not speak out of turn, Your Grace, when I say I think Anne will capitulate and wish to marry you in that time, giving you, as you say, a lovely English bride."

Maxim bowed his head and could not help but smile. "I concur with you, sir."

Anne leaned close and whispered under her breath, "What do you think you are doing?"

“Giving you an escape route from this conversation,” he returned.

She glared and then her features softened. “I may have just as many secrets as you, you know.”

Maxim shrugged. How little she knew. “I doubt it.”

Her gaze flickered to her father, who was beaming, and then returned to Maxim. “Well, then. It appears I have no choice but to acquiesce.”

Her tone was not exactly joyful, but despite this, Maxim found a flicker of joy curl around his heart. So, he would be receiving a bride for Christmas.

Chapter 5

The deep breath that Anne brought into her lungs did nothing to calm her nerves, nor keep her hands from shaking.

She could barely believe it. There he was. The Royal Prince George of England. Prinny.

Despite St. James' Court being one of his favourite places, he almost never actually attended, but of course on the day that her marriage of convenience was announced, there he was.

"...terrible complexion," he was saying to someone as he lounged in the throne at one end of the room. "I could barely look at her for more than two minutes together, I ask you! How did..."

"This is it."

Maxim's voice was barely above a whisper but they were standing so close together, it seemed to echo into Anne's mind. She nodded, not trusting her voice to speak.

"You know," he continued in a whisper, "I believe this is the perfect opportunity for me to speak with His Royal Highness about my claim to the title of Czar!"

Anne chuckled under her breath, attempting to ignore the pointed stares radiating towards her from many faces around the room. "You think my father will allow you to distract the court from our impending marriage?"

Looking down, she saw her own hand on his arm. It had been placed there by her father, and it felt strange to see them so tangibly connected, and in public too.

To think: she had expected to come here, while away the hours of boredom as agreed with her father, perhaps spend a little more time with Meredith, and then return home.

Instead, she appeared to have gained a fiancé – and one who was not only handsome and charming, but claimed a royal title too!

Anne swallowed down the excitement and forced herself to remember that this was all an act. None of it mattered. She was going to tell Maxim on Christmas Eve that she could not marry him, just as they planned.

It was not as though they were actually going to be wed...

The mere thought of it forced an image into her mind, and it made her gasp aloud, it was so forceful. There she was, in her favourite gown – none of this court formality, just a simple muslin gown in a light blue – and before her was Maxim, in his finery as a Russian Czar. They stood together, at the altar of a church, and he was placing a ring on her finger.

Anne felt her cheeks blush and forced the image aside. Glancing up at Maxim, she tried to consider him as objectively as possible. Would marriage to him really be so awful?

He was personable, at least. In fact, she could probably listen to him all day. That kiss he had stolen, not that she had forced him away, had proven they were compatible in that way...

“Miss Anne Marsh, daughter of Sir Thomas Marsh, of Romney.”

Anne jumped at the sound of her own name being so formally presented in a loud voice by a servant in the largest powdered wig she had ever seen.

“Miss Anne Marsh?” Prinny looked over with a sneer. Anne felt her cheeks darken as he continued, “I have never heard of her. Who is she?”

A courtier, dressed in the court fashions which had never been permitted to be altered, leaned over into the prince’s ear, and whispered something.

Prinny’s gaze moved to her. Anne pinked, curtsying low as Max clicked his heels and bowed.

The prince snorted. “Ah, the so-called Czar, eh? Now Matthews, you were telling me earlier the most delicious bit of gossip and I did not hear the end of the tale. Was she really...”

It was only in that moment that Anne realised she had been holding her breath, and she allowed it to escape her lungs slowly, the tension she had not felt in her shoulders starting to lessen.

She glanced up at Maxim and caught the full weight of his disappointment – but then it was gone. He was smiling, and Anne knew he had forced down his emotions before the Royal Court.

“Well,” he said quietly, “he knows who I am now. That is a start.”

Anne could barely hear his final words due to the rising muttering around the room. Some were even starting to point as their chatter rose in volume.

“We are going to have to become accustomed to this, you know,” she said quietly, her hand squeezing his arm briefly. “All this gossip, the pointing, the wondering, the rumours...”

“What do you mean, this is fantastic,” breathed Maxim, looking around with a smile and inclining his head at a few people who were making the

most obvious remarks about him. “Do you think we should circulate, and introduce ourselves?”

Anne stared in disbelief. “Do you mean to say you are enjoying this kind of attention?”

Maxim shrugged. “‘Tis better than no attention at all.”

Her mouth fell open. Well, if that was the way he was going to approach life, then he was certainly not the man for her.

“My dear ones!” Sir Thomas had rushed over to them, all smiles, and Anne plastered one of her own onto her face for his sake. “To think, the Prince Regent of our land saying my daughter’s name, not once, but twice! Ah, this is a happy day indeed! The announcement of your betrothal!”

“Father, keep your voice down,” Anne said quietly. “And remember, this is a marriage of convenience only, nothing more.”

But Sir Thomas was not to be dissuaded from celebration. “Here, you must meet Meredith – Meredith Marsh, come here!”

Anne’s heart leapt. “No, let her speak with – ”

Meredith approached their group hesitantly, hiding behind Sir Thomas and peering out at Maxim from behind his safety.

Anne swallowed. She had had no plans for introducing Maxim to Meredith, and had intended to shield her from the wedding plans.

“This is Maxim,” her father was saying. “Well, that’s not his full name – I think it is Alex Dimity...”

“Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich,” said Maxim quietly. “But my friends call me Maxim, and I would like it if you would.”

Anne watched Meredith carefully, but she did nothing but blink silently from behind Sir Thomas.

“Well then,” said Anne briskly. “That part is over, the announcement is made.”

Maxim placed his hand on hers. “I think this has been sufficiently uncomfortable for everyone. Sir Thomas, Miss Meredith, my future bride and I are leaving.”

“L-Leaving?” Sir Thomas spluttered.

Anne stared. “Where are we going?”

Maxim smiled, and something lurched in Anne’s stomach. “Not far, I promise you. I think we have spent enough time in this stuffy court and I could do with fresh air.”

The thought of escaping the stares and gossip around her was enticing.

“Meredith, stay with Papa.”

The girl nodded, and Anne sighed as she and Maxim left the hot room.

“Thank you.”

Maxim stared, confusion across his features as they walked down a corridor. “For what?”

“For rescuing me from those stares,” she said heavily as they stepped outside. “I cannot bear it.”

He laughed and squeezed her hand. “My dear Annika, you will need to become accustomed to that when you are a Czarina.”

She could not help but laugh, it was so ridiculous – but that laugh became a gasp as she saw two beautiful horses, just waiting to be ridden.

A rush of warmth suffused across Maxim’s body as he watched Anne smile. When was the last time he had brought such joy to anyone?

“Oh, they are beautiful,” she breathed.

Maxim watched her gently release her hand from his arm, and move quietly and without sudden jerks towards them. It was evident that she was not only an excellent horsewoman, but one who appreciated the steeds for their own merits. Instead of rushing towards them, allowing her own excitement to overwhelm her, she moved slowly, allowing them to move towards her curiously.

“Thunder and Lightning,” he said with a smile.

Anne turned back to look with laughter in her eyes. “You did not honestly name them that?”

Maxim shook his head. “They are court horses, but I have befriended them over the last few weeks. I have been desperate for a good ride for a while, and I thought it would be a good chance to escape the court, if only for a little bit.”

Her eyes shone, illuminating her beauty even more. “You read my mind. Come, help me up.”

“You cannot ride in that gown,” he protested, moving forward.

“Nonsense,” she said decidedly. “Any woman who cannot ride in a day gown should not call herself a rider. Come on.”

Maxim grinned. Here was a woman who was more than a match for him, then. As he reached out to help her mount Lightning, their hands touched. It was more than a frisson this time, more than just coincidence. Anne’s body made his own come alive, and it looked like he was not alone – Anne’s

cheeks were pink and her eyes wide.

Did she feel as he did? Was she also wondering how far they could take this wild dance? Could this engagement of convenience simply become something real?

Maxim coughed as Anne settled herself in the saddle. He must not get too ahead of himself. The last thing he wanted to do was spook her, like a wild horse.

Pulling himself onto Thunder, he clicked his steed with his ankles and Anne followed suit, moving their horses outside the inner courtyard and beyond the limits of St. James' Court.

Already, knowing that she was moving further and further away from the stares of the gossips and the focus of polite society, it was clear that Anne was feeling better. The tension in her face was gone, and as a breeze tugged at her hair, she smiled and closed her eyes.

Maxim smiled. "This is for you."

Reaching into a saddlebag, he pulled out a box, wrapped in brown paper with a gold ribbon.

Anne stared at it. "What is the occasion?"

"Occasion?" Maxim shook his head with a wry smile. "It is almost Christmas, and if I cannot get my betrothed a present five days before Christmas, then what is the point?"

Blushing prettily, Anne reached over and pulled Lightning to a stop as she opened it. Her eyes were fixed on the gift, but Maxim could not take his eyes from her face.

Her mouth opened as she pulled out an elegant riding cloak. "Oh, Maxim!"

"I thought you would like it," he said, a little hoarsely. Pulling Thunder close and steadying him, he reached out and brought the cloak around her, fastening it with fumbling fingers.

"Thank you," Anne breathed. The moment was taut with restraint, and she looked a little uncomfortable as she said, "but...I do not have a gift for you."

Maxim chuckled. "We Russians celebrate Christmas completely differently to you English, anyway, so I would not worry. We celebrate much later, January the seventh."

He pulled away, conscious that if he stayed much closer, he would be unable to resist the temptation of those pink lips.

“I did not know that,” Anne said breathlessly, clicking her horse into action.

“Yes, the New Year is far more important than Christmas,” he said, attempting to keep his attention on his words. “We fast for forty days before Christmas Eve, and the day is full of feasting, story-telling, even telling fortunes.”

“Fortune telling?”

He could hear the interest in her voice, and grinned. “Why, would you like to know your fortune, Annika?”

Her eyes dropped and her cheeks darkened. “Perhaps. Meredith’s, certainly. I would like to know she will be happy. B-But that is of no consequence – your Christmas celebrations sound vastly different to ours.”

Maxim followed her, trying to focus on their route rather than her beauty. “I have had to adapt in the few months I have been here, but nothing like how quickly you have adapted to Lightning. ‘Tis like you have known her all your life!”

Anne laughed, and it was a true laugh now, with no concerns or self-consciousness. “A country girl who doesn’t know her way around a new horse isn’t worth anything.”

“Ah, so you are not a city dweller then?” Maxim found himself asking. Suddenly, knowing all about Anne, everything about her, felt especially important.

“No, I am from a small town in Kent that no one in London has ever heard of,” she said with a smile. “We are not far from London, but I have to say I much prefer the countryside.”

“If I had not promised your father we would stay at St. James’ Court, you could have shown it to me.”

Anne glanced at him, as though attempting to decipher whether he was jesting with her or not, but she seemed convinced of his sincerity. “I would like to show you, one day. The marshes are beautiful, especially when the mists are rising in the morning. I often see them when I visit Mrs Patterson each morning. She has lost her sight, poor thing, and her daughter is in service over ten miles away. I help with her sewing.”

It was impossible not to hear the wistfulness in her voice. “You miss your home.”

Anne jerked from her reverie and smiled a little awkwardly. “Well, who would not? You must miss your family, and the places you grew up.”

Maxim swallowed. Why did it come so quickly, this instinct to lie, to hide the truth? It was an innocent question after all, one that she would probably not think twice about saying to any acquaintance.

But he was not just someone she had met. He was a Czar, and telling her anything could not just reveal his secret, but perhaps put her in the most dangerous of plots.

“If you do not wish to speak of it,” Anne’s voice cut through his thoughts, “you do not have to.”

Maxim glanced over and saw her smile gently. There was surely no danger in telling the truth here. While Édouard would surely tell him to beware any woman – he had been caught that way before – Anne’s enquiry was innocent.

“I certainly miss the winters,” he said, his throat feeling strangely dry as they turned and started making their way back to St. James’ Court. “You do not have real winter here in England, I think. No icicles hanging from your nose when you step outside, no mountains.”

“Icicles on your nose?”

“In the depths of winter, you would be lucky to get away with that,” Maxim said with a wry smile. “And in the palace I grew up in, the winter palace, we would have fires in every room just to keep out the chill.”

Just one glance told him all he needed to know.

“It really is disgraceful, you know,” he quipped. “My own future bride not believing me.”

Anne laughed in turn. “You do not actually think we will get married, do you?”

The words ‘of course not’ were on the tip of his tongue when a cloud moved and sunlight lit up Anne’s entire face. Maxim’s breath caught in his throat. She was perfection, and she had been handed to him on a plate. He would be mad to walk away from her – mad!

“Are you quite well, Maxim?” Anne’s voice was close by and he blinked. She had moved closer, halting her mare beside his horse. “You look very strange.”

Maxim looked around them. They were alone.

Dropping his reins, he reached out and caressed Anne’s cheek before pulling her face towards him. She did not resist, her lips meeting his with just as much passion as that which he poured down upon them.

If they had not been mounted on different horses, it could have been

different. As it was, Maxim was unable to pull her into his arms, but if anything that just made the kiss more tender.

Eventually, they broke apart.

“I must not get accustomed to this treatment,” Anne breathed, her blue eyes searching his. “When we announce the end of our engagement on Christmas Day, I may end up missing you.”

Maxim swallowed. “I know I will miss you even if we decided to end the engagement now.”

She stared, as though attempting to decipher any secret meaning in his words, and then she chuckled gently and moved her horse forwards.

“Your Czar charm won’t fool me.”

Maxim watched her back as she rode ahead of him, and then remembered he needed to be moving too and touched Thunder into action.

“Yes,” he said, awkwardly. “Czar charm.”

Chapter 6

“Absolutely not.”

“But – ”

“No buts,” Anne said firmly. “I promised one more story, and how many more did I read?”

Meredith, eyelids drooping with tiredness, muttered, “Two.”

“Two,” repeated Anne, unable to keep the smile from her face. “And now you have to go to sleep.”

Meredith’s bed chamber was dark, with a single candle lit on her bedside table, but it was enough to make every pearl on Anne’s court gown shimmer.

“It is not fair,” pouted Meredith, a small frown puckering her forehead. “Why can you go to balls, and parties, and see princes and kings, and I have to go to bed?”

Anne smiled this time. “Because I am far older, and far wiser.”

For some reason, this response seemed to concern the younger girl. “But what if I get older without getting any wiser?”

“Then you will have to pay far more attention to your tutor when we return home,” Anne said gently. She had not intended this to be a lecture; she was late already to meet her father, and if she did not hurry, he was going to start to fret.

“I hate Miss McPhearson!”

“I know,” said Anne soothingly, brushing back Meredith’s hair from her face, “but you need to learn things if you are going to be wise. Come on now, I will blow out the candle.”

But her hand was stayed by one a little smaller than hers. “Were you wise when you were my age?”

A twinge of awkwardness pulled at Anne’s heart, but she attempted to brush past it. “Absolutely not! I had to grow up before I was wise enough to attend balls.”

And even then, a small voice said in her mind, you were not really wise enough, were you?

Kissing Meredith and tucking her in tightly, Anne smiled at the drowsy child and whispered, “Sweet dreams.”

She picked up the candle and by the time she shut the door behind her, Meredith's breathing had already slowed to slumberland.

Anne leaned against the door. It was getting harder as Meredith got older, but she had known that would happen. Any little girl without a mother was going to become a handful, but at some point, Meredith would need to know.

She swallowed back the emotion threatening to fall from her eyes. If only her mother had lived. Anne would have someone to talk to then, a woman who could guide her during this difficult time.

But this was getting her nowhere. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down her gown and tried to ignore the stiffness in the bodice. She cannot stay here, standing outside Meredith's bed chamber. She has to go to the court ball, and be seen with Maxim.

Not that that was a hardship! Why, just yesterday when they had gone horse riding, every moment with him had been intoxicating. The mere thought of ever going horse riding again, to try and share that closeness, was madness.

She need not have concerned herself with her father missing her, at any rate. As Anne entered the ballroom, she was forced into a corner by the sheer number of people. Sir Thomas was a few yards away chatting animatedly to someone who looked like a duke, and Maxim was nowhere to be seen.

Disappointment caught at her throat, making it sore. Maxim had spent the day not with her, but waiting for a royal audience with Prinny. She had not realised it was possible to feel the lack of someone you had only met a few days before, but he was...

Well. Anne swallowed and tried to plaster a smile on her face. He was starting to become the reason she got out of bed in the morning. He was far more vibrant, interesting, and stimulating than anyone she had ever met.

After years of boredom and monotony, helping her father to raise Meredith, Maxim was a wonderful distraction – even if he was going to disappear once Christmas Day arrived.

Suddenly, a wave of loneliness washed over her. She would be so alone once they returned to Romney with just Meredith and her father.

Perhaps it would be better if she just married Maxim...

Anne pushed away the thought as she spotted a handsome man in more gold finery than was good for him dancing on the other side of the room.

Dancing – with another woman!

Hot fiery anger flooded through her veins, and something that tasted very

much like jealousy rose in her stomach. What did Maxim think he was doing, dancing with another woman?

As quickly as the emotions had come, Anne forced them down. She was not a jealous woman as a general rule, and she does not like it – but she liked the way that Maxim was smiling at that another woman even less.

A gaggle of chucking gentlemen moved past her at such speed that Anne was forced to take a step back. She could not truly be falling in love with Maxim, could she?

That would be ridiculous. The last thing she should be doing was opening her heart to another, particularly someone like Maxim. How many other women had he seduced on the journey to here from Russia?

Anne swallowed. Falling in love; she knew where that could lead, and it did not lead to happiness.

In that moment, Maxim spotted her. His eyes lit up, even from this far across the ballroom, and without saying another word to his partner, he bowed and then left her standing in the dance.

The young woman stared, evidently outraged. She was forced to step back and allow the other dancers – those who still had partners – to continue on.

A flash of pleasure roared into Anne's heart but she pushed it away just as sternly. It was wrong to find pleasure in another person's disappointment, surely?

Maxim had reached her, clicking his heels and kissing her hand, which made Anne smile.

“My lady,” he said in his deep, calming voice. “I thought I would never gain the pleasure of looking at you today, and so you have given me the greatest gift possible. Here is a small attempt to make amends.”

In her hand he placed a small box, wrapped in brown paper and with a silver ribbon.

Anne could not help but laugh at his sparkling eyes and way with words. “Another gift? What is it?”

Maxim's smile matched hers. “You will have to open it to see.”

It took only a minute to pull the ribbon and wrappings away, and Anne gasped as two large diamond earrings appeared inside the box.

Her eyes grew. “I-I cannot accept these.”

“Of course you can.”

Anne looked up. Maxim's face was diffused with pleasure, but as she

looked down at the earrings, a sense of just what a dangerous dance they were weaving came over her.

“Maxim,” she managed to say, “these must be worth – ”

“You are my future bride,” he said magnanimously. “You must have diamonds!”

Pulling them out of the box, Maxim leaned forward to place them in her ears. “Besides,” he whispered, his breath caressing her neck, “it is expected.”

Anne turned her head slightly as he placed the first earbob in her ear, and saw Prinny watching them, muttering to one of his companions. As she turned her head in the other direction, her father came into view. He was nodding approvingly.

Anne worked hard not to roll her eyes. Always watched, always putting on a performance. Did Maxim never grow tired of it?

“And now, I would like to dance with you,” Maxim said impressively. “Come, I think they are making up a new set.”

Anne glanced over to the dancers. “I...I have not danced in public for a while. You will have to forgive any mistakes.”

Maxim took her by the hand, which he squeezed as they walk over. “Why not?”

Thankfully, it was possible for Anne to ignore this question, as by the time they had reached the set, the dance was about to begin.

Maxim held out his hand. “My lady.”

A shiver of anticipation flowed through Anne’s entire body, and as their hands touched, heat seared along her fingers. There was something about Maxim; something she could not explain, but her body seemed to know.

Weaving in and out of the other dancers, Anne did not take her eyes from him, and his gaze never left her. It was as though they were the only ones in the room, the only people in the world. Anne felt her breath catch in her chest every time they came close together, and the temptation to lean in and steal a kiss, even before all the court...

“I want to kiss you,” murmured Maxim as they came together, their hands interlinked. “And I know you want it.”

Desire thrilled through her as she stared into his dark eyes, a smile dancing on her lips. “How could you possibly know that?”

Maxim smiled. “I know.”

It was fortunate for Anne that the dance ended at that moment, and gentle applause rang out around them, as it drowned out the half-formed thought

that escaped her lips.

“I think I am falling – ”

“I shall get you a drink, my lady,” Maxim said with a grin. “‘Tis warm in here, it is not?”

And with that, he was gone.

Anne breathed out and tried to calm her beating heart. He was everything she had ever hoped for – no, had ceased to hope for. She could never have expected any gentleman like this would ever want her.

“Miss Anne Marsh.”

She turned to see who had spoken, and was immediately accosted by a well-dressed elderly gentlewoman who was frowning.

Anne curtsied low. She did not have to know who this woman is to see it would be ungracious not to give her all the deference of a queen.

The lady looked a little mollified as she said, “Lady Romeril. I thought in incumbent upon me, Miss Marsh, as you have no mother, to warn you about that man.”

With her last two words, Lady Romeril pointed her fan towards Maxim.

Anne’s cheeks darkened as she said, “My lady, I do not – ”

“He is a ruffian,” Lady Romeril said decidedly. “A wild gentleman, one with a secret no one can discover. I know that your little tête-à-tête was indelicately disturbed and you had no choice but to announce your engagement – ”

Anne stared. Who was this woman, to walk up to her so forcefully, in the middle of St. James’ Court, and speak to her this way?

“ – but you are not the only one, of course,” continued Lady Romeril with a wink. “Why, I remember Lord Romeril and I, at the Duke of Axwick’s ball – not the incumbent, of course, his grandfather, who from memory – ”

“Lady Romeril,” Anne interrupted, praying her cheeks would remain calm, “you must excuse me.”

“Oh. I see.” Lady Romeril’s eyes narrowed as she pointed a wrinkled finger at her. “Just you remember what I have said, Miss. A ruffian. A trickster. I pray you avoid him, Miss Marsh.”

Without another word, she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Anne with nothing but intrigue and curiosity – probably a quite different impact than the one Lady Romeril had intended.

“Who was that?”

Anne jumped. Maxim had appeared by her side with two glasses of

something, and her cheeks flamed to think of what Lady Romeril had just been saying.

A gentleman with a secret...

“Let us take some air outside, and cool down,” she said quietly. “It is far too hot in here.”

Maxim took one look at her and seemed to understand. “Of course.”

He proffered his arm which Anne took gratefully. Anything to be out of this mêlée, where they were evidently being watched and gossiped about, if Lady Romeril was any indication.

As they reached the door, Maxim whispered something to a footman, who nodded and disappeared down a corridor. Within a few seconds he had caught them up as they reached the outside door. There was a fur coat in his hands, and he handed it with a bow to Anne.

“You have made a mistake. That is not mine, it is – ”

“My lady,” said the footman, with a nervous glance at Maxim. “I was instructed to – ”

“Give it here, man,” said Maxim easily, and nodded at the footman. “Off you go.”

The servant bowed gratefully and disappeared into the gloom.

“Here, put this on.”

Anne stared as he placed the fur coat around her shoulders. “Where did you get this?”

Maxim smiled, his breath billowing in the cold night air as they stepped outside. “Why, ‘tis one of mine. Did you think I had it stolen?”

Anne laughed nervously, pulling the warm coat around her. A small part of her had wondered, and she hated that her instincts had played her false. Why should she believe Maxim could not provide something as simple as a winter coat?

“Now, tell me,” said Maxim in a low voice, pulling her arm into his once more. “You are a beautiful woman, Annika – no, do not dissemble – and witty, and charming. Why have you not been married before?”

Anne hesitated. Was this the moment to tell him the truth?

“All women have secrets,” she said lightly. “And this is one I am not yet willing to share. Tell me a little more about your family. How is it possible that you are the heir to be a Czar, and yet you are here?”

Maxim had known this question would be coming – it was always asked

eventually. So why did he find his tongue utterly unable to repeat the same old excuses he had trotted out for everyone else?

Could Anne be trusted? He felt closer to her than anyone else in the world, and yet that was not saying much. It was incredible to think they had only met four days before.

Anne Marsh was everything he could ever have wanted in a woman, but could it all be over in another four days?

It seemed madness now, to think that they could be nothing to each other in a few days.

“I have no wish to force a confidence from you.” Her words were light, her breathing billowing out into the freezing air. “I am not the sort of person who would attempt it.”

Maxim smiled. “I know. ‘Tis a long story, and I have no wish to bore you, but a short history should suffice.”

In the thin candlelight that escaped through the curtains of the court, he could just make out her expression as they walked around the walls, and it was trusting. Maxim swallowed. It would be wrong of him indeed to put this woman in danger. Not when he was starting to find his heart just as desperate for her as his loins.

“My father had two wives,” he said slowly. “It is not uncommon in Russia, to have a wife recognised by the church and then another recognised by common law. I am the eldest son of his first wife, but they had a disagreement when I was thirteen years old. My mother...disappeared.”

He glanced at Anne, who was staring. “Disappeared?”

Maxim shrugged. He would not dwell on this; he would not allow the pain of those years to return. “She went for a walk in the snow, and never returned. A year later, my father’s second wife became his wife in church, and their eldest son, one of my half-brothers, became the heir. I was disowned, and the line of Czardom moved to Dmitri. The throne of Russia should have come to me three years ago, but the disagreements within my family line forced the court to choose another cousin for the crown.”

There was silence beside him, and as he looked into Anne’s face, she looked nothing like he had expected. Even a little...sceptical?

“I would have thought news such as that would be in the papers,” she said slowly, not meeting his gaze. “Such a huge injustice, and in a royal family.”

“Are you questioning my story?” Maxim could not keep the words in, his shock was so great. “Questioning a Czar?”

Even in this dim light, he could see Anne's cheeks flush. "It is not in my nature to say what a person wants to hear, but merely what is on my mind."

Her honesty slowed down his rapidly beating heart, and softened his irritation. "Of course," he said quietly. "'Tis the first time you have heard the story, and so it is natural for you to be a little curious. I admire that quality in you, truly. I hope you will always be that honest with me."

"Really?" Anne did meet his gaze now, and she was smiling as she teased, "Even if that is to say that I do not wish to marry you?"

Maxim laughed, but it did not cover the pain that wrenched through his stomach. The idea that she could say no to him...

"Well," said Anne quietly as they turned a corner. "No matter what the truth is, by claiming to be a Czar publicly, you certainly have everyone talking."

He could not prevent a smile creeping over his face. "That is half the fun."

Maxim could feel the tension in Anne's arm and wondered whether he had made a mistake. When she spoke, he knew he had.

"Tell me truly, Maxim – I must know. Are you just a...a confidence trickster? Someone out for what they can get, with no thought to the consequences?"

Anne's voice was full of nerves and when Maxim stopped walking, she looked up with a strange expression on her face.

"What answer do you want?" Maxim whispered, her arm still in his. "What do you want to be true?"

Anne licked her lips and Maxim felt a tug in his stomach he knew all too well. "I do not know," she said quietly. "The idea that you are a Czar, or a prince in disguise...it is a heady thought. But I do not want to be lied to, secrets or no secrets."

Before Maxim could answer, a loud noise wrenched through the silence of the night – a large black dog, tied to a chain affixed into the wood, bounded up to them, snarling, dribble falling from its teeth.

Anne stumbled backwards in terror but Maxim's arms reached out and caught her, pulling her several steps back around the corner they had just turned. Her hands scrabbled at him in terror and he caught sight of her face, absolutely terrified.

"I have you," he said quickly, "it cannot get you – you are safe with me, Annika."

Anne leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and Maxim tried to ignore the visceral effect that rescuing her and seeing her so breathless had on his body.

“Annika?”

The moment their eyes met, her breathing started to slow. “You saved me.”

Maxim chuckled as he pushed a lock of hair which had escaped her pins behind her ear. “Only from a dog.”

But that did not seem to matter to Anne, who whispered, “Kiss me.”

He needed no further invitation. He crushed her against the wall, his lips ravishing her own, and he almost cried out with the pleasure of it. The sensation of her under his body, pressed up against him, her fingers pulling him closer, her breasts pushed into his chest – there was no one like Annika, no one like her at all.

“Oh, Maxim,” she moaned as his lips moved to her neck, kissing a trail down to her ears.

“Annika,” he whispered, before reaching for her hands and pinning them to the wall, trying not to cry out with pleasure as she arched against him.

“Oi, who goes there?”

They broke apart in an instant as a gentleman forced a lamp into their faces. Annika turned away, desperate not to be identified.

Maxim laughed gruffly. “I should have known we would be caught,” he said ruefully, pulling out his pocketbook. “You seem like a very conscientious man, sir. Here, a pound for your trouble.”

He placed the paper note in the man’s hand, and within a moment, he and his lamp were gone.

Annika was still leaning against the wall, but she was smiling now. “We have got to stop being caught...kissing.”

Maxim saw the flush of pleasure still on her cheeks, and nodded. “Of course – but first...”

He moved forward and she moved to meet him, desperate for his touch once more. A little more kissing would not do any harm.

Chapter 7

Anne watched the flickering light on the ceiling, as someone with a candle or lamp walked past her room. The curtains were not fully pulled together, and the light danced across the white paint as thoughts danced across her mind.

Well, not exactly thoughts. Images of herself and Maxim, dancing across the ballroom at St. James Court, flashed across her mind. His hand on her arm. Her hand in his. His fingers brushing her cheeks before he kissed her...

Anne swallowed and turned over. When was the last time she had felt this way? She could barely remember – it had been years ago.

And it had not been like this. That had been a childish crush, an obsession which she had not really understood nor interrogated.

These feelings were those of a woman.

Maxim smiled in her memory and Anne shivered. Just the thought of him made her feel more alive than ever had done. He made her feel powerful, more certain of herself. More certain than she had ever felt.

“We have got to stop being caught...kissing.”

“Of course – but first...”

The pressure to continuously apologise for her thoughts and actions disappeared whenever she was with him. Was it his smile, his charm, or just his gentle acceptance of her?

She smiled in the darkness. It certainly was not his Czardom, a palace and crown. Whatever it was, she was drawn into him and could not, would not fight the desire to be with him.

A clock chimed somewhere. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Anne sighed, pulling her feet over the side of the bed and striking a tinder box, the flame almost blinding her. She lit the solitary candle by her bed, picking up a book. She turned more than five pages before throwing it down. Not a single word had sunk in.

Marriage was an estate she had entirely given up, long before she had met Maxim – but his presence here, this engagement of convenience that they had contrived...was it the final chance she would ever have to be a wife? Or at least, to experience a little of that intimacy and closeness that a wife would feel?

Dark and wild thoughts rolled around her imagination and she licked her lips. Genteel ladies do not have such thoughts, she knew that. But she was not ignorant of the way a gentleman and a lady...enjoyed each other.

The conflict warred inside her for another ten minutes, and then she stood up resolutely. The fur coat Maxim had brought her was lying on a chair by the door. Pulling it around her shoulders, it took her only another few minutes before she was standing outside Maxim's bed chamber.

Anne took a deep breath. There was still time to return to her own room. But would she be able to live with the regret?

Maxim was in a chair by the fire, a thoughtful expression on his face, but as he turned to look at Anne as she closed the door he smiled lazily.

"You appear to have been expecting me," Anne said in a whisper. Why was her voice so weak, at the very moment when she needed to speak?

"I was not," he said quietly.

Anne swallowed. She was not entirely sure what she had expected, but it was not this. "I...I wanted to see you."

"Of course," Maxim said, his eyes focused on her. "And I have been thinking of you all evening, too."

Warmth flooded through Anne's veins. Here was a gentleman who understood her, far better than anyone else she had ever met.

"We are very well suited," she said aloud, taking a step into the room. "It is almost as though you can read my thoughts. What a shame you are teasing the court about your Czardom, and it would be reckless of me to marry you."

Maxim laughed. "Come, sit by the fire."

This was it, she thought. The last opportunity to disappear. But she did not want to. This was the opportunity she had hoped for; the chance to ask for what she really wanted.

"You know, this marriage of convenience that I and your father have contrived," Maxim spoke softly as Anne curled up in a chair opposite him. "It is starting to appear far more interesting than I thought."

Anne could feel her heart thundering in her chest, but said lightly, "It is almost as though we are each other's Christmas presents."

He chuckled. "Remember, you can leave me under the tree on Christmas Day if you do not want me."

She could not help but laugh at that, especially as she could not think of anything less likely to happen. Why, he was far more likely to leave her...

"Now, why do you think I am going to leave you?" Maxim's dark eyes

were shrewd. “You have given me no reason to want to leave you – and every reason to want to stay with you.”

Anne licked her lips unconsciously at the very thought of him, and he groaned.

“Damn it, Annika. You come to my bed chamber at a ridiculous time in the morning, looking as you do...anyone would think you were after something.”

Her heart now beating so heavily she could almost hear it in her ears, Anne swallowed. This was it: the moment when she had to say something, or she would regret it for the rest of her life.

“Actually...” she started, but her words seemed to disappear. How could she explain what she wanted, her desire for him, her desire to be touched by him in every way, without revealing herself to be a scandalous woman?

But once again, Maxim seemed to understand her. “If...if you are suggesting what I think you are suggesting, Annika, you must know that there are serious consequences to...making love...before we are wed.”

Anne’s skin tingled all over just at his words. “We could be careful.”

He examined her closely, and then seemed to decide he could speak. “Well, yes, I have preservatives. But that is not entirely what I meant. You would lose your innocence, Annika, something you cannot take back. I would not want to ruin you for any other gentleman, if you decided not to have me on Christmas Day.”

Her cheeks had darkened at the word innocence, but spoke honestly when she said, “I am unlikely to marry anyone else, Maxim. I only came to St. James Court this Season to appease my father. One last Season, and then he would stop forcing me into society. I just wanted to spend my life quietly in Romney, with Meredith.”

“And your father?”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly. “But...but that does not change what we could do tonight. Could experience, together.”

Try as she might, Anne could not hold his searching gaze.

After a few minutes, Maxim sighed and a charming smile fell across his face. “Well, you strike a difficult bargain – or at least, you would, if I did not want you so badly.”

He rose so swiftly and pulled her upright so fast that Anne gasped aloud – but the gasp did not continue. His lips captured hers and utterly possessed her, his arms reaching around and pulling her tightly into his embrace.

Anne lost herself in the feelings. She had never felt anything like this – Maxim’s strength, his passion, his devotion could all be felt in the way his tongue teased pleasure from hers.

“Oh,” she moaned, unable to help herself. The sound seemed to stir something in him, his self-control disappearing.

“Annika, I want you,” he growled, pulling away to stare into her eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Did she trust him? She would have followed him to the moon and back.

Unable to put her feelings for him into words, Anne nodded.

With another growl that sounded almost animal, Maxim lifted her up and carried her over to the bed, throwing her onto it. Anne felt the softness of the linen beneath her and looked up into the face of the gentleman that she would give anything to. She wanted him. She loved him.

“I have wanted to do this from the moment I first met you,” Maxim whispered, his eyes not leaving hers as his hands pulled at the buttons on his shirt. “I promise you, we will make love afterwards – but first...”

His voice trailed away as he unbuttoned his breeches and pulled them off.

Anne gasped. What was she doing? Lying here, on Maxim’s bed, in the middle of St. James’ Court – and she did not need any further explanation of what was standing before her.

Maxim smiled. Was there a hint of nervousness there?

“You can tell me to stop at any time,” he said quietly, reaching for something in a chest at the foot of the bed, utterly naked, and then pulling on a preservative over his manhood. “You know that, Annika? At any point, and I will stop.”

Anne nodded. She did not trust her voice. She was about to experience something incredible, and hopefully a little pleasure.

But she could never have predicted what came next. Maxim kicked aside the chest, and grabbing her ankles, pulled her towards him. Anne gasped as her skirts, caught on the bed linens, were pulled up to her knees – but they did not stop there.

Maxim’s dark eyes did not leave hers as his strong hands pushed her skirts further up, his fingertips grazing the inside of her thighs. Anne moaned, she could not help herself, and once again her vocal pleasure pushed him over the edge.

Pulling her undergarments off, Maxim seemed to hesitate. He was looking at her as though she was a delicate flower.

“I am ready,” she breathed. “Trust me.”

He swallowed. “You are an innocent, I do not want to hurt you.”

Anne tried not to smile. “You won’t. Damn it, Maxim, make love to me.”

Something flickered over his face, pushed her legs apart roughly and in a swift moment, plunged his manhood inside her.

Anne screamed with the intensity of the ecstasy and he froze.

“I have hurt you?”

Anne looked up with desire hazed eyes. “More. Harder.”

He did not need further invitation. Reaching out, he pinned her hands by her head and took possession of her lips with his own as he plunged himself into her, slowly at first, building the pressure inside her.

Anne writhed, the sensual ecstasy rising in her, that heat in her stomach moving lower, her whole body on fire for him.

“I want to see you come,” Maxim whispered, tearing his lips from hers and gazing deeply into her eyes. “First I ride you, then I will make love to you. Lose yourself in the pleasure, Annika...”

And she did. Anne closed her eyes as the bliss built to such a pitch she could not think, only feel, and her whole body rocked as the pleasure exploded around her.

Maxim immediately stopped, panting heavily and grinning when she opened her eyes. “My my, Annika, you know what you like. I had to be careful there. Now – ”

“Now,” interrupted Anne, breathlessly, hardly able to believe what she was about to say, “you have ridden me. It’s time that I rode you.”

With a strength she never would have believed, she tipped Maxim over so he was lying on the bed and she was straddling him.

Anne swallowed. She had never done this before, but how difficult could it be? She had ridden a horse, hadn’t she?

Maxim’s eyes widened. “R-Ride?”

Anne did not answer. Instead, she lowered herself onto his hot manhood, preservative still thankfully intact, and moaned as she felt him fill her up.

“*Khristos zhiv,*” Maxim murmured. “Christ alive, Annika, you know what I want.”

She did. Every instinct in her knew what he wanted – but she was not going to give it to him so easily.

Still mounted upon him and smiling down at him, Anne very slowly rocked backwards and forwards without moving up and down, but as she

gazed into his eyes, she started to untie her gown.

Maxim's eyes closed and his hands twitched. "Annika, God I want you – give me what I want."

"No," she murmured, revelling in the power she had over him. "No, this time we are going to do it my way."

It was a delicious five minutes of gently teasing him before she was totally naked. If she had been concerned he would not appreciate her nude body, she was wrong. Maxim surprised her by sitting up, his mouth eagerly closing around one breast and his hand worshipping the other.

Anne arched her back, desperate for more, and only then did she start to gently rise and spear herself onto his manhood.

Maxim fell back, his eyes closed, hands on her hips. "Yes, oh Annika, faster!"

She could feel the heat building in her again, but she would not give him satisfaction that easily.

"No," she said with a smile, hardly able to keep her voice steady. "My pleasure first."

She took it, twice, her body exploding around him each time, her voice unable to remain quiet, until finally Maxim had clearly had enough.

"Annika, I will have you," he growled, twisting so that she fell back into the soft linens.

His mouth captured hers as he built a steady, hard rhythm, Anne twisting in the bed to allow him in deeper.

"I wanted you," she gasped, "ever since –"

"And I wanted you," he groaned. "Annika, I want this every day, I want you every day."

"And you can have me," Anne smiled. "Every day, whenever you want. Just give me – oh!"

Maxim shouted out with her this time, their ecstasy in glorious union, and as Anne's body rocked with her fifth orgasm, he ploughed into her and exploded into pleasure.

Maxim tried to pull breath into his lungs, but no matter how much air he took in, it was not enough.

Dear God, that it was possible to experience something like that, a closeness, an intimacy, a pleasure like that with a woman – and all the same woman!

He glanced at her, dark hair wild and her own breathing heavy. Annika Marsh. She is everything he could have wanted, everything he could have imagined.

How was it possible that she knew not only how to please him, but also to take her own pleasure?

She was the perfect woman; all the elegance of the English with all the fire of the Russians. If he did not have a Czardom to claim, he would sneak her across London to a little Orthodox chapel he knew, and marry her immediately.

“This cannot be real.”

Her words were soft, breathed rather than spoken, and he laughed as he pulled her closer.

“I have to be honest,” he said quietly, “I was more worried that you would be in pain than in pleasure.”

“I have never,” she began, and then hesitated before continuing in a less controlled voice, “never experienced anything...anything like this.”

If he had heard words like that from anyone else – and if he were honest, he had – he would have found his ego inflating, to know he had given such sensual delight to a lady.

But not with Annika. All he felt was relief, and joy that she had experienced ecstasy. She was important – far more important than he had realised before she had stepped into his room this evening.

Not only important, but precious. He felt honoured, as though he had been given a precious gift, that it had been he to give her that first experience of intimacy between a gentleman and a lady.

She shifted slightly in his arms, and Maxim could feel himself stiffen at the very thought of a repeat experience. No, he must be controlled. Though she was not sore now, she certainly would be if he took his pleasure and plunged into her again.

“Well,” Annika whispered, tracing an invisible line across his chest with a finger, “that was a secret worth knowing.”

Maxim smiled. “Plenty more where that one came from.”

She did not respond, her eyes lowered to watch her finger move.

He continued, “You must have secrets too, Annika, even if they are only little, womanly ones.”

“Every woman is entitled to her own secrets,” she said quietly.

Maxim nodded. “Of course, but you must remember that in the

bedchamber, that is the perfect time to share secrets. Why, it is only the two of us, and neither of us will ever mention this to another. Consider it a Christmas gift to me. Tell me...”

His voice trailed away. He had glanced down, and Annika’s eyelashes had fluttered shut. Her breathing was steady, and he watched her slip into slumberland in his arms.

Chapter 8

Anne rubbed her eyes. She knew there would be consequences to her night of passion with Maxim, but she had not expected it to be tired eyes and a slight headache.

“I do not need,” she said quietly, and as calmly as she could manage, “a carriage with four horses.”

“Of course you do,” Sir Thomas said absentmindedly. “Now, the next thing we need to agree is – ”

“No, we have not finished discussing the carriage,” Anne interrupted with a sigh. She leaned back in her chair, and tried not to think too longingly of her own bed. “Father, four horses are such an extravagance, one we do not need. Why spend money when we do not even know whether this marriage is taking place!”

Her words fell on entirely deaf ears.

“Nonsense, no carriage? No horses?” Her father looked down at the copious piles of papers in his lap. “Now, somewhere I have the details of a farrier who – ”

“Father, I do not want four horses and a carriage! I am hardly a duchess, I am just a gentlewoman from a small town in the country,” Anne said fiercely. “And I am happy to be so! I do not wish to exhibit pretensions that others will think ridiculous!”

“You are the daughter of a baronet,” Sir Thomas said, a little more focus in his eye as he found the piece of paper he was looking for. “You will not dishonour me in this, Anne.”

“Dishonour you?” Anne stared at her father in disbelief. “Who is this wedding for, you or me?”

Her words startled him, but not in the way she had expected. “Then... then you are going to go through with the marriage?”

She hesitated. They were sitting alone in a corner of the Court, Meredith out playing with a kitchen girl who had not been needed that day. A smattering of snow fell past the window, and the fire blazed in the grate, as courtiers and visitors meandered and mingled.

She had spoken instinctively, without consideration, but now she stopped

and examined her feelings...

This wedding, this marriage to Maxim...when had it ceased to be a sham in her eyes? In her heart? Was it the gifts, the way he smiled, the way he actually listened to what she said?

Or, and she blushed at the very thought, was it when she had been naked in his arms and known pleasure beyond anything she could have imagined?

It had only been a few hours ago. She had crept away before the sun had risen, and found her own bed cold and empty. Longing for him was not only sensual as she tried to get a few hours of sleep before the Court awoke. She had wanted him for the comfort of his arms around her.

They were but two days away from their marriage: the day before Christmas Eve. The idea that she would not go through with the wedding, it was ludicrous – not after what they had shared in his bed.

“I have wanted to do this from the moment I first met you.”

Maxim. He had made her feel safe, wanted, desired, free to ask for what she wanted. Could she have imagined a gentleman like him?

In the rare moments she had ever considered marriage, before this wild week at St. James’ Court, she had not imagined such joys, such easiness between her and her intended.

Her eyes moved around the room and as though unable to stay away, fell on Maxim. He was stood stiffly, resolutely, in his most formal wear, a few feet from Prinny who was discussing a gambling bet with a friend. The patience on Maxim’s face was stoic, but as their eyes met, he smiled.

Something fiery twisted in her stomach as she returned the smile. She could not help it. He was exactly what she had not dared to hope for in a gentleman, and he was all hers.

And it was not like anyone else would want to marry her...

The thought had passed through her mind before she could stop it. Why did she forbid herself the potential happiness that was before her? She could not think of herself like that. she was worthy of love, and while this engagement was a strange one, something she could never have predicted or sought, that did not mean she did not deserve it.

Did it?

“Anne, I am speaking to you!”

Anne jumped. Sir Thomas was staring with a slight frown across his face, and she realised she had likely been completely ignoring him for the last few minutes, her mind so overwhelmed with thoughts.

“I apologise, Father,” she said quietly. “It is just...”

Her gaze was pulled inexorably towards Maxim again, who inclined his head to Sir Thomas.

Her father sighed. “My dear, we are attempting to plan this wedding, a wedding, may I remind you, which is only two days away.”

Anne nodded without taking her eyes from Maxim. How could she? He was everything she wanted, and after everything that happened, after the regret she had lived with for years, she was finally going to have something that was her very own.

“And then you will be married, and someone else’s problem.”

Anne turned to stare at her father, who looked a little defiant. “You...you almost sound as though you are relieved to be rid of me!”

“Any father would be,” Sir Thomas began, but he was not permitted to continue.

“Any father?”

“I did not mean it like that,” he said hurriedly, keeping his voice low. “Now, do not look at me like that, Annika. I am not ashamed of you, nor do I seek to lose you. But I do worry about you. Who will look after you when I am gone? Who will care for Meredith?”

Hot fire seemed to be burned through her veins as Anne tried to swallow down her bitterness. He was not a bad person. He was her father, and he knew her better than – well, a week ago she would have said anyone.

Now that Maxim and she had...

Anne swallowed. “I had hoped you would always be proud of me,” she said quietly, to ensure that no one else in the court would hear her words. “No matter what mistakes I have made in the past.”

Sir Thomas shook his head sadly. “Ah, Anne. You know that I love you, but your marriage will solve more than one problem, do you not see?”

She rose. “I see,” she said coldly. “This wedding is for you then, as I suspected. For you, and your honour, and to relieve you of me as a burden. I will see you later, Father.”

Ignoring his protestations, Anne stepped away from their chairs and strode across the room. A few gentlemen had to scuttle out of her way, but she ignored their scandalised looks and the whispers moving around the room. Maxim had gone, and there was no one else she wished to speak to here.

The door to the corridor flew open and Anne almost ran through it –

straight into the arms of Maxim.

Even from a distance, standing and waiting for Prinny to finish his banal conversation about a foolish bet he regretted, Maxim could see that Annika was upset. Was it the turn of her head, the lilt on her voice that carried over the crowd?

He could not tell, but every inch of him knew that she needed him. Maxim's eyes glanced at Prinny, and he hesitated. The royal regent was not always in attendance at St. James' Court. This was a perfect opportunity to speak with him, plead his case.

Annika's voice grew, still indistinct enough that he could not hear the exact words, but clearly in heightened distress.

Maxim's decision was made. Turning on his heels, he strode out of the room. If there was a time for another gift, then this was it.

As he moved to step back into the court, gift in his hand, he almost ran headlong into Annika herself.

"Ann – Miss Marsh, I..." Maxim's voice trailed away. If he did not know better, he would have said there were tears in her eyes. "Let us go for a walk."

He spoke so firmly that she simply nodded, taking his arm and allowing him to guide her through the corridors with festoons of Christmas decorations, into the cold air. Snow was starting to fall.

The pressure of her hand on his arm felt natural. As though it should have been there all along. How deep am I falling here, Maxim wondered. When did I start to not want this woman, but need her in my life?

Words seemed to fail him as they trod footsteps into the lightly fallen snow. What did one say to a woman who, mere hours ago, you had naked beneath you?

And yet there was no tension between them. If anything, the tension was leaving Annika; he could see her shoulders slacken. Just walking here, in silence, was wonderful. As though they were made for each other.

There were only a few people walking in the grounds of St. James' Court, kept inside undoubtedly due to the inclement weather.

Finally, she spoke. "You must think me very strange, Maxim."

"No," he countered gently. "Just upset."

Annika sighed heavily, her breath warm in the freezing air. "None of this seems real, do you think? I mean, it is Christmas Eve tomorrow, and then the

next day...”

No words followed this statement. Whether from her words, or the freezing air around them, her cheeks had pinked.

“The next day is your wedding day,” he said lightly, “if you choose it. Unless you have cold feet.”

She laughed and looked down at her thin boots. “In only one sense, Maxim. Believe it or not, I...I am actually considering forcing you to marry me.”

Relief and joy rushed through Maxim’s body in equal measure. “You mean that?”

Her blue eyes glanced at him and she nodded.

Was this situation real? Maxim swallowed, trying to maintain his equilibrium as his emotions flew around inside him. This was not what he came here for, he came here to hide his secret and claim the Czardom that he was owed.

But would any of it mean anything, if he did not have Annika by his side?

“You had better prepare all of your medals, by the way,” Annika was saying with a chuckle. “My father is planning the whole thing out to his satisfaction, and I think he would quite enjoy a military feel. You don’t have any more, do you?”

“Medals?” Maxim shook his head. “I could always rustle up a few.”

She grinned. “I think Father is far more interested in the preparations than I am.”

“Well,” said Maxim as they turned another corner, “I did say that I would marry him if he asked me to.”

The sound of Annika’s laughter seemed to bounce off the frozen trees, giving the whole world a different light.

“He has always dreamed about walking me down the aisle,” she said confidently, “and it seems callous not to give him that opportunity.”

“And have you always dreamed of walking down the aisle?”

It felt like an innocent question – until the words were out of his mouth, and he saw the expression of fear on her face. Why did such a simple question provoke such a response?

“Once,” she said quietly. “But not for very long.”

Questions whirled in Maxim’s mind like the snow starting to pick up around him, but it was clear by Annika’s tone, and the way she refused to meet his eye, that this was not a conversation she would be drawn on.

Well, everyone should be allowed at least one secret. They were happy together, and it looked like nothing could stop their nuptials in just two days. What did a crush, years ago and with no consequences, matter to him?

Their walk took them down a long walkway. Coming towards them was a young lady, solitary, and dressed in the latest fashions. She had evidently ignored the Prince Regent's desire for more formal attire.

About twenty yards before she met them, a gentleman appeared around a corner and shouted something. She stopped, waited for him to join her, and then kissed him full on the mouth before they started walking arm in arm.

"Good day," the young lady said with a flirtatious smile.

"Good day," Annika replied quietly, inclining her head.

Maxim looked back after a minute. "Who was that couple, and a very happily married couple they are too."

"Not quite," said Annika gently. "That is the Earl of Marnmouth and Miss Emma Tilbury."

It took a moment for her words to sink in, and then Maxim turned back to take another look at them. They were no longer arm in arm, but standing in the path, kissing passionately as though the whole world had melted away.

"Miss Emma Tilbury?"

Annika nodded. "I believe Miss Tilbury has been the Earl's mistress for a number of years."

It was impossible to prevent the shock he felt from appearing on his face. "You cannot be serious. The Prince must not know – how else could he let such a woman here at Court?"

She laughed and tightened her grip on his arm. "Oh, Maxim, you do not know England as well as you thought. The Regent's entire world is about pleasure, and taking it where you can. Were there not mistresses in the Czar's court? Did your father not have two wives?"

The way she spoke, so relaxed, so casual, made Maxim hesitate. It was true, his own father had taken a second wife; but she had been a wife nonetheless, not a mistress. He knew it happened, even in the most regal of settings – but to have it so obviously flaunted...

"Well, I am glad at least that you kept your distance," he said faintly, his mind starting to move to other things. "A woman such as that here! We shall have to ensure she does not attend the wedding, Annika."

But she had removed her arm. "Why?"

"Why?" Maxim stared, and so only mild defiance in her face. "Annika,

you cannot be serious?”

“No one can judge another for their decisions in life,” she said simply. “You do not know her situation, what brought her to that arrangement with the Earl. It could have been the making of her – she could have started from somewhere much worse.”

Maxim did not speak. No matter what she said, Annika seemed to know a little too much of this Miss Emma Tilbury, and he did not like the idea of his future wife consorting with a woman who evidently had no concerns of gossip, or morals, or...or decency!

“Do you know her?”

Annika blushed darkly, her cheeks flushed. “No, of course not! But any woman who does not abide by society is not necessarily wrong. Is it not possible that she is just different?”

Maxim took a deep breath. “You are a far gentler creature than I am, I will admit. Just remember, one day you will be a Czarina, and you will not be permitted to socialise with women like that!”

She laughed and cried, “A Czarina? Goodness, will that be my title?”

But he could hear the pain underneath the laughter. There was an untold story there, one that Annika clearly did not trust him enough to tell. But she would, in time.

After all, what kind of secret could she be hiding?

Chapter 9

“Do not go too far, Meredith!”

Anne’s words were caught in the wind, not reaching the young girl who was giggling wildly and skipping away, making deep tracks in the snow. The St. James’ Court servants had decorated outside here, too. Garlands of winter roses adorned every door they passed.

Shaking her head with a smile, Anne followed her from a slight distance. She should have known – knew better than anyone, in fact, that you simply could not tell a girl what to do and expect to be obeyed. Not when the child was so like her mother.

Meredith was twelve, almost thirteen. It would not be long, a few years perhaps, and she would be tugging at the bit, desperate to be out there at card parties, balls, catching the eye of a gentleman or two.

Anne’s jaw clenched for a moment at the very thought. Meredith, fifteen or sixteen years of age, smiling coquettishly at a soldier. If only she could prevent her from making the same mistakes as her mother...

“Whoops!”

“Be careful, Meredith!” Anne frowned slightly as she watched Meredith pick herself up from the snow and brush down her gown. “If it is too icy out here, we should go inside!”

Meredith completely ignored her, running with her skirts flying as the sight of her kitchen maid friend appeared around a corner, giggling in turn.

“Wait for me!”

Anne’s face softened. It was rare for Meredith to find a playmate she could lose herself with, and they would be gone in less than a week. Best to let her play, and get all that energy out of her system. She could not come to real harm, hopefully.

“Just do not go too far, Meredith.”

Meredith ignored her. Same old, same old, Anne thought with a wry smile. She should have known.

“That child is almost like a wolf, running wild,” said a voice behind her. “What a wonderful sight!”

Anne’s wry smile grew into a broad one. She knew that voice. It was

Maxim, surely – and when she turned around, she was not only correct, but saw him in a thick woollen coat holding a gift.

“It is Christmas Day tomorrow,” she said lightly. “Do you not think that any more presents should wait until then?”

Maxim shook his head, his eyes bright. “No. I like giving gifts. You deserve them. It is simple to me.”

Anne rolled her eyes. Was he always going to be so...well, guileless? It was not that she wanted a more complicated man – someone perhaps more likely to hurt her. But Maxim was so uncomplicated. Sometimes she thought she could see right through him.

Her cold gloved fingers scrabbled at the brown paper around what appeared to be a jewellery box.

Her eyes widened. “More jewels, Maxim?”

He laughed and opened it up gently. There, resting on blue velvet, was a delicate gold necklace absolutely dripping with diamonds.

“Oh, Maxim,” she breathed.

“I knew you would like it,” Maxim said softly, picking up the chain that rippled like water, and placing it around her neck. “And it matches those earrings I – ah, I see you are wearing them.”

Anne’s fingers moved to her ears, her cheeks blushing. “Yes, they are so beautiful, I did not want to leave them in our rooms.”

“What are you wearing, Anne?”

A shy voice had piped up from just behind her. Anne started, turning to see Meredith staring at her curiously.

Her already pink cheeks darkened. A formal introduction with Meredith had been all the interaction Maxim had had, and this was not the time for further interaction – not when she was so close to their marriage day. What if Maxim did not like Meredith...or worse, what if she did not approve of him?

“Go and play with your friend, Meredith,” she said, far more firmly than she felt. As she said the words, she noticed that her kitchen maid friend had come.

“But I want to see,” Meredith insisted, her voice becoming a little stronger now. “Hannah had to go back, and I do not have anyone to play with. Please will you show me?”

Anne hesitated. Should she insist, send Meredith away? Was this really the time for Meredith and Maxim to become acquainted? If only her Father was here, he would be able to extricate Meredith and end this situation

entirely.

“‘Tis a necklace,” said Maxim softly. Anne turned to him, and saw he was smiling as he continued, “A gold necklace, with diamonds from where I was born.”

Anne’s eyes darted down to look at the beautiful necklace, which had gained even more importance in that moment. “From where you were born?”

Maxim nodded, and Meredith reached up to touch one of the diamonds. “Truly?”

“Where I come from, there is snow almost all of the year,” he said softly, leaning on his haunches to be closer to Meredith. “The sun sparkles down and makes the whole world glitter, and yet the snow does not melt. There is a fairy tale in my country that no matter how hard the sun tries, it can never melt the snow, because interspersed with the flakes of ice are diamonds.”

Meredith’s eyes were wide, and Anne smiled. Despite her advancing age, there was still much of the child in Meredith.

“Really?”

Maxim smiled. “Of course. But the really exciting part of the story comes later. Come, walk with us and I will tell you.”

Meredith’s gaze darted to Anne, who smiled. “Would you like to walk with us, Meredith?”

“Yes please,” the girl said, a little shyly.

Anne wanted to laugh, but forced down the merriment. “Then let us walk down this path, and Maxim can tell us both the story.”

She placed her arm into Maxim’s without even thinking about it, and seemingly just as unconsciously, Meredith slipped her hand in Maxim’s.

“Hundreds of years ago,” Maxim began as they started to walk together, “there was a fabulous queen in Russia. She laughed at the sun, and ordered her subjects to look for the diamonds hidden in the snow. She was determined to have them for herself, and no one else.”

“And did she find them?” Meredith’s eyes were wide, and Anne smiled. Seeing her and Maxim in this way, it made tomorrow all the sweeter.

“She did, and she made a glorious necklace of the very finest, on a gold chain,” said Maxim impressively, winking surreptitiously at Anne. “She believed she could live forever when she put that necklace on, because something and someone so beautiful could surely never die. And that is why, two hundred years later, when I met her, she was still wearing the necklace.”

“You met her!” Meredith laughed with surprise. “No, you could not

have!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Maxim said in mock outrage. “When I met this queen I could see that she was exceptionally beautiful, but she was also cold, and there was no joy or warmth in her heart. I knew she did not deserve the necklace, and one day, I would meet a woman even more beautiful, and this time with a beautiful heart. So I stole the necklace.”

“Maxim!”

“You really stole it?” Meredith sounded impressed. “But did the queen not have guards, and...and soldiers?”

“Hundreds of them,” said Maxim solemnly. Anne risked a glance at Meredith, who was utterly enraptured. “But I was pure of heart, and all they wanted were the diamonds. I escaped, and I have been holding onto that diamond necklace ever since, waiting for the beautiful woman who deserved it.”

Meredith glanced up at Anne, and said softly, “And now you’ve found her.”

Anne blushed as Maxim said, “Precisely. The moment I saw your sister, I could see her beauty, but as I have become more acquainted with her, I have seen and felt the real beauty of her heart. We are to be wed tomorrow, and I knew it was time to give her the necklace.”

Meredith stared at the two of them for a moment, evidently astonished at the story. “Is that true?”

Anne squeezed Maxim’s arm. “Of course it is. Why would Maxim make up such a story?”

“Meredith!” The call came from Sir Thomas, who had stepped out of a doorway and was waving at the trio. “Come on now, we must be going!”

“Coming!” Meredith let go of Maxim’s hand, but hesitated before running off. “Was there a second necklace that you stole from the queen?”

“Meredith!”

But Maxim laughed. “No, my child. I did take a bracelet from her jewellery box, and a wise hermit told me the true legend of it – but that is a story for another day. Go to your father.”

Anne smiled as the girl scampered away. “You should not tell her such stories, Maxim.”

“Why not?” He smiled, squeezed her hand. “She is a delightful child, and I like to tell wild stories. You never know, I might have been telling the truth.”

Anne laughed. “A Russian queen that lived for hundreds of years?”

Diamonds in the snow? You, getting past hundreds of soldiers?”

“You do not believe I could do it?” Maxim protested with a smile. “Do not worry, I already have the bracelet wrapped. It was intended to be a Christmas Day present, and now it will be all the more delightful for her, I hope. You are fortunate indeed to have Meredith as a sister.”

Anne’s blood went cold, but Maxim did not appear to need a response. She bit her lip. Was now the time to tell him the truth? But it would hardly help him, and it would certainly not help her.

All the truth would do is confuse him.

“Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich?”

They turned around to see a footman standing in the freezing cold, shivering.

“Yes?” Maxim said, clicking his heels and bowing. “That is I.”

The footman handed over a piece of paper without saying another word. Maxim read it, his dark eyes widening as he finished it, and then without saying a word he handed it over to Anne.

She read it carefully.

Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich,

You have waited around for long enough, damn you. Come and find me in my rooms, and let us discuss this Czardom you claim.

His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent

When Anne looked up, Maxim was smiling broadly.

“This is the moment,” he said softly, as the footman looked away respectfully. “This is it, Annika. Today is the day that I am confirmed as Czar! And tomorrow, you will marry him.”

Excitement welled up in Anne’s heart, but not because of his latter words. “You really think he will confirm you?”

Her voice had been a whisper, but Maxim had caught every word. “Why else would he want to see me?”

His whole demeanour had changed; the relaxed nature from his story to Meredith had gone and his body was taut with excitement.

And then he deflated. “I had hoped to spend the rest of the morning with you. You do not mind, Annika, if I leave you now?”

“I would not dare attempt to stop you,” she said with a smile. “Please go, and take all my luck with you.”

Maxim grinned, and impulsively kissed her on the lips, even as they stood there in the grounds of St. James’ Court. And then he was gone.

Anne put her hand to her lips. There was still heat there, so strong it was as though she had been branded by his love, as though no one else would ever be able to make her feel this way, now that they have shared what they have shared.

And was that not true? After all they had experienced, after all they had been to each other, there was nothing she wanted more than to spend her life with him.

She loved him. She may not have spoken the words aloud, but he understood, surely – and he cared, perhaps even loved her.

Anne shivered. With no other companions, the open wintery air did nothing but chill her. It took only ten minutes to reach her rooms, throwing off her coat and sinking into a chair gratefully by the fire. The whole day was ahead of her, and she had naught to fill it with but a good book.

One of her favourite novels had been beside the chair, but it had gone. Anne smiled. It looked like Meredith had a similar taste.

She sighed, stretching out her legs and enjoying the comfort of the chair. When she had been a child, near Meredith's age now, she had thought being at Court would be balls and excitement every waking moment.

Now she was older, she knew the truth: most of it was waiting around for Prinny to decide what he wanted to do!

Without her book, Anne picked up her father's discarded paper. At least it could entertain her for an hour or two. Her fingers flicked through the pages, not looking for anything in particular, but her attention was caught by a name that was familiar.

Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich.

Anne folded the newspaper and read the sentence, but it did not seem to make sense. The paragraph did not make sense either, and after struggling to understand what it meant, she sighed and moved her gaze to the top of the article.

Our editor has received reports once again that a certain gentleman, who goes by the name of Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich, has been spotted at another pawnbrokers – in this case, purchasing a number of foreign looking medals. Despite having no claim to them and likely no understanding of the great mockery he has put himself to by attempting to appear far more noble than he actually is, the gentleman in question has been spotted at St. James' Court, no less, wearing the very medals purchased merely days before! This editor hopes that Alexei Dmitry Immanuel

Maximilian Konstantinvich has a few friends to whisper in his ear, and tell him of the dreadful ridicule he is experiencing across Society.

Anne swallowed, and read the paragraph again, but its meaning did not change.

Maxim bought those medals. He bought them from a pawnbroker. They were not even his medals.

Trying to ignore the frantic beating of her heart, she carefully folded the newspaper and put it down. Then she allowed the thoughts creeping at the back of her mind to come forward.

Was this editor perhaps jealous? Who would not want to be a prince, or king, or Czar?

Anne swallowed, her gaze falling to the blazing fire. An editor would not be permitted to print blatant lies in his newspaper, there would be an outcry. And when she really thought about it, how much did she know about Maxim?

Only what he told her.

Anne gripped the arms of the chair as she fought down the panic rising from her stomach. His name, his history, even his family – all of it could be lies. His name did sound a little ridiculous, now she thought about it without his intoxicating presence before her.

She had accused him, once, of being a confidence trickster. And what had he replied?

“What answer do you want? What do you want to be true?”

Maxim had said from the very beginning of their acquaintance that he had a secret. There was no proof to say that he was who he said he was. No servants, no friends, no supporters. Just her.

In a moment of irritation, Anne unfolded the paper and read the paragraph again.

This editor hopes that Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinvich has a few friends to whisper in his ear, and tell him of the dreadful ridicule he is experiencing across Society.

How had this editor, whoever he was, known about this? Perhaps he had spoken to the pawnbroker. Why would a pawnbroker lie?

Her breathing slightly ragged, she put the newspaper down again. The newspaper would not lie, and so that could only mean...that Maxim had lied.

“Earned through battle, though I will not say who with for this is an English court with English sensibilities. Just pieces of metal, really.”

She had given her heart, her body, her soul to a gentleman who was a liar.

Was he also a thief? Was he even Russian? He could be a bootmaker from Moscow, and she would have no idea.

Anne rose without conscious thought, desperate in her need to do something, understand it all. What better person to ask than Maxim himself?

She would have to face him at some point.

She had almost reached the door of her rooms when she hesitated. Maxim had been called to the presence of the Prince Regent, but that did not necessarily mean that Prinny had been ready to see him. Maxim could still have been waiting.

Anne bit her lip. Perhaps she would find something, something to confirm his identity...in his rooms.

Five minutes later, she was knocking gently on his bed chamber door. So certain had she been that he would still be with Prinny that she jumped when a voice inside spoke.

“Come in.”

Anne took a deep breath. This was the moment it could all fall apart.

Maxim looked surprised to see her when she opened the door. “Annika! I did not think I would see you again so soon. I am told that it is bad luck to see your bride the day before the wedding.”

Anne tried to keep her voice calm. “Maxim, I...I need to ask you something.”

“I know what you are going to ask, and I am sad to say, not yet,” Maxim said heavily.

She shut the door behind her with a puzzled expression. “Not...not yet?”

He shook his head, throwing himself into a chair. “No, Prinny is not willing to make a decision quite yet. I think I almost have him convinced, but it will take a little more time. He wants to hear about my adventure, how I managed to get here.”

Anne stepped into the room and found her voice was cold as she said, “I would like to hear that story, too.”

Maxim had opened his mouth to respond, but he hesitated. Evidently, something in her voice made him pause. “And I was always going to, Annika. I just have not found the time, yet.”

“And are you also going to tell me,” Anne said, not moving towards him because she knew her heart would melt and fall at his feet if she got any closer, “the story about why you decided to choose a false title for yourself?”

Maxim’s face fell, and then his brow furrowed. “False title?”

“Those medals you showed me,” said Anne, hating every word but knowing she had to speak. How could she marry a man tomorrow with all these lies between them? “They are not yours – I mean, they are yours now, but you did not inherit them, or earn them. You bought them, Maxim. You bought them.”

She had thought her words of accusation would provoke far more of a response, but he did not move. His brow remained furrowed, but he did not take his eyes from her.

When he finally spoke, it was in a low, hurt voice. “And where did you hear all this nonsense, Annika?”

“‘Tis not nonsense!” Anne could not help but raise her voice a little. “Maxim, or whatever your real name is – it is all in the paper! The newspaper tells the whole world that you bought those medals! You are a laughingstock and...and so would I have been, if I married you.”

“If?”

Anne swallowed. Only an hour ago, she had realised that this was the gentleman she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, but now she knew the truth about him. Perhaps it was time he learned the truth about her.

“No more secrets,” she said softly. “No more lies. If you still think that marriage tomorrow is a good idea, for both of us, then...then perhaps we can put this all behind us.”

“I do not have any secrets,” Maxim growled. “Not ones that matter.”

“But I do.” Anne could barely believe she had spoken the words, but this was not the time to hide the truth. Perhaps, if she had just told him at the very beginning, they would never have continued this engagement of convenience, and she would never have given herself to him, fallen in love with him, only to have her heart broken again.

Maxim scoffed, throwing his hands up in the air. “I do not think any ‘secret’ you tell me will be as shocking as the accusation you’ve just thrown at me!”

Anne swallowed. She still had the opportunity to disappear from this room, keep the truth to herself. But some part of her wanted to hurt him, hurt him as his lies had hurt her.

“Do you want to bet?” she said softly.

Maxim rolled his eyes. “Go on, then. If you think you can try to shock me, you are perfectly mista – ”

“Meredith is my daughter.”

Anne had not expected the words to be so difficult to say, but there was a ringing silence in the room after them.

Maxim rose to his feet. “Y-Your...”

She nodded. Well, she had come this far. “I was...seduced, I suppose you could say, when young. A soldier, passing through our town. My father has raised her as his own, and borne my disgrace with silence. Maxim, I was no innocent when you met me.”

Chapter 10

Maxim's jaw fell open.

Had he heard those words correctly?

"Meredith is my daughter."

Mind utterly overwhelmed, thoughts rushing around his brain, it was not possible to untangle them into rational understanding: but he could feel.

Dread, confusion, anger: they swept through his body like a cold winter wind. As Annika stood there, staring at him as though waiting for a response, he could do nothing but stare.

Everything that he knew – or thought he had known, more accurately – about this sweet, gentle, charming woman...

His eyes raked over her, looking for a sign that she was lying. But no; everything before this moment had been the lie.

"Daughter." That was the only word he could manage, and it appeared that Annika was just as overwhelmed as he was. Without speaking, she nodded.

She was a mother! That caring, nurturing nature, of course it had to come from somewhere. Annika was a mother. Meredith was her child!

He could never have guessed, but now that he knew, there was a certainty in him that he should have guessed. They were so alike. Neither of them had mentioned their mother, and...had Annika ever described Meredith as her daughter?

The realisation that he was not about to wake up from a nightmare came over him, and Maxim felt nausea rise in his stomach. Nothing but deep shock could feel like this. How was it possible to keep this from him, after all they had shared – after the passion they had experienced in the bed just feet from him?

True, he had his own secrets, but he had always said he had a hidden past. Nothing he could tell her would be as dramatic as this.

Annika's eyes had not left his, and he watched her hands come together and clench nervously. She feared him, or at least, feared his reaction. And she was right to be. Only now did their conversation about Miss Emma Tilbury, the mistress of the Earl of Marnmouth, come into focus.

Of course, she had argued in her favour. Was there very much difference between them, really?

His gaze was caught by the bed in the corner of the room, and Maxim swallowed down the sadness that suddenly rose. He had not been her first. The pleasure he had given her had, perhaps, not even compared to what she had experienced with this, this, *soldier*.

“Wh-Why did you not tell me sooner?”

His splutter was genuine, but Annika narrowed her eyes as though he had attempted to accuse her of espionage.

“I did not have to tell anyone,” she said defensively. “And after all, ‘tis not purely my secret. It belongs – belonged to Meredith too. I have no wish for my child to be judged wherever she went, haunted by the mistakes of her mother.”

Maxim shut his eyes, as though not being able to see Annika would help him to understand her better. Child, mother, they were simply not words he could ever have imagined coming from her lips.

And then something struck him and his eyes snapped open. “She does not know?”

“Of course not,” Annika snapped, some of that fire returning to her voice. “What sort of monster do you take me for? I would not put that on a child, not an innocent who has known nothing but kindness and acceptance. I have allowed her to live an...an ordinary life. She has a much older sister. That is all she knows.”

“Much older sister?” Maxim blurted out, hardly able to take the mocking laughter from his tones. “Annika, you are...you are an unmarried mother! God knows where her father is, and you think that I, a Czar, could marry a ruined woman?”

Annika’s cheeks darkened, but her voice was forceful as she said, “I am not a ruined woman!”

Maxim laughed drily and threw up his hands, almost falling into the chair behind him. If she was going to be so unreasonable...

“I made a mistake!” Annika stepped forward, but stopped after a few steps, evidently unsure of herself. “A mistake that I am sure countless other women have made – and the mistake was thinking that he loved me. I do not regret Meredith, I could never regret her!”

A curl of regret tied itself around Maxim’s heart. “I did not say that – ”

“No one knows the truth, none save the two of us and my father,” she

continued, her voice a little more forceful. “I have lived a...a normal life ever since. There is no reason why that could not continue.”

Maxim laughed bitterly, shaking his head. “Secrets always come out, eventually.”

She joined his laughter, and it sounded awful coming from her sweet lips. “You would know all about that, would you not, Maxim? If that is your real name, which I am not minded to believe at this moment. After all, it was only today that your secret was published in the newspaper!”

It took him a few seconds to realise what she was referring to. “Oh, you mean this tittle tattle about the medals?”

“To think the whole of society is laughing at you,” Annika said with a physical shudder.

Fury rose in Maxim’s heart. To be judged by such a woman, with such a mistake haunting her past! It was not to be borne.

But as he looked up at Annika about to spit angry words, his heart softened. Even knowing what he did now, he could not despise her. She was Annika. Something about her clung on in his heart, his very soul cried out for her. He needed her, despite it all.

“You are mistaken if you think those medals are my secret,” he said aloud. “Those blasted medals are nothing to do with it.”

Annika’s face crinkled into a curious frown. “Then...then I think it is time that you told me about this secret of yours. There is no purpose in holding anything else back, after all!”

It was impossible for Maxim to think; not with all this hurt and anger rushing through his mind. What harm could it do? They were not going to marry now, that much was clear, and no one would believe her anyway.

“My secret is the best one – the truth!” He blurted out. The words seemed to arrange themselves without conscious thought, pouring from him after being dammed up for so long. “You think I do not hear everyone laughing at me, calling me pretender?”

Annika nodded, unable to speak.

Maxim laughed drily. “Yes, and I act like the perfect pretender, do I not? Eager to please, eager to see the Prince, speaking with as many earls and dukes as I can? Well, that is the only way to keep myself safe. I need Priny to *deny me my Czardom.*”

Annika was staring as though he had lost his wits. “But...but that does not make any sense.”

“And that is why the plan was so brilliant,” Maxim said bitterly. “If there was any justice I would be confirmed as the Czar, but I would not last long. My brother was murdered, assassinated for even suggesting that our family line was the one that should have been on the throne. My sister, taken from us. I have no idea what happened to her, though I pray she is safe.”

Now the words were pouring from his lips, it seemed impossible to stop. When was the last time he had spoken of Katarina? Months. Almost a year. And now he had merely alluded to her, he could feel the tears pinching in the corners of his eyes.

Brushing away the burning liquid, he continued, “The more ridiculous I look, the more kings and queens of Europe refuse to confirm my birth right, the more likely it is that I shall be left alone. And yet I am the future Czar, or at least I should be. There. My precious secret.”

Annika took a hesitant step towards him. “So...so your secret is that you never lied about who you were.”

“I am Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich, Czar of Russia,” Maxim said heavily. “But to be publicly confirmed as such...it would be a death sentence. I have to keep myself safe, far better than I was able to keep Igor and Katarina safe.”

Why did it feel so strange, sharing this truth with her? He had carried the secret for so long that it had become a weight around his neck, and now that he had shared it, he had thought he would feel lighter.

But the tension and bitterness between them had not disappeared.

“What about the medals?”

Maxim sighed. “Damn it, Annika, you think I wanted to pawn them? But I was in desperate need of funds, and I had nothing else of value on me.” His hands twisted in his lap. “I should have known it was a mistake from the moment I walked into that place, but...but I was hungry. I needed coin, and for that I pawned my family’s honour along with our medals. I came into some more funds. I bought the medals back.”

When he finally had the courage to look up, it was to see a softening on Annika’s face.

“You...you should have just told me in the first place,” she stammered. “All these jewels you have given me...why – ”

Maxim laughed bitterly. “What, and you would have believed me? When we first met, you wanted to be entertained. You did not want to hear the sad story of a royal house come to ruin. In my family, a gentleman does what he

must to survive, and takes the sacrifices upon himself. Pawning my medals hurt me. Pawning family jewels would have hurt my future bride.”

“Still,” she said, a little more firmly. “You should have told me, after we...”

Her eyes flitted to the bed.

Irritation rose in Maxim’s heart. “And you should have told me about Meredith! Do you not think that a husband deserves to know if his wife has any children?”

“You would not have understood!” A little of Annika’s fire had returned to her voice. “No one would have, and I saw how you looked at Miss Emma Tilbury – and she had no child!”

He waved away her protestations, feeling nothing but bitterness. “I was nothing but honest with you, and this is how you repay me?”

“How was I to know that I would fall in love with you, actually desire this marriage?”

Annika put her hands over her mouth, obviously shocked at the words which had come from her mouth.

Maxim stood up slowly. His heart was pounding, his lungs jerking, trying to take in enough air, but there was not enough in the room.

She was in love with him. *She loved him.*

“How was I to know that I would fall in love with you?”

The words rose up in his throat that he returned her affections: that he loved her, had loved her from the moment that she had crept into his bed chamber and asked for his touch.

But he forced them down. He could not even countenance the idea of marrying a woman who had been...well, despoiled would have been the word he would have used for anyone else. Just thinking it about Annika felt wrong, but he could not help it.

She had loved another man, conceived and borne his child.

He had to be strong. His noble house could not be aligned with one such as her.

“This has to end.” The words came out almost as a croak, and even as he spoke he had to force his hands to stay by his side and not reach out for her. Just the touch of her hand would be enough to overwhelm his resolve, and he owed it to himself, and to his house, to stay strong. “This must end now.”

“End?” Annika was looking in confusion. “I do not understand. We know each other better now, all secrets are out in the open. Tomorrow, Christmas

Day, we...we could..."

Her voice trailed away at just the look of his face.

"I cannot go through with the wedding."

Her eyes widened. "You...you cannot?"

Maxim could not help but laugh now, and its bitterness was bile in his throat. "You really believed, after hurling accusations at me and revealing your own...history – you thought we could just ignore today and get married tomorrow?"

"If we both care for each other," she said in an insistent tone, "then every obstacle can be surmounted!"

Maxim ignored the words. He would not admit the love in his heart, not now that she had broken it. "I was foolish to even consider a wife who wasn't royal, let alone innocent."

It happened in a moment. Annika stepped forward and gave him such a slap across the face that he staggered back, falling into his chair.

"You are hardly innocent," she said, fury dripping from her voice as she stood over him. "Two standards for royalty and commoners, for gentlemen and ladies...I should never have trusted you. Good day, Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinvich."

She stormed out of the room without saying another word. Maxim raised his hand to touch his cheek, which was burning. The heat was nothing to the pain in his heart.

Chapter 11

Someone was pulling painfully at Anne's arm. No matter how much she attempted to retreat into her own bed, eyes still firmly shut, they did not seem to go away.

"Anne?"

Anne frowned, eyes unopened. The last thing she wanted to do was wake up. Her headache, brought on by too many tears the evening before, still lingered across her temples. Why would she want to face the world? Why was someone trying to force her into consciousness when all she wanted to do was stay here?

"Anne!"

It was her father. His voice sounded concerned, but Anne brushed him away, pulling her arm under her bed linens. She did not want to speak with him. She did not want to speak with anyone.

"I have to leave. See if you can wake her."

Heavy footsteps sounded, followed by the opening and shutting of a door. Anne sighed. Perhaps now she would be left in peace.

"Anne?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Meredith?"

Something inside her, call it nature, a primal instinct, forced her to fully awake as her child said her name. Meredith was standing beside the bed, a concerned look across her face.

"What is wrong?" Anne forced herself to sit up, her head aching and heavy. "Are you hurt, are you injured?"

Meredith shook her head. She was wearing her favourite gown and her hair had been pinned up. The childishness of her features had completely gone with the adult coiffure.

"Nothing is wrong, Anne," Meredith whispered. She seemed to know that Anne's head hurt, keeping her voice low. "It is almost luncheon, and you did not rise for breakfast. Are you feeling unwell?"

Anne's gaze shifted from her daughter to the clock over the mantelpiece. It was indeed almost one o'clock in the afternoon. Sunlight streamed around the drawn curtains, weak winter sun with no heat in it.

“Luncheon?”

Meredith nodded. Anne attempted to collect her thoughts, but they were so painful and so scattered that it seemed impossible to keep track of them all.

Had she made a mistake by going to Maxim’s bed chamber last night? But she could never have proceeded with the marriage – the sham marriage, she thought bitterly – without knowing the truth about those medals.

If only she had never read that newspaper. Had she made a huge mistake, thrown away the only chance she may have for happiness?

But had she not already started to suspect that there was something more going on that he was not telling her? How could she trust a gentleman who had not told her the truth...or at least the whole truth, about his past?

She would never have had a prickle of doubt, never confronted him, and never told him the truth about Meredith.

She looked at her daughter. She had not been truthful with Maxim, that was true, but how could she? Who would understand?

And of course, she had been proven right in the end. Maxim had not understood, and now there would be no wedding.

“Anne?”

Anne forced herself to focus. Meredith needed her, an anxious frown across her face.

“Please do not concern yourself,” she said quietly, taking Meredith’s hand and squeezing it. “I am quite well but I...I did not sleep well last night. I chose to stay in bed which was rather lazy of me, I admit. Nothing is wrong. I may just spend the day in bed, to recover.”

She had intended her words to calm that puckered frown, but if anything, they had the opposite effect.

“But you are supposed to be getting married this afternoon,” Meredith said in a rush. “Where is Maxim? No one has seen him, and you are sick.”

No matter how hard she tried, Anne could not prevent her heart from sinking. He had warned her, right in that conversation when they had organised this sham of an engagement. Had he not said that he would disappear?

“Miss Marsh can inform me on Christmas Eve whether she wishes to go ahead with the marriage. If not, I will disappear to France the next morning – I am due to see some friends there in any event – and Miss Marsh will be a jilted, sorrowful figure. One to claim society’s pity, not scandal.”

It was hardly a surprise, but Anne could not have predicted the heaviness of her disappointment. It consumed her, like a fire, taking all joy and hope from her soul.

She swallowed. The last thing she needed was for Meredith to see just how upset she was – but she was not a child anymore, not really. She deserved the truth.

Some of it.

“I am sorry to say that the wedding will not be happening this afternoon,” she said gently. “I...I discussed it with Maxim last night, and we decided that it was not the best thing for us.”

Meredith’s frown disappeared, but it was replaced by sorrow. “It is because of me, isn’t it?”

Anne’s heart froze as she tried to say calmly, “Of course not, Merry. Why would you think that?”

Her cheeks pinked as she said, “Well, because...because I am your daughter, and he did not approve, did he?”

If the entire bed had fallen over a cliff, Anne would not have felt any more astonished, fearful, and shocked. Her stomach dropped away as she looked at a child who would spend the rest of her life fighting against the prejudice of others.

How was it possible? They had been so careful, so secret. Neither she nor her father had ever shared the secret with anyone. They had even travelled to France to have the baby, when her mother had been alive. Only a month later had they lost her, tragedy amongst new life.

No one had known. So how had Meredith discovered the truth?

“Wh-what?” were the only words she could manage to speak aloud, as wild thoughts whirled around her mind.

Was Meredith even old enough to understand the consequences of this for her – for both of them?

“What are you talking about?” Anne managed to say with a little more decorum.

Meredith smiled, and in that moment, she became the very image of Anne herself, at that age. Anne felt she was looking at a portrait taken of her at the age of thirteen.

“I heard someone speaking of it a few years ago,” her daughter was saying hesitantly, her cheeks pinking. “It did not take too much thinking to understand it fully. Please do not worry. I like having you as both sister and

mother.”

Anne smiled weakly. And here she had been attempting to protect Meredith from what she already knew.

“I understand that it must remain a secret,” she was saying, “that I had to remain a secret. But...did Maxim find out? Is that why he has left us?”

Anne swallowed. If Meredith’s true parentage were ever public knowledge, she would experience far worse than Maxim’s confused anger.

But she was too old to be lied to.

Anne sighed. She certainly would not have chosen these circumstances to try and explain this all to Meredith, and if she were not careful, the tears she had not cried for the last thirteen years would all fall at the same time.

“Maxim does not wish to marry me anymore, and that does not mean he did not enjoy your company greater. It is not because of who you are, it is because of...something I said to him.”

Meredith bit her lip, and only in that moment did Anne realise that her daughter looked just like her when conflicted.

“I...I am not ashamed of who I am,” she said simply.

Anne reached forward and pulled her daughter close. “Good. Because you should not be. You are wonderful.”

Meredith’s voice came a little muffled, and jagged with emotion. “I love you, Mummy.”

How was it possible for Anne’s heart to break all over again? This precious child, this unique cargo she had carried through life and now had to watch venture further and further from her safe and loving arms...how would they ever be the same again?

How long they were in each other’s arms, she did not know. In a way, it was their first ever hug as mother and daughter, both of them fully aware of the truth, and Anne had to brush away a tear. Her daughter, and she was not a child anymore.

When Anne finally released her, Meredith’s eyes were a little pink. “I am glad you were able to explain it to Maxim. I would...I would hate for him to have the wrong idea, and for the two of you to fall out because of me.”

Anne bit her lip and tried to smile. It had all happened so fast, that conversation yesterday afternoon. Had she explained everything properly? Had she really listened to him when he had attempted to explain things?

“I know I cannot call you Mummy in society,” the younger girl said wistfully. “I shall have to remember to call you ‘Anne’.”

Anne smiled. “I will answer to either, you know that. I will always answer when you call.”

How could she ever have thought Meredith too young for St. James’ Court? Why, she was practically a young lady, and yet the child she remembered – giggling through the fields behind their home, learning how to play with the cat without getting scratched, the tantrums at the piano – that child was still there, too. In the eyes, perhaps.

“I am going to go open another present,” said Meredith, her voice cutting through Anne’s thoughts, “and I’ll let you wake up slowly. Join us if you feel able.”

She stepped away but paused by the door, looking back at her mother. “If Maxim did not hear the full story, perhaps he misunderstood. Perhaps you should talk to him.”

And with that, she was gone.

Anne fell back into the comfort of her pillows and felt her soul unsettled. Her heart still hurt, and if that was not love, she did not know what was. But was it too late to speak with Maxim? What would she say? She would not apologise for who Meredith was, or what she herself had done in the past.

Was it possible to make peace with a Czar at Christmas?

Maxim sank heavily into the chair, rubbing his sore eyes. His arrival into the room was met with laughter.

“My goodness,” Prince Édouard said, sitting lightly opposite him at the breakfast table. “I would say you were a sight for sore eyes, but I think it is you who has the sore eyes, not me!”

Maxim attempted to smile, but did not manage it.

“When you turned up outside my door at God knows what o’clock on Christmas morning, I was expecting a dramatic story!” Édouard’s smile faded. “And yet now I am minded to think it more a tragedy than a comedy.”

Maxim sighed. He knew his friend of old, and he would not be put off. “‘Tis a dramatic tale, you must admit. I went through it all last night, surely you do not need me to tell it again?”

Édouard shook his head as he reached for the teapot. “No, I think I have a clear idea of what happened.”

Why did his friend sound so calm? Maxim glared down at his plate. What was the point of food, if he had to live in a world in which Annika lived, but could not be his?

“Who would have believed it,” he said darkly, poking at a sausage. “A woman who looked so innocent could actually be so – ”

“Human?” Édouard said archly.

Maxim scowled at his friend. “If you do not want me here, cluttering up your home, I can just leave.”

The prince leaned back in his chair, examining his expression. “Do not be so *insensé*. I would never turn away a friend, especially a distant cousin.”

That was enough to make Maxim smile, just a little. “You have never told me how we are supposed to be related. What was it, third cousin twice removed by our great grandparent’s marriage?”

Édouard waved away Maxim’s words as he grinned. “The point is that we are both royal – and you, if you do not mind me saying so, have managed to create a royal mess for yourself.”

Maxim leaned forward with teacup in his hand, which was filled. “I do not know how you make that out. I was honest with her the entire time, from the very beginning of this sham engagement – ”

“Which was your suggestion,” interrupted Édouard.

“ – and yet all she did was lie to me,” continued Maxim doggedly.

His companion raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so it was common knowledge to everyone else then, I see.”

Discomfort rose in Maxim’s stomach. Well, anything would sound foolish if spoken like that. “No, it was a secret from everyone – I don’t think the child even knows.”

After taking a sip of his tea, Édouard frowned. “I am lost then, my friend. What made you think that you were special, nay, important enough to be told a secret that a father and daughter had kept for over a decade?”

“We were supposed to be getting married this afternoon!” Maxim exploded. “‘Tis only because of our late night conversation that we are having breakfast at this ungodly hour. I should be on my way to be married at this very moment!”

The cup of tea in his hand had spilled across the table. A brown stain moved steadily across the crisp white linen.

He was supposed to be getting married that afternoon. How had it all changed in just one conversation? Instead of finding his bed warmed by his delicious new bride, he was spending Christmas as the miserable guest of Édouard.

His host was shaking his head. “You fool.”

Without saying another word, he rose and stepped over to a cabinet. As Maxim watched, Édouard opened up the cabinet, took out a bottle of an amber liquid, and two glasses.

“You know, I would not normally do this at only one o’clock in the afternoon,” he said conversationally, “but it is lunchtime, I suppose, and it is Christmas. More importantly, you are an *imbécile*.”

Pouring a large measure of the liquid, he handed the glass to Maxim.

“Brandy?”

Édouard nodded. “France’s best.”

Maxim accepted it gratefully and poured the burning liquid down his throat. It brought him back to life in a way that tea never could.

“I admit it,” he said grudgingly, “it was a secret from the world, true, and so I was not particularly special in not knowing it. But damnit, Édouard, I wanted to be special! I was going to marry her!”

Édouard had poured himself a similarly generous glass of brandy, and as he sat back in his chair opposite him, raised an eyebrow. “I thought the only reason you had concocted this charade was because you two were found in a compromising position. Was it not a...*comment dites-vous, mensonge*...a lie, anyway?”

Maxim sighed, draining his brandy glass. Secrets and lies. Where do they mix, where do they meet? What was the difference in the end?

His mind returned to Annika. He had fought it, tried desperately not to dwell on her beautiful face, the way she had hurtled away, hurt by him.

“*Your Czar charm won’t fool me.*”

A smile crept across his face, unbidden. She was honest, their conversation free, every moment with her easy.

Their lovemaking had been wild and passionate, unrestrained. He had never experienced anything like her.

Was he really willing to walk away from all of that?

“You are a Czar,” Édouard said heavily, “or you should be, which is what matters. But right now here you are, in exile with a fellow exiled royal, in another country where you cannot be appreciated.”

Maxim’s heart softened. It was all very well for him to complain. He had a throne to go back to. His family, albeit distant, was still on the throne of Russia.

Édouard’s would never be going back to France.

“Yet you had the chance for something real, something that you could

actually experience whether you were a Czar or not,” continued Édouard. “You had happiness in your grasp, and I say again, you were an idiot to lose it.”

“I-I, the idiot!” Maxim spluttered, his veins heated by the brandy. “I am no fool!”

“Yes, you are,” Édouard said calmly, placing his glass down and staring seriously at his friend. “After all this time you have spent looking for a throne, why not become the king of your own castle?”

Maxim stared. “Castle? The Marshes have no castle.”

Shaking his head and laughing, Édouard said, “No, ‘tis an English expression. To be king of your castle. To build a home. *Mon Dieu*, you had the chance to build a real life, not one in the clouds. Was it really worth throwing away for a little misunderstanding about medals?”

Chapter 12

Anne leaned back. “Well, I cannot eat another bite. Can you, Meredith?”

Meredith’s eyes were a little glazed over, a sure fire sign that she had overeaten. “Pardon?”

Sir Thomas chuckled as he looked at his girls. “Well, I have to admit, I am impressed by the fare the kitchens here have been able to provide. You never know, when away from home, whether the quality will be precisely what you are expecting.”

Anne placed a hand on her stomach. She had certainly eaten more than she had expected, but then, what was the point in attempting to remain slender? No gentleman would be calling on her any time soon, and with that disappeared any incentive.

Maxim had loved her body. No, Anne corrected herself silently, wincing at the very thought of him. Maxim had made love to her body. He had no real interest in her. As soon as he discovered the truth about her, the one secret she had, he had made it perfectly clear that he could not consider her as a bride.

“You really believed, after hurling accusations at me and revealing your own...history – you thought we could just ignore today and get married tomorrow?”

“Right then,” said her father, cutting through into her thoughts. “If we go now, we should be in time to see the royal family arrive.”

Anne sighed heavily. “May I stay here, in our rooms, Father? I am not feeling up to company today.”

Sir Thomas frowned. “We have to go, Annika. My goodness, ‘tis Christmas!”

Anne winced. That little pet name, once so beloved by her when only her father had used it, was spoiled now. Maxim had ruined it for her.

Meredith looked between them and then said loyally, “I do not wish to go either, Papa.”

Anne smiled, despite herself. Perhaps now that the truth was out in the open between them, they would become even closer. Perhaps there was joy to be found in this situation, even if her heart was breaking.

“Of course you do,” she said gently. “Do you not want to see the decorations, the candles, and the royal family?”

Her daughter squirmed in her seat. “There...there is a boy that I was hoping to see there.”

Anne looked over her head and mouthed ‘boy’ to her father. Sir Thomas shrugged and shook his head with a sigh.

“Well, if you wish to meet your gentleman friend, we will need to go,” he said aloud. “Come now, Meredith. Go and choose a piece of jewellery from your sister’s things, you deserve a treat this Christmas. And change into your court clothes, while you are there.”

Cheeks a little pink at the admission of a gentleman friend, Meredith obediently rose and stepping into her own room.

Anne leaned back and shook her head. “A gentleman friend. She is not even thirteen, Father.”

“It will be innocent enough,” he said bracingly. “Come now. You will need to change, too, and while you are changing gowns may I suggest a change in expression?”

“This was supposed to be my wedding day, Father,” Anne said fiercely, not bothering to keep her voice down. “I do not think it will be as simple as just deciding to be cheerful.”

Sir Thomas had risen and was pulling off his waistcoat to swap it for a more formal one. “Nonsense. You will enjoy it once we see the royal family. You do not know, maybe you could meet another gentleman and – ”

“No.”

Her word was so final that Sir Thomas turned to stare at her. “Anne?”

She smiled sadly. “Father, no more. I...my heart cannot take it anymore. Let us survive through today, maybe a few more days, and then let us go home.”

“But – ”

“I am going to get dressed,” she said calmly, rising to her feet as Meredith came back into the room. “My daughter needs her mother.”

Sir Thomas’ eyes expanded dangerously, and Anne could not help but laugh. Perhaps this was going to bring about a new change in her family? Perhaps they could all be more honest with each other, now all this misery had occurred.

“She knows, Father. She knows,” Anne said gently, touching his arm lightly as she passed. “Do not ask me how, but she does, and I think it is for

the best. I will be back within twenty minutes.”

It seemed that only after a few minutes, the three of them were entering into the centre of the court. Despite her father’s words, Anne could already see that it would be a dull affair. Few people of any elegance were there, and there was no energy in the room, no vibrancy. The royal family, it appeared, were not going to attend.

Anne found herself breathing out slowly. So, Maxim would not be here. There was no chance of it if the Prince Regent was not going to be here.

The thought should have brought her joy, but instead it merely made her feel even more despondent. At this very moment, she should have been returning from the church, a married woman, to receive the blessing of the Regent. Instead...

“Now, Meredith,” Sir Thomas was saying very seriously, glaring at his granddaughter who was smiling and waving at a boy of about her age across the other side of the room. “Are you going to introduce us to your friend?”

Anne knew she must step in. “Meredith, you are not to leave this room, you understand?”

Meredith raised her eyes to her mother’s, and likely for the first time, received a mother’s glare. “Yes, Anne.”

Anne smiled. “Then enjoy yourself. We will be here if you tire of your friend and wish for our company.”

Her daughter nodded, and then instead of scampering off as she would have done merely days ago, she elegantly walked across the room, curtsying as she arrived at the family group where her friend was standing.

Anne felt a heavy hand on her arm, and smiled at her father. “She is quite safe.”

Sir Thomas sighed and shook his head. “That is what I thought about her mother.”

Anne grasped his hand. “Whatever you did, you did for the best. I am just sorry that I was not able to live up to your expectations.”

“Nonsense,” her father said, waving aside her words. “I am more sorry that I have...well, pushed you towards Alex Dmitri Maximilian Konstantine, or whatever his name was.”

Her stomach clenched, and her heart seemed to break all over again. She would have been his wife, and yet now she will never see him again.

“It has made you so unhappy, and that is unforgiveable.”

“No,” she said firmly, “please do not apologise. I know you intended the

best for me, and I understand why. It is not *your* fault that your plans did not come to pass. We could not have known that my secret would ruin everything.”

There was a moment of silence between them, and then her father removed his arm.

“You are...more upset, than I thought you would be,” he said delicately.

Anne smiled wanly, and nodded. “Well, I do not believe either of us predicted that I would actually fall in love with Maxim, did we? I should have known secrets would come between us. I should have known a Czar at Christmas wasn't someone you could depend on.”

Someone tapped on her shoulder. “So, you are the Czarina, are you?”

Maxim's heart was hardly beating, and he knew that because it was in his mouth. It had almost given out after he had forced Édouard's horse to gallop far faster than it was able, and he had almost fallen over dismounting and rushing into St. James' Court.

This was it. This was the moment he could win Annika back.

Did he deserve her? Probably not. Ever since she had stormed out of his bed chamber, he had gone over and over every word they had exchanged, and now in the cold light of day, could find little wrong with it.

He had behaved despicably, but he had to try. He would always wonder why.

He swallowed, and repeated, “So, you are the Czarina, are you?”

Annika was staring, and her father behind her was glaring in a most unpleasant manner.

“What do you want, you cad?” Sir Thomas spoke quietly, evidently unwilling to create a crowd, but his words were venomous. “Please leave my daughter alone.”

Maxim's eyes moved to Annika, who was blushing.

“I am no Czarina, sir,” she said calmly, her gaze not leaving him. “I believe one must marry a Czar for that.”

Was there warmth in those words, or just shock? Maxim could not tell, and he had little opportunity to discern her expression as she grabbed his arm and pulled him away from her father towards a corner of the room. Christmas decorations filled most of it, but she was able to force him away from everyone else before she hissed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Happy Christmas,” Maxim said weakly. What was the matter with him? He had had this all planned out, all agreed internally, and now he was standing before her, his legs were jelly and his mouth had no ability to speak coherently.

Annika rolled her eyes. “That is not helpful, Maxim. You know what I mean.”

He sighed, dropping his gaze, and finding it immediately resting on her delectable form. His eyes snapped back to her face. “I know what you meant. I am sorry, it is just...I have not done this much before?”

Curiosity shone in her face. “What, exactly?”

“Apologised,” he said blandly. Why was his voice shaking? “I...I needed you to know that I will always regret losing you all my life. Even more so than losing the Czardom.”

It was impossible to tell whether his words were having any impact. She was certainly still standing before him, and had not slapped him yet. Surely that was a good sign? Did she, perhaps, want him as much as he wanted her?

“I could not live with myself,” he said in a low voice, “not trying again. To see whether it would be possible for...for you to forgive me.”

Maxim held his breath. His entire future, his potential happiness, was resting on the response Annika now gave him.

It did not appear that he would be made happy. Annika’s forehead had puckered into a frown, and her arms had folded before her.

“I do not know why I should,” she said quietly, her voice steely. “You were not completely honest with me, and I in turn was not entirely honest with you. Perhaps...perhaps it would be best for both of us if we do not see each other again. You are not in Kent often. It should not be too difficult.”

Any hope Maxim had of reconciliation, perhaps even a stolen kiss, disappeared. Édouard had not warned him about this horrendous sinking feeling, when one realised that the love of your life was willing to go the rest of her days without laying eyes on you.

“I am not willing to give up,” he found himself saying, all his pent up fears pouring from him. “We have experienced too much, shared too much, just to ignore how we feel about each other, Annika.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “And how do we feel about each other?”

Maxim swallowed and looked around the room. There was no one too close to them, no one who could overhear him. But this was a statement he had never made before, and when it came to speaking it aloud, his courage

failed him.

“I was wrong, and I apologise,” he said instead, hating himself for being such a coward. “I was...surprised, shall we say, by your admission. That surprise does not make my reaction acceptable – if anything, it makes it worse. I should have listened to you, heard the whole story.”

Even his admission of guilt did not seem to be melting Annika’s heart. Suspicions were in her eyes, and when she spoke, it was in an accusing manner.

“And where has this change of heart come from?”

Maxim did not answer immediately, but instead reached out and took her hand in his. It was warm, heating his whole body and bringing him back to life.

“A good friend attempted to knock some sense into me,” he murmured, “but I realised I could consider myself an impressive Czar all I wanted, but that meant nothing if I did not have compassion for those I truly loved.”

With his final word, Annika looked down at her hand which was being held in his. She did not speak, but she did not pull her hand away.

“I treated you with no compassion and that was wrong – as not just a czar, but a human being,” Maxim said urgently. “You make me feel alive, in a way I had not done since losing my family.”

“You made me feel the same,” she whispered, her eyes lifting to his. “But I can’t be hurt like that again.”

“It hurt because this means something, because it’s something valuable we must not lose,” he said fiercely. “Annika, everything in my life has changed now. My priorities were...I mean...everything I thought was important just pales in comparison when I look at you, and...”

Maxim’s voice trailed away. It was not possible to put into words what he had risked when he had pushed her away. Had he utterly lost it? Was there no way back?

Annika frowned. “We met but a week ago. How can you be sure that these – these feelings, are real?”

That, at least was a question he could answer. “I just know. I love you, Annika. I love you.”

His free hand moved to the pocket of his coat and pulled out the gift he had considered throwing in the Thames yesterday. Her eyes widened as she saw the small box move towards her.

“One last gift,” he whispered.

Almost seemingly against her will, Annika reached out for the box and opened it, gasping as the candlelight sparkled in the exquisite diamond ring.

“That was my great-grandmother’s ring,” Maxim breathed. “It was her daughter’s, and her daughters, and one day, I would like it to be your daughter’s. Our daughter’s, if you will permit me the greatest privilege of being part of Meredith’s life...and yours.”

Not taking his eyes from her, he lowered himself onto bended knee. There were murmurs around the room, and he could distinctly hear Lady Romeril’s voice near the back.

“Proposing? I thought they were engaged?”

“All secrets are out now,” he said quietly. “Let us make this a Christmas we never forget.”

He had expected – well, hoped – that Annika would smile, accept him, and perhaps even give him a kiss. At the very least, he had thought she would smile.

But she hesitated.

“What are you nervous about?”

Annika reached out and touched his hand, and whispered, “Any more secrets?”

No matter what her words said, he could feel the warmth in her fingers, could see the way she leaned towards him.

A smile crept over his face. “Many, but none that really matter. The rest are just detail. You?”

Annika smiled and spoke so softly that only he could hear. “The father of Meredith is a Kaiser.”

Maxim froze.

Her laugh seemed to resound around the room. “You will have to become accustomed to my sense of humour when we are married, you know.”

She pulled him up to his feet, and then pulled his face towards hers. Maxim kissed her passionately, pouring all the frustrations of the last twenty four hours onto her lips. When they finally broke apart, there were astonished gasps around the room. Maxim glanced over at Sir Thomas, who was smiling broadly.

“Well, no time like the present,” Maxim said lightly. “Father Michail?”

Father Michail stepped forward, rather out of breath. “I came as soon as I received your note, Czar, but – ”

Annika was laughing as Maxim pushed the ring onto her finger. “You

came prepared! How on earth could you possibly know that I would say yes?”

Maxim entwined his fingers in hers as Meredith came running over, her eyes shining. “Every Czar needs a Czarina by his side.”

Epilogue

Anne sighed as she leaned back in the carriage. “Are we almost there?”

Every inch of her ached, and she could not remember the last time they had slept in an actual bed. Her back hurt more than ever, and her eyes itched with tiredness. It was not her habit to complain, but if they did not arrive soon...

The carriage jolted and she placed a hand over her swollen belly protectively. As though the little one knew precisely what she was thinking, it gave a little kick.

A smile crept over her face as she looked up. “I suppose a better question would be, are we going to get there before this baby arrives?”

Maxim laughed, his eyes twinkling. Seated opposite her in the carriage, he had encouraged her to place her weary feet up beside him, reducing the weight on them.

“Now then, what sort of a question is that to ask your husband?” he said mischievously. “Have I ever let you down?”

There was a snort from the gentleman beside him. Anne smiled at her father, who was frowning at his son-in-law in a most aggressive way.

Meredith, seated beside her mother, giggled. She was wrapped up in furs to keep the freezing weather from her bones, and she looked very snug.

Anne’s smile did not disappear as she said, “He has had a further eight months to do so, and so far Maxim has done very well. The question is, what about the next thirty years?”

Maxim leaned over and took his wife’s hands in his own. “And the rest.”

She could not help but beam. Alexei Dmitry Immanuel Maximilian Konstantinovich. He was everything she could have ever hoped for, more than she deserved. Doting on Meredith, respectful and caring towards her father, and devoted to her.

What had possessed her to push him away, just at the moment when she could have lost him forever?

Even more strangely, why had she thought she had not wished to marry?

But then, she had not even met Maxim when she had struck that bargain with her father. Her last season. Thank goodness, Maxim had chosen that

time to attend St. James' Court. How different their lives would have been...

The carriage came to an abrupt stop, and Anne pulled her hands from Maxim's, holding her stomach protectively.

He had immediately peered out of the window, and he said with the joy of a child, "We are here, we are here!"

"Thank God," Anne muttered. The constant rocking of the carriage of the last – what was it three weeks? Four? They had all merged into one, and now at last she would be able to rest properly in the small family home Maxim had promised her.

True, it was in Russia, hundreds if not thousands of miles away from her beloved Romney marshes, but he had promised that this small house was in one of the warmest parts of Russia.

It did not feel like it when Maxim opened the door. A freezing wind rushed in, making Meredith and Sir Thomas pull their furs more tightly around them.

"What a journey," Sir Thomas said weakly. "It will be all be worth it, I am sure, once we get into this home of yours, Maxim..."

His voice trailed away as he descended from the carriage.

"Father?" Anne called out, but he did not reply. Instead, a hand appeared to help her down which she took grateful. "Father, what – oh, my!"

Her jaw dropped as she stood beside a grinning Maxim, holding his hand.

Before her was not a home. It was a palace, monstrous in size, elegant, and covered in snow. Four large towers pinned in the corners, and there was a gatehouse with a portcullis, and battlements...

"It is a castle," Sir Thomas breathed. Meredith was beside him, her eyes wide. "A castle, Maxim!"

"More like a palace, actually, Sir Thomas," Maxim said airily. "Do you like it, Annika."

Anne was not sure whether she would be able to find the words. "L-Like it? Maxim, you said it was a small house?"

"I said it was our smallest home," he corrected, still grinning. "This is the smallest of the palaces I have ever lived in. What was I supposed to say?"

Anne stood and stared. Everywhere she looked, there seemed to be another window, another bit of finery. How was she supposed to live in this? How was she supposed to manage a home – nay, a palace this size?

"And on the subject of secrets –"

She frowned at her husband. "We were not, but continue."

Maxim laughed. “Did I mention there are servants here? Lots of servants. I had no idea that renouncing my title would encourage my extended family to give me such a large stipend, but they have, and it includes servants. I do not want you to do a thing while we wait for this baby.”

“Servants?” Meredith said with a frown. “Will any of them want to play with me?”

“You said no more secrets!” Anne said with a laugh. She could not help it. The entire thing was so ridiculous! How was it possible that the only daughter of a Kentish baronet could end up living in a palace in Russia?

“I said none that matter,” corrected Maxim. “Now, kiss me.”

Anne glorified in the feeling of his lips on hers, but blushed and pulled away as her father coughed loudly.

“Can I pick my own room?”

She laughed at Meredith, and then placed a hand on her stomach as her second daughter – or perhaps, her first son – kicked along with its sibling.

“You most certainly can,” said Maxim. “But remember, the baby will need its own room!”

He raised his voice as she darted away from Sir Thomas and ran through the gatehouse excitedly.

Her father moved towards them, and said gruffly, “You never mentioned this, Maxim. A palace. Servants. After your rejection by the Prince Regent, I was under the impression that you would be forced to work to earn your keep.”

Anne looked at her husband quickly, but he was not offended.

“My dear Sir Thomas,” he said gently. “I know I could never have bought you, you are too honourable for that. This way, you can be assured that you permitted me to marry your daughter for who I am, not what I am.”

It was all the reassurance Sir Thomas needed. After cupping his daughter’s cheek and smiling, he followed his granddaughter’s footsteps in the snow.

Anne sighed happily. “You know, this is one of the best secrets you could ever have kept from me.”

Maxim wrapped his arms around her. “It will be Christmas again soon. I will have to think about what to get you.”

She laughed. “I do not think I will have to worry – I have your present right here!”

Placing one of his hands on her stomach, they waited and then both

grinned as their child kicked out at the world.

“You know, no matter what the world says, you are a Czarina to me,” he whispered.

Anne nodded. “I know, and I am perfectly happy to keep secrets from the outside world, not from each other.”

Maxim nodded, and leaned forward for another kiss. “Except, maybe, what I have got for you for Christmas...”

About Emily Murdoch

Emily loves to read and write sweet and steamy historical romance. If you love falling in love you've come to the right place.

Enjoy her sweet romances written as Emily Murdoch, and her steamy romances as Emily E K Murdoch, ranging from England 1050 to Texas 1848.

Emily is an historian and writer, with a varied career to date: from examining medieval manuscripts to designing museum exhibitions, to working as a researcher for the BBC, to working for the National Trust.

She can't wait for you to fall in love with her heroes and heroines.

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A Scot Most Wanted

by Angelique Armae



Prologue

*Dundaire, Scotland
December 23, 1776*

Catrina Lennox, known simply as Cat to those in her inner circle, which by most standards was not a large circle considering it only consisted of one good-spirited cook and one very small child, wasn't a woman to shy away from a challenge. Not only had she willingly left her privileged life in London—which included walking out on a very handsome laird and his offer of marriage—to rescue her sister from a notorious highwayman, but she also acted as midwife and delivered her nephew, Fergus. And now, on the eve of her twenty-first birthday, she was about to chase down the rebel who'd taken her sister's life and abandoned the child Moira had given birth to.

Which was why, on this cold and very snowy night, she found herself in town, battling the elements like any good aunt would do for the sake of her disadvantaged nephew. Though considering the trail of whispered curses she'd left in her wake, thinking herself good was growing debatable.

She headed up the road, her bootheels skidding on the ice-licked cobblestone.

Damn winter. What in God's name possessed *The Christmas Rebel* to choose this time of year to go thieving? The man was an outright fool to put himself up against the weather, let alone add Christmas to his made-up name as public acknowledgment of the holiday had been banned for centuries in Scotland. Once caught, she prayed the man faced a punishment far worse than the average highwayman or thief. Though she supposed that was not her problem. She only desired to catch the brute to have him make amends to Little Fergus. That, and to give him a good tongue-lashing solely for the inconvenience of dragging her out during the snowiest season Dundaire had on record.

Bastard.

The man should be made to repent on his knees, his man parts encased in snow.

God, but she'd become bitter since uprooting from London. Which was

another sin that needed to be added to *The Christmas Rebel's* list of crimes. The man had outright stolen her cheery disposition. The moment she'd learned what he'd done to Moira, she'd lost all faith in men, in the fairy-tale of happily ever after. A lifetime of laughs, smiles, and dreams, all wiped away by one man's selfish desire to covet what was not his. Capturing his sorry *arse* would be more than a delight.

Teetering on the slippery pavement, Catrina reached out and steadied herself against the pub's stone façade.

Wind tore through the holes of her gloves.

Her fingers froze, their tips turning numb on the instant.

Bloody nuisance.

An aunt with half a hand lost to a storm was not going to help Little Fergus. Especially not where his unfinished blanket was concerned, its length of soft blue wool draped over her knitting basket in the parlor. Not to mention the difficulty she'd have making a fist, a fist she so desperately hoped would soon collide with *The Christmas Rebel's* jaw. Or nose. Or some other part of him where she could inflict pain.

Pain.

No amount of punches would ever take away the hurt she carried over losing Moira. She could beat to a bloody pulp, the thieving beast who'd ruined her sister, and he'd still have the luxury of living. A fact that was most unfair to Little Fergus and Moira.

Moira.

What was the sweet girl thinking falling for the charms of a highwayman? A highwayman for God's sake! Of all the ways she could have failed Moira after their parents died, leading her baby sister astray was not a mistake she could have imagined making.

A burst of snow blew down from the hilltop.

Holding on to the front point of her tricorne hat with her free hand, Catrina battled her way to *The Snarling Wolf's* front door, unlatched it and entered the pub.

Cheers exploded as she crossed the threshold, the room of ruffians raising their tankards to whatever it was that Old Bruce, the brute who fancied himself their leader, had said.

Men.

Offer them a pint and they flock to your feet in droves. Do the same with news of a soon-to-be-born bairn and they flee like cowards.

Despicable.

She tugged off one glove and let the Half-Sovereign she'd hidden in her palm, unstuck from her skin. Nearly a week's wage, the coin really should be put toward raising her sister's son but catching Fergus's reckless father was just as important.

What was it about dangerous men that made women swoon over them? She definitely was not going to make the same mistake Moira had made. Absolutely not. A chase vicar was more to her taste these days. Someone who would give her the tranquility of dull afternoons and even quieter nights as love and lust no longer held a place in her world after she'd witnessed what those damning emotions had done to her sweet sister.

She'd go to her own death having never married if it meant avoiding scandal. Or ending up with one of the louts taking up room in the pub tonight.

Another round of cheers went up for Old Bruce.

Cat shook her head.

Pushing her way through the tavern's rowdy throng of men, Catrina barely had room to move with the wood benches occupied as they were. Every wayward Highlander in the area must have come out tonight as this crowd had to be the foulest of what Dundaire had to offer. By scores.

She inched forward. The warmth emitting from the crackling flames in the pub's hearth thawing the frost that had previously stalked her fingers. The heat also thawed her nose, though that wasn't necessarily a welcomed comfort as the stench of unwashed bodies mixed with the aroma of day-old stew now easily jabbed at her nostrils worse than had the smell of manure floating off the nearby cow field. The stench spiraled all the way to her core.

In protest, her stomach churned.

Shite.

Casting up her supper would win her no favors as Old Bruce was a stubborn man who did not see women as strong equals. Convincing him and his men to allow her to join their plight was going to take a small miracle.

She swallowed and continued toward the front of the pub.

At the head table she slapped down the coin she'd been carrying. "I want in on the hunt."

Old Bruce lowered his tankard but did not bother to stand. "Well now, lads, look at what we 'ave here. A lass dressed in breeches." He gave her wool-covered legs, which were now partly exposed thanks to the hem of her greatcoat having gotten stuck on the splintered edge of the bench, the once

over.

A round of hoots echoed through the tavern.

“I’m serious,” Catrina said, eyeing Old Bruce head on. “I want to help catch *The Christmas Rebel*. This is the second year he’s took to thieving and since you still have not managed to catch him, I believe I am what you need.”

On that, the brute rose. Flexing his thin fingers, he drew nearer and tugged at her curls. “They say ye can tell the true nature of a lass’s soul, by the color of her hair. The deeper the copper, the deeper her wanton desire.”

The crowd roared once again.

She slapped Bruce’s hand away. “I’m the best shot you have. And you know it.” She eyed the scar on his forearm. The scar that remained from her expert aim.

He followed her gaze. “Ye missed me by several lengths.”

“I grazed you on purpose as I don’t believe stealing hares should be a crime punishable by death. Though I would not recommend you try stealing from me again as I cannot promise I will always keep the same view.”

Old Bruce frowned. “Good shot or no, ye are still a woman. And the only way I will allow a woman to ride out with me, especially a *Sassenach* spitfire such as yerself, is if she’s under me.”

The ruffians cheered.

Catrina ignored the crowd. As well as Bruce’s ridiculous comment. “I heard you lost Angus tonight,” she said. “Which means you are down a man.”

“Aye we are down by one, but Angus is nae dead, merely injured. He was wounded when helping Mr. Murray fight off *The Rebel*. The bastard ran away with Mrs. Murray’s ruby and pearl necklace. And I already gave Mr. Murray my word that finding the thief willnae be a problem. Which is why I dunnae need the added burden of minding a troublesome female.”

She doubted *The Christmas Rebel* was fool enough to get caught a second time. “How can you be sure of success this time around? The man has been thieving from some of Dundaire’s most prominent men for nearly a month now—not to mention the thieving he did last year, to the same men, during the same season—and not a one of you have even managed to figure out what he looks like.”

“We dunnae need to know his face. Angus hadnae met the man and still he came close to capturing the beast just an hour ago.”

“Close is not the same as having *The Rebel* in your hands,” Cat said,

quick to point out the difference. “At best, you are a lot of piss-poor drunks who even combined, have proven, are not skilled enough to find our thief.”

Old Bruce glowered at her insult. “Mind yer tongue, woman, for yer mother must be turning in her grave at yer words.”

Just because her mother had been born and raised in Dundaire did not mean *she* was suited for living in this harsh land. The past eight months had been pure hell on her. Well, maybe not total hell, but Dundaire was not London. Not by far. “I would be an asset to your group of men.”

Old Bruce smirked. “Och, the only way for a woman such as yerself to be a benefit to my horde of lads, is if ye were *nae* yer mother’s daughter. Now scat before ye sully her good name.”

“You won’t catch *The Christmas Rebel* without me.” Only she knew the man’s horse was white and that he had one blue eye and one brown one. The details were the last comments Moira had revealed to her, before dying. And since Dundaire’s famed highwayman mainly attacked at twilight, and was very good at keeping his horse hidden, yet close enough to make his escape, *The Rebel’s* victims were unable to give the horse’s description to the authorities. Even the local newsheet stated such facts only last week. “You are a fool if you don’t take me with you.”

“Dunnae test me, lass, for find him, I will. And I’ll do so by morning because the bastard will be dead by sun-up. Murray took a sword to the beast’s ribs. So, even down a man, I should be able to find *The Rebel’s* body with little effort. He’s probably lying on the road as we speak.” He paused to rub his long, brown beard. “I dunnae need ye.”

Catrina hated being denied the right to get justice for her sister and nephew. “Then take me along strictly as a witness. I am even willing to pay for the chance to be there. I will cost you nothing.”

Old Bruce shook his balding head. “No.” He slid the Half-Sovereign back her way. “Now be a good lass and take ye coin and leave. Or I will be forced to take ye over my knee and give that lovely *arse* of yers a good throttling.”

“Attempt to take me over your knee, and I’ll *give* you a knee.”

The stomp of the men’s tapping feet shook the small building as they hooted and hollered like riled up animals.

Old Bruce closed the gap between him and Katrina. “Care to repeat yerself, lass?”

“No. But I would not mind showing you.” She kneed him square in the balls, grabbed her coin and was out of the pub before the old bastard had a

chance to clutch himself.

She skidded down the road and turned into a dark alley. With her hand at her waist, Catrina doubled over. Tears flowed down her cheeks. This may be a man's world, but heaven help her, she was going to get justice for Moira and Fergus. Even if it meant going after *The Christmas Rebel* herself.



* * *

Dundaire Abbey
Several miles away from *The Snarling Wolf*

For the third time within the hour, Niall MacHendrie, Laird of Dundaire, re-read the ledger that confirmed his beloved abbey finally free of debt. Debt he himself had personally worked toward settling. Debt his father hadnae rightfully owed but couldnae prove otherwise. Debt his late father's supposed friends had hoisted upon him to save their own sorry *arses*. Debt he....

A cough interrupted his rising anger. Glancing up from the desk, Niall focused on the tall, thin man standing just past the library's open door. "Yes, Edgar?"

"He's been found, sir."

Robert. It amazed him how only three years separated him and his younger brother, yet the *eejit* acted as if he were a lad of ten rather than a man of twenty. And he'd acted so for two Christmases straight. Thank the Good Lord their mother was no longer alive to witness her son's fall. Her Catholic heart would have been broken at Robbie's total disregard for the holiday. "Was he drunk?"

"No," Edgar answered.

"Alone?"

"Aye."

Niall leaned back in his chair, the crackle of the hearth's fire snapping at his ears. "And where, pray tell, is the fool now?"

In a surprising move for the often-bold acting butler, Edgar lowered his gaze. "Mr. Robert has taken to his bed, sir."

Now that was unexpected. “Here? As in this verra abbey?”

“Aye, sir.”

Robert hadnae been home in almost four weeks. Nor had the insulant prat sent word of his whereabouts during that time, causing Niall more than a fair share of worry. “I suppose, overall, that is a good thing.” He remained seated. While he wanted desperately to run upstairs, hug his fool of a brother and thank the Good Lord for returning the lad home, he wasnae going to give in that easily. He’d made that mistake last year and it served only to have the lad repeat his actions, this year. “Thank ye, Edgar. That will be all.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Edgar?”

“I fear ye dunnae understand the gravity of the situation.”

A knot twisted in his gut. “Go on.”

“It appears Mr. MacHendrie was involved in an altercation.”

For the love of God. “Was he in the ring again?”

“I fear it is graver than a mere fight.”

Niall rose. “How much graver?”

“I have sent word to fetch the surgeon, though I dunnae believe he’ll make it here in time.”

Niall bounded through the library and up the hall’s main stairs in less time than it took for him to catch his breath. He slammed open the door to Robert’s bedroom and froze.

Blood oozed from his brother’s side.

He dashed to the bed and pushed the sheet against the open wound.

“What the bloody hell did ye do, Robbie?”

Robert grabbed Niall’s arm. “I have a confession to make.”

“Nae now.”

“Please, Niall, ye must let me have my say. Ye didnae allow me the chance last year and now ye must hear me out.”

Denying a dying man his last wish, wouldnae be right. “Verra fine. Make yer peace.”

“I am *The Christmas Rebel*.”

Shock coursed through Niall’s veins. “Yer speaking nonsense, lad.” The loss of blood obviously had his little brother in a state of derangement.

“No. ’Tis true. It took me two years. I chose the Christmas season because that is when those bastards who destroyed...who *killed* father, carried out *their* heinous act. They didnae have decency with us. Thus, I had

none with them.”

“Aw, Robbie. But have ye never listened to my lectures? Revenge doesnae give a man justice.”

“The items I took were stolen from others. They didnae belong to the bastards who’d confiscated them.”

“That may be, but two wrongs dunnae make a right. Thieving is thieving.”

Robert dug his fingers deeper into Niall’s arm as he took a deep breath. “Ye must return it all for me—to the rightful owners, nae to those bastard bankers—as I dunnae want to die for naught. Ye will find it all—including the ruby and pearl necklace that Father had bought for Mother that last year—in the secret compartment at the bottom of my armoire.”

Their mother had died before she had the chance to wear the jewels, but still, Robbie’s actions werenae without sin. He pulled back the sheet to inspect his brother’s wound. “Who did this to ye?”

“Murray.” Robert moaned as he shifted slightly on the bed. “Promise me ye will confront the bastard and restore our family’s good name.”

He’d kill the man, not just confront him. “A necklace isnae worth yer life, Robbie.”

“To me it was. The necklace was the last on my list. Murray had no right taking it from Da.”

On that, he agreed with Robbie. Murray was the most ruthless of their father’s former partners. Demanding the necklace as partial payment in a blackmail scheme, however, was the least of what the man had stolen from them. Mother’s death was their true loss. The humiliation she’d suffered over the financial ruin had devastated her, broken her to the point she’d lost all will to live. Father dying only months later made their loss even worse.

Blood dripped through Niall’s fingers. He couldnae lose his brother, nae now when he had so much good fortune to share with him. “Sleep, Robbie. Ye need yer strength.”

Robert’s hold on Niall’s arm grew tighter. “Ye have to promise me, Niall. Promise me ye will return it all in my stead. And promise me ye will restore the family name. Murray must be confronted for what he did to Da.”

“Aye.”

“When ye are finished, when all the goods have been returned and ye have the family reputation where it belongs, then and only then, ye must do one more thing for me.”

He'd face the devil himself if he could for Robbie. "Anything."

Moving slowly, Robert handed him a folded piece of paper. "Take all that is left of my inheritance and deliver it to this address."

"Why?"

Robert coughed, the corner of his mouth now bearing a drop of blood. A deep rattle rose from his throat. He trembled, his hand going cold and limp.

"Robbie?" Niall slapped his brother's face, but Robert's eyes merely looked to the ceiling, the essence of life gone from their stare.

Pain sliced his soul.

Niall gazed at his now dead brother; his heart shattered into a million pieces. He leaned forward and placed his forehead against Robbie's. "Why, God?" He cried. "Why nae take me instead?"

He stayed at Robbie's side for what seemed like hours, going over in his head every possible mistake he'd made with the lad. And while he couldnae bring his little brother back to life, he could seek justice for him. Make certain the lad's name was never associated with *The Christmas Rebel*. He'd return the missing items to their rightful owners, in secret, then go back and confront each of the men who'd caused his family's demise, force them to confess the truth of their own thieving ways. He'd worked hard these past years to regain what had been stolen from his father. He'd even gone beyond that and now had more money and more power than had all those thieving bankers put together. More than enough of what was needed to get the justice his family deserved.

Opening his hand, the piece of paper Robbie had slipped him, unfolded. It bore no name, only an address: Rose Cottage, Wolf Lane.

The address was unfamiliar to him, but that came as no surprise as not all land within Dundaire remained his. Especially parcels in the wilds of Dundaire, as those lots had been sold off years ago, by his grandfather. He'd have to check the ledgers to see where Rose Cottage stood, but he surmised it was somewhere in that vicinity as Robbie had often traipsed off into those parts, his actions led by his heart rather than his head. And while he could think of several possible reasons why his brother would want his inheritance delivered to the cottage, Niall would have preferred not being left to guess that reason. But this was the hand Fate had dealt him. And fulfilling Robbie's dying wish was a must.

Chapter 1

Dundaire Abbey
Christmas Eve, one year later...

Niall trudged into the drawing room; the lower half of his body nearly frozen to the bone. Who would have thought returning one small silver spoon could cost him two hours of his life? Certainly not he. The task was specifically saved for last because it was the nearest to Dundaire Abbey, the spoon's owner being one of Niall's own tenants. But never in his life would he have taken the aged Mrs. Douglas for a woman who favored waking before dawn solely to sit at her window and sip her tea—slowly—waiting for the sun to rise.

Of course he could have picked the back window by which to slip the spoon through, but by the time he'd discovered Mrs. Douglas's morning habit, it was too late for him to rise and make his way around the small house, undiscovered. His legs suffered instead. As did his *arse*, his cheeks still numb from sitting on that blasted bank of snow. His breeches and coat were both sopping wet.

Two whole hours.

He rubbed the seat of his coat.

For one bloody spoon. Even God wouldnae have had the patience that he'd had with Mrs. Douglas this morning.

Water trickled into his gloves.

For the love of Heaven. Just how much snow *was* he carrying in on his *arse*?

Splat.

He really didnae care to look back, as whatever amount of thawing ice was now melting on the floor behind him, it was sure to be making a mess. And he kent all too well what that would cost him as Edgar was a stickler for keeping the Abbey primed to perfection, especially its wood plank floors.

Damn me now.

Niall shook his head, attempted to squash his rising agitation before it caused his blood to boil. If nothing else, this morning's task had completed

his promise to Robert. Save of course for the matter of delivering the lad's inheritance to Rose Cottage. Wherever the hell that house and its Wolf Lane might be. Grandfather's ledgers were a mess at best, and that was only *after* he'd found the missing pages. He couldnae even begin to imagine how much money the man really had considering how careless he'd been with it.

Across the room, heat escaped the hearth's fire.

Reveling in the house's warmth, Niall divested himself of his snow-drenched greatcoat and draped it over a nearby chair. He then flopped down on the settee and covered his eyes with his hand. He was definitely going to need a change of clothes before venturing out again.

The squeak of turning wheels, as well as the clank of china vibrating against silver, disturbed the room's quiet air.

Food.

And Edgar.

He swore the man must have either the nose of a bloodhound or the ears of an owl based on his impeccable timing. Though Niall wasnae certain he cared to eat at the moment. He could barely move a muscle after battling all that snow.

"Ye really should take better care of yerself, sir," Edgar said.

Niall dropped his hand from his eyes and sat up. He glanced at the floor, a wet spot fanning out on the Aubusson carpet under his boots. *Wasnae the floor's wood, sacrifice enough?* The gods of old obviously had it in for him this morning.

A whiff of ham teased his nose. "Yer lovely Grace is too good to me, Edgar." He rose from the settee, his still-chilled bones aching in protest.

"I will make certain to tell her ye said so, sir." Edgar proceeded to remove the silver trays from the cart and place them on the table. "I know ye dunnae fancy taking yer breakfast at the card table, but after seeing the wet trail ye left—all the way from the side door—I didnae think ye would be concerned with formality this morning."

The butler's mild show of annoyance almost made Niall want to bite out that it was *he* who owned the Abbey and nae the other way around, but then thought better of it. "Please also inform Grace that I willnae be requiring a midday meal."

Edgar straightened, the lid to one of the silver trays still grasped in his hand. "For the sake of Saint Andrew's soul, please tell me ye are not intendin' to go back out there today."

“I am.”

“But why?”

“Because I must.”

“I doubt yer cold *arse* would agree. Sir.”

“It doesnae, but...” He stopped and quirked an eyebrow at the man. While he should be angered at the butler’s bold choice of words, he and Edgar had never had the typical servant and laird relationship. “And how, Edgar, do ye know about my cold *arse*?”

The butler put down the tray lid. “Me Grace insisted I keep an eye on ye. Of course if ye would have confided in me first, before ye went out in the dark, I could have told ye that Mrs. Douglas takes her tea at the *front* window every morning. And that she is as slow as a sloth at drinking it, too.”

“And how do ye know what Mrs. Douglas does every morning?”

“My Grace takes her tea at our bedroom window every morning. It has a clear view of Mrs. Douglas’s house.”

For the love of God. And here he thought he was laird of a first-rate manor, nae laird of a house of spies. “Well, regardless of what I did and didnae do this morning, I am still going out after I finish my meal. Alone.”

“Grace willnae be pleased.”

No. He imagined she wouldn’t be. “Tell her nae to fash herself. I am only going into town and then I will be back.”

Edgar fiddled with the items still on the meal cart. “Venturing out in the midst of a brewing storm, never does a soul good.”

He glanced at the window. “It stopped snowing almost thirty minutes ago.”

“’Tis a ploy.”

Turning back, Niall reached his knife for the butter and slathered a good portion over the hot biscuit on his plate. “I wasnae aware ye were so well-schooled in the weather, Edgar.”

“’Tis my Grace’s warning, sir, nae mine.”

“Well, tell Grace I willnae succumb to a bit of harmless snow.” He paused and considered that damn snowbank he’d endured this morning. He kent nothing about Rose Cottage or its owner. What if delivering Robbie’s inheritance, along with the letter he’d discovered the lad had written, turned out to be more of a problem than had been Mrs. Douglas’s bloody spoon?

“Mayhap ye should read Mr. Robert’s letter before ye go off searching for Rose Cottage, sir.”

“I see ye’ve kept a verra good eye on me, Edgar. Perhaps a wee too good?”

“Och, sir. ‘Tis for yer own wellbeing. And ye ken it.”

How was it his butler made more sense than he? “I will nae read Robbie’s private thoughts. I dunnae have a right to.”

“Ye are a good man, sir. Even if a tad daft.”

Yes, he was daft, but with Robbie dead, the lad couldnae defend whatever the bloody hell he’d written in that letter. And Niall had no desire to get his emotions riled up because of it. He was better off not knowing the note’s content.

Putting down his knife, Niall glanced up at Edgar. “However, in the event I do get caught in a storm, dunnae come looking for me unless I fail to return by tomorrow evening.”

“Are ye certain of that?”

He prayed he was, as he couldnae imagine settling up Robbie’s final affairs would take more than a day. “Aye. And ye may even fetch Lord Lycansay at the time. For if the weather does get the best of me, ye ken what to do with the Murray situation. And Lycansay needs to be a part of that as he was a witness to Mother’s last words.”

Edgar nodded, but said nothing as he placed the teapot on the table and then wheeled the cart off to the side of the room and left.

Niall leaned back in his chair. The sudden realization that this would be the first Christmas he’d truly be alone, slowly settled into his brain. And while the holiday had never been a huge celebration at Dundaire Abbey, Mother never failed to make the house a cheerful place this time of year. She especially loved weaving the boughs of greenery into beautiful garland which then adorned the hearth mantles throughout the Abbey.

The thought of having no one to share that with this year socked Niall in the gut stronger than had any punch he’d ever taken from Robbie in the ring.

God, but he missed the lad. Even the worry he’d caused him as he’d give anything to have Robbie back. But Fate didnae work that way.

He pushed back his chair and then stood, his stomach no longer having an appetite. Finding Rose Cottage was a must. And not only so he could fulfill his promise to Robert, but because he needed a distraction to make him forget the loneliness he was suffering.

Grabbing his still wet coat from the nearby chair, Niall headed out of the drawing room. Grace may think she knew all about the weather, but he put

more trust in what he saw with his own eyes. And last he'd checked, there wasnae a snowflake in sight.

He hesitated at the stairs, torn between going up to his rooms and changing clothes, or riding out, taking his chances that the air would dry him off. He really didnae care to waste more time, especially with the shortened amount of daylight he was facing.

Aw, bloody hell. Wet clothes werenae going to kill him.

He turned away from the stairs and proceeded down the corridor.

At the back door, he slid on his greatcoat, grabbed a dry scarf from the rack in the corner to wrap around his neck and face—just in case Grace was right about the bloody weather—and then plucked the wolf-headed hunting whip he favored, off the nearby shelf.

A whiff of simmering pear teased his nose. One didn't know heaven until they'd sampled a slice of Grace's pear tart and after the morning he'd had, Rose Cottage wasnae going to keep him from getting a piece of that delectable dessert. He'd be back in no time. And just to ensure his speed, rather than ride out on his own stallion, Waterking, he was going to take Mischief, Robbie's favorite horse. After all, it seemed only fitting he take the horse that more than likely had been Robbie's companion on his trips to Rose Cottage. Maybe Mischief would even bring him luck in finding the dratted little place.

He slipped out the door and glanced up. Warmth greeted his face, the shining sun forcing his eyes to squint.

Brewing storm my arse.

Chapter 2

*Rose Cottage
One hour later...*

The aroma of herb-basted chicken forced Catrina into the kitchen and to snatch a slice of carrot from the chopped vegetables heaped on the table. Even with limited stock, Mrs. Ramsay never failed to cook up a meal that bewitched one's taste buds.

A slight groan rose from the floor.

Cat glanced down. Three sharp prongs protruding out from under the table—and coming quite close to her right boot toe—greeted her gaze. “Forgive me, Mrs. Ramsay, but I do not believe pitchforks used for shoveling stables aid in making chicken soup. In the least they do not belong in the kitchen.”

“Och, child, of course the soiled things dunnae belong in the kitchen. But this one is clean. And I am nae using it to cook.”

That much, she'd gathered. “May I enquire as to *why* you have a pitchfork in the kitchen?” She offered her hand to Mrs. Ramsay.

With a slight struggle, the woman accepted Catrina's help, then rolled out from under the table and stood, her chubby cheeks, flushed.

“Are you all right?” Cat asked.

“Aye,” Mrs. Ramsay answered, brushing her free palm down the front of her apron.

Cat had to admit, overall, her treasured cook did appear no worse for the ordeal. Save, of course, for a few strands of her copper curls which were acting like mutinous pirates escaping the confines of their white cotton cap.

Looking up, Mrs. Ramsay gave Catrina a concerned stare. “I was preparing meself for when ye go out, in case *The Christmas Rebel* shows up to rob us. I take pride in the fact I can defend this house and our wee bairn.”

She was certain the cook did. “I appreciate your efforts, Mrs. Ramsay, truly I do. But Rose Cottage is not exactly a house that eludes to riches stored inside.”

“We do have yer mother's silver teapot.”

So they had, but only because no one else in the family wanted the old scrap of silver. “I highly doubt *The Christmas Rebel* will be coming out in this weather, let alone hike all the way up Wolf Lane for a teapot with a severed spout. We’re lucky the postman knows we exist.”

Mrs. Ramsay bit her bottom lip, appeared to be thinking over the situation, though not the pitchfork. That darn thing remained firmly in her hand. “I just wish they’d catch the bloody bastard. He has me and all the other women in town unable to sleep.”

“Well, I don’t want you worrying about the man today. It’s Christmas Eve and I have every intention of making sure our little home is secure.”

“I must admit, Cat, I dunnae like ye going out there on those lonely roads pretending to be a highwayman to hunt down the real thief.”

She didn’t care for it either, but with *The Christmas Rebel* being so secretive, especially this year when he had not yet even started his seasonal thieving, she had no choice but to go out and stalk all the places the brute had been known to have visited in the past. One way or the other, she was going to find the man who was responsible for Moira’s death. And then make sure he paid for his sinful act. “I won’t be gone long.”

Mrs. Ramsay frowned. “I trust ye, child, but if ye wouldnae mind, I would verra much like to keep the pitchfork within reach.”

“Of course.” A calm Mrs. Ramsay would benefit them all, especially Little Fergus who was sleeping upstairs in the nursery. Though Cat did not expect Rose Cottage to be on any thief’s list this Christmas. It was too small and too far off from the main road to be worth the trip.

She tugged on her favorite pair of black leather gloves, which she’d retrieved from the waist of her breeches where she’d earlier stuck them. “I shan’t be gone long.”

“I wish ye wouldnae be gone at all.” Mrs. Ramsay said. “But I ken ye must.” The scratch of the pitchfork’s handle dragging against wood, echoed through the air as the stout little cook crossed the kitchen to lean her trusty weapon against the wall. “I will have the chicken soup ready by the time ye return. Along with yer favorite bread.”

“I would starve if it were not for you, Mrs. Ramsay.”

“Och, child!” The cook’s cheeks reddened as she smiled and waved her hand in dismissal of Cat’s statement. “Ye are making me blush.”

Cat winked at Mrs. Ramsay and then headed into the hall.

She snatched her greatcoat off the peg rack and slipped it on, the worn

wool rough against her arms.

Not a day had gone by that she hadn't thought of Moira. But there was a piece of her that sometimes did wish she could just let it all go. Return to London with Little Fergus and Mrs. Ramsay and forget about Dundaire completely. This hunting down a phantom-like highwayman was taxing—both physically and mentally. The more days that passed, the more she worried she'd never find the bastard. If it weren't for the fact her promise to Moira was a deathbed promise, she'd pack it all in now and make a new life for herself.

She crouched and opened the hidden panel under the niche next to the door. From the box stored inside, she withdrew her ladies' flintlock pistol as she wouldn't dare go after a highwayman without first arming herself.

The weight of the gun rested in her right palm. Running her left hand over the fine walnut grips and brass barrel, her thoughts wandered back to Moira. The gun originally belonged to her, a gift from *The Christmas Rebel*. Cat prayed to God when she found the man, he'd recognize the weapon. Who bought off a woman with a damned pistol? And more importantly, what sort of woman agreed to such a thing? Moira was worth far more than bloody gun! Cat shook her head. She had failed her sister in so many ways. So, so, many ways.

Mrs. Ramsay stepped into the hall, a dishcloth in her hand. "Ye ain't going to shoot the gent, are ye?"

She would never let *The Christmas Rebel* off that easy. "Have no fear, Mrs. Ramsay, my intentions are not to kill the beast, but only to drive a bit of fear into his soul."

"He deserves far worse."

"Agreed." Cat stood. "But first I must find the bastard. Pray that I do." She slipped the flintlock into the small pocket she'd sewn into the side of her greatcoat.

"Ye have a wise head on ye shoulders, Cat. I'm more of the mind to poke him square in the *arse* with my pitchfork and ask questions of him after the fact."

Catrina stifled a laugh as the expression gracing Mrs. Ramsay's round face was one of seriousness. "I'll be back soon. Hopefully Fergus will remain sleeping until I return."

"Dunnae fash about the bairn. We get along just fine, the two of us." Mrs. Ramsay offered a slight nod, then took to the stairs, dishcloth now tucked

into her apron pocket.

Cat hated leaving Fergus and Mrs. Ramsay, especially being it was Christmas Eve, but she would not rest unless she knew the perimeter of Rose Cottage was safe. And if something should happen to her, at least her nephew would be in good hands with Mrs. Ramsay.

With a sigh, she headed out the side door.

Wind battered her face.

Rubbing her glove-covered hands over her cheeks, she trekked across the field to the barn. God, but she wished she were still in London. The brutal wind that rolled down from the hills to the glen had no mercy on the people of Dundaire. And not just in winter. The elements in this part of Scotland were unlike anywhere else in the country. Visitors often described Dundaire as a strange and odd place. And they had good reason to do so.

The essence of horse, mixed with dried grass and wood, wafted under Catrina's nose.

She entered the barn and immediately began saddling up Sprite, her sole highway-stalking companion this past year.

The horse neighed, as he always did.

"Today's ride won't be long. I promise." Gliding her hand along Sprite's smooth midnight coat, she leaned in toward the horse. "And when we get back, I'll see what extras Mrs. Ramsay can spare from the kitchen. Maybe an apple or a few carrots."

Sprite turned his head toward Cat. He gave up a loud nicker as his ears bent her way.

"Aye, carrots it is, then," Catrina said with a laugh.

Retrieving her eye mask and the worn-out neckerchief she kept stored on the peg on the post next to Sprite's stall, Catrina covered up the better part of her face.

Sprite watched her every move, a soft neigh falling from his mouth.

"I know I look funny. But it's the only way to keep my face from being recognized."

A barely-there neigh followed her comment.

"Aye, but to keep your identity secret, I'd need a lot more than merely a mask and old cravat."

When all was ready, Cat mounted Sprite and rode out of the barn, circled the house, and then took off down Wolf Lane.

She prayed Moira watched over her.



* * *

Nearly an hour later Catrina faced off against blinding snow and raging winds. She slowed Sprite, whose breath was visible in the cold, to a trot as there was no point in going forward. “I think it’s time to head back, good friend.”

Spot offered a low nicker in response.

As Cat prepared to turn around, a horse’s neigh echoed in the distance. She looked ahead, a galloping rider coming her way.

A white horse. Dare she hope she’d found her highwayman?

With caution, Cat dismounted and then patted Sprite with a soft touch. “Keep steady, boy.” She held onto the horse’s reins, wind battering her from every direction now.

Even if the oncoming rider was *The Christmas Rebel*, a fight was not going to be easy in this storm. With her free hand, she reached for her pistol and withdrew it.

The approaching rider slowed until he reined his horse to a full stop just feet from where Catrina stood. In silence, he stared down at her, though with a thick gray scarf covering the bulk of his face, and his black, tricorne hat lowered to the point his eyes were shadowed, deciphering the man’s features were impossible.

Cat pointed the flintlock, aimed the gun at the man’s leg. “Move and I will blow your bloody foot off.” If only she could see his face better. Not that she knew everyone who lived in Dundaire, but she disliked facing a foe who was hiding as much of himself as was she.

“If yer hoping for a large booty,” the man said in a muffled voice thanks to his thick scarf, “I fear I must inform ye I have nothing on my person.”

“Everyone says that.” Releasing Sprite’s reins, Cat stepped nearer to the stranger staring down at her.

“Ye are nae from here, are ye?” he asked.

“No. I’m not.” She inspected his horse, took in the fact the stallion appeared to be in fine form, with a coat as white as the falling snow. She also noted it had one blue eye and one brown.

Her heartbeat quickened.

Calm yourself, Cat. Losing the best chance she'd ever gotten at catching the man responsible for Moira's death, over something as trivial as her getting overwhelmed, would haunt her for eternity.

She took a deep breath.

"Dismount." She needed to see the man's face.

"Verra well. But I assure ye, stopping me in this storm will nae benefit ye or me. Or our poor horses. I dunnae abuse my animals and I will not stand for it from someone else, either." He stayed close to his horse.

So he appeared to have a conscience with that reference to their *poor* horses. Though it could very well be a ploy. Highwaymen were notorious for lying, for saying whatever the bloody hell they needed to say to get the best of their victims.

Although, in this case, the stranger was the one with a gun pointed at him and *she* was the one with the advantage.

Bloody hell.

Cat inched closer to the man, her boot-covered feet trampling through the snow. "I fear it is you, my good sir, who has put our horses at risk as I was about to turn around when you appeared, changing my mind to do so."

"That's mighty unfair, lass, blaming me for yer misjudgment of the weather. Ye shouldnae have been out in a storm in the first place."

How dare this brute lecture her. "You know nothing about the reason for me being on the road today. And how dare you take the liberty of thinking you do." The man had gall; she'd give him that much.

Walking forward, she stumbled.

The stranger reached out and steadied her, his strong arms grasping her waist.

A hint of sandalwood teased her nose. As did the hint of citrus soap and sun-dried linen.

What highwayman wore clean clothes? Well, maybe some did. She was wearing a freshly washed shift under her woolen jacket.

Oh, but what was she thinking? Now was not the time to be musing about the better aspects of a man who just might be the bastard she wanted to beat to a bloody pulp.

Spinning around, Catrina worked her way out of the stranger's grasp and glared at him. For the first time since spotting the man, she had a good view of the upper most part of his face.

Those eyes.

There was no mistaking that familiar hazel-eyed gaze that was so intense, it made her feel naked despite the abundance of clothes she wore.

She swallowed.

Though refrained from chastising herself as Niall MacHendrie was a master of sinful manipulation. He'd never failed to get the best of her. Between his scorching hot kisses and his whispered words detailing every inch of her body and what he'd done to it and had planned to still do to it, there had never been a single moment where she'd been in his presence that she had not been fevered and bothered.

And to think, had it not been for that damn highwayman, she would be married to Niall right now. But none of that mattered at the moment, as the only question on her mind was what the bloody hell was her former fiancé doing riding around on *The Christmas Rebel's* horse?

She gathered her senses and pointed her pistol once more. "In less than an hour it will be dark. And with the storm being what it is, the only riders daft enough to be out now would be either a fool or a man desiring to risk his life." She prayed he did not recognize her voice. "Which of the two are you?"

Niall offered her a sly grin. "Well, I certainly dunnae care to risk my life, though I am aware that I am doing exactly that. I suppose then that also makes me a fool. Though I assure ye, I have good reason to be out in the storm. And it does nae include harming ye."

She wished he was lying, as it would make her life so much easier. But Cat knew Niall spoke the truth. At six-feet-three, with a well-muscled body, and large, strong hands capable of knocking down even the best of brutes, he was not a man known for doing so without good cause. Of course she did not care to have him know she knew he wouldn't harm her, not yet at least as she still needed to know why he was in possession of a highwayman's horse. "I have no way to believe you." She hoped her ruse worked.

"True, but if ye stop to think, I am the one at a disadvantage as I am not only cold, but unarmed."

If only he hadn't realized the fact.

"And," Niall said, leaning slightly toward Cat, "I dunnae have a voice that can tempt a man to do anything its mistress desires."

"Flattery will not win me over, sir." Her lies were getting far worse.

"Are ye certain about that, lass?"

"Yes."

“Then me saying ye have eyes as beautiful as the clear blue sky will nae cause ye to put yer pistol down?”

“Absolutely not.”

Niall took a step forward. “What if I say ye smell of fresh cut roses and have curves meant to be draped in the finest silks?”

She shook her head as she did not trust what words would come out of her mouth at this point.

Niall closed in on her. “And if I do this...” In what seemed like only one move as he’d acted too fast for her to even attempt to escape him, Niall had his scarf down, her neckerchief and mask off, and his lips on hers.

She dropped her flintlock. All sense evaded Cat’s mind, the last fragments of sanity slipping from her head like water through a sieve.

Heat fanned through her body.

She moaned.

Aw, bloody hell. One damn kiss and she was done. So much for thinking like a highwayman. Now she was acting more like Moira, God bless her soul.

Niall pulled back, breaking their kiss. He brought his hand to her chin and ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “So, ‘tis nae a highwaywoman I am facing, but ‘tis ye.”

“Of course it’s me.” She wriggled out of his grasp. “What are you doing out here?” Dropping to her knees, she searched through the snow for her missing pistol. Her lips burned and it had nothing to do with the cold wind whipping about her face.

“I think the better question,” Niall said, “is what in blazes are ye doing in Dundaire?” He knelt and joined her in her hunt for the flintlock, which he found the second he dug his hands into the snow.

Lucky bastard.

Returning to his feet, Niall offered her the gun. “Ye didnae answer my question.”

Cat stood and snatched the pistol from Niall’s gloved-covered fingers, then jabbed the firearm into her pocket. “Because that, your lairdship, is none of your business.”

“Dundaire, and all that happens within it, *is* my business.”

“Then you mustn’t be very good at managing your estate, as I am no longer your concern. Nor are my personal affairs.”

Niall huffed. “Ye didnae object to sharing yer *personal affairs* with me when I visited London.”

She did not need to be reminded of what they once had. “The misadventures of a naive young woman are hardly anything that her sophisticated, grown self, would care to repeat.”

“So ye think me nothing more than a misadventure?”

She didn’t need to think it, he’d proven it by his own actions, by not even once asking why she’d walked away from him. “You didn’t even care to ask me why I broke it off.”

“I had my reasons.”

“Well, then, they must have been quite remarkable reasons since you stayed silent for two whole years. Even if you did not know I was in Dundaire, which you should have known if you are the laird you say you are, you could have written to me in London. Eventually, I would have received the post. But you didn’t. You did not even come calling on me the next day. You simply accepted me saying I was leaving. Did you not even care to think where I was going or why?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Niall let out a deep breath. He then dropped his hand from his face and looked up. “Of course, I cared. Still do, if ye care to ken. But at the time, my brother Robbie went missing. I had no choice but to go after the lad.”

So he’d been in a similar situation as had she. “And what am I to make of you being in possession of a highwayman’s horse? Can you explain yourself out of that, too?”

Niall quirked one, brown eyebrow. “How do ye ken Mischief is a highwayman’s horse?”

Cat clammed up. Discussing Moira’s fate was not her right.

With a deep breath, Niall huffed, then gave in. “I can explain everything, though I insist ye explain a few things yerself as I dunnae recall any mention of Mischief in the newsheets. Or in gossip.”

Bargaining was probably her best option as Niall was the closest she’d gotten to *The Christmas Rebel* since arriving in Dundaire. And taking the chance he’d flee if angered, was not something she cared to do. “Agreed.”

A howling wind blew across the road.

Niall cursed under his breath, but his stare softened. “I believe we will need to continue this somewhere else, or we both might freeze to death. There is a pub down the road. I ken we can get there before the sun fully sets.”

She knew she was going to regret this but did not see a way out of

making the offer. “Rose Cottage is closer.”

Niall’s hazel eyes grew wide. “What did ye say?”

“Rose Cottage, my maternal grandfather’s house, the house I inherited after my mother died. It’s closer than going into town.”

“I see,” Niall said, his voice suddenly taking on a more serious tone.

The mention of Rose Cottage obviously troubled Niall, though she couldn’t think of one reason why it should have. He certainly was not Fergus’s father. Moira may have kept the man’s identity a secret from her, but she knew damn well her sister’s lover was not Niall MacHendrie. Her sister would never have courted the same man as she had, and especially not at the same time as she was.

Which left only one possibility for Niall’s sudden change of demeanor. *The Christmas Rebel* could have very well had an accomplice. The notion forced Cat’s gut to drop. Could she and her sister both have been so wrong about the men in their lives? *Bloody, freakin’ hell.*

The day was not turning out how she would have liked it to with this unexpected possibility. “I think we better start back now, or the roads may become unpassable.” She returned to Sprite and mounted the horse.

Niall nodded, just a small tilt of his head, then mounted his horse.

Of all the things she had prayed for this Christmas, learning Niall MacHendrie had a connection to Moira’s blasted highwayman, was not one of them.

Chapter 3

Never in all his four-and-twenty years would he have ever thought Robbie had fled London because of Catrina Lennox. He kent he should never have taken the lad to England, but dealing with his English grandmother's estate, was vital. And leaving Robbie behind for any amount of time would have been far worse with how he'd been acting up after their parents' deaths.

Anger, along with a cauldron of boiling emotions, stoked Niall's nerves. He wanted to run, escape his own body. But alas, that was nae possible.

He motioned for Mischief to pick up speed.

Despite riding in the snow, there was nae an inch of Niall that was cold at the moment, those blasted memories of Catrina and what he'd once shared with her, hammering his brain.

His time in London was life changing. The fact he'd met and become involved with Cat while there, was merely an extra bonus. At least, that is how he'd seen it at the time. Once Robbie took off, everything in his world came crashing down. But this...

He merely cursed to himself. How could he have been such a fool?

Niall glared ahead, his gaze following Cat and her galloping horse, which was now turning off the road.

He steered Mischief onto the same narrow lane.

Snow continued to fall, though it was coming down at a much heavier and faster pace at the moment, ensuring he was not going to get that slice of Grace's pear tart. Not that that was the most important thing to him with what he'd just learned about Robbie and Cat, but the fact did add to his already heated emotions.

Arriving at the end of the lane, Cat reined her horse to a full stop in front of the cottage's weathered stables. "There is room a plenty for your horse in here." She nudged her head toward the barn as she dismounted.

A whiff of rose filtered through the air.

Damn me. Cat's captivating perfume was going to make it very hard for him tonight. And there was not one bloody thing he could do about it, especially not since learning Catrina was the woman Robbie wanted his inheritance left to. What the bloody hell had gone on between the two of

them? Was that why the lad had been angry with him for two years? To say he was confused...and shocked...was definitely not a stretch when it came to describing the emotions riling through him tonight.

Without commenting on Catrina's offer to house his horse, Niall led Mischief into the stables. He dismounted, then proceeded with removing the saddle from Mischief's back. "Ye never mentioned a Rose Cottage when we were courting."

Cat looked over to him from the opposite stall. "To be honest, I never thought about this place much. It's where my mother was born, but other than that, it meant nothing to me at the time."

"And it does now?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She gave him a concerned stare. "It's where I live. Does your home not matter to you?"

His home mattered verra much to him. In fact, Dundaire Abbey was everything to him. "I just find it odd that all of a sudden ye would pick up and leave London to go live in a place ye dunnae care for."

"Some things in life are not planned. Me coming to Rose Cottage was one of those things."

He definitely could agree with the statement, as unexpected love was never something he'd planned on. Catrina Lennox, the subject of that love, was entirely unexpected with her flawless face, light blue eyes and hair the color of deepest copper. God, but how he had loved entwining those strands between his fingers while he whispered verses of erotic poetry at Cat's ear. While he'd kissed that swan-like neck of hers, the notes of her unique perfume forever burning itself into his scent memory.

And now he had to dismiss those memories, those feelings. Cat was no longer his. Maybe she was never his, if she was Robbie's.

With a huff, Niall finished settling Mischief in the stall, then headed out of the stables.

Catrina walked barely a step ahead of him, an air of confidence in her stride. Even meeting up with him by chance didnae rattle her. She was amazing in too many ways for him to count.

"Why did ye never think to seek me out after arriving in Dundaire?" Maybe she'd shed some light on Robbie's secret life if he kept hounding her. Even the most steadfast person was bound to slip up at some point.

Cat shrugged. “Why should I have? It’s not like I came back here for you.”

No. She wouldn’t have come back for a man she’d agreed to marry but didnae love. What woman would? “I admit I shouldnae have left to go look for Robbie, without at least sending ye a note. But I wasnae certain ye’d care to hear from me after ye broke off our engagement. Plus, Robert was my brother. He was also at a verra vulnerable place in his life at that time.”

“I can understand your concern for Robert,” Catrina said. “I gave up a lot for my sister Moira, God rest her soul.”

“I’m sorry for ye loss.” It seemed they’d both suffered much these past two years.

He followed Cat into the quaint the cottage. The aroma of fresh baked bread, coupled with the salty essence of celery, pleased his nose.

“There is an empty peg on the rack for your coat.” Cat nudged her chin toward the row of wood pegs lined up on the wall opposite the door.

The house wasnae large, but the small side hall was free of dust and dirt, and it gave off a verra comfortable feeling thanks in part to the food currently cooking. The sudden urge to forget all his troubles, overwhelmed Niall. Catrina lived vastly different than he did at Dundaire Abbey, but there was something about Rose Cottage that took the edge off his worries.

In silence, Niall removed his snow-washed coat, then hung it on the peg rack on the opposite wall.

He couldnae help but keep his gaze on Cat. The grace with which she moved took his breath away, made him want to watch her for hours, days, years. Losing his heart to her, and then having it broken, was the most traumatic thing ever to happen to him outside of losing his family. Maybe even worse, in some ways, if he were to be honest with himself. Not even the agony of restoring his fortune and good name was as brutal as dealing with Cat and the loss that came with her walking out on him. Surviving one night under her roof would be a miracle.



* * *

Catrina's breath hitched as she eyed Niall standing in her hallway, his tall, muscled form the most perfect sight she'd ever seen. Thank goodness she had loved Moira as much as she had and still did, or she doubted she'd be able to contain her anger thinking how she'd given up her future for her sister. She fisted her hands at her side.

Shimmying out of her coat gave her the perfect chance to hide the fact she was enjoying watching Niall.

He may very well be a rogue for being in possession of a highwayman's horse, but Niall McHendrie cut a fine form in his gray waistcoat and matching breeches. Even his boots were highly polished, which was a lot more than she could say for her own worn pair. She must look like a mess to him.

Niall reached for her coat.

He was making it hard to want to be upset at him over the horse situation.

"In exchange for ye saving me from the storm," Niall said as he hung up Cat's coat, "is there anything I can help ye with around the house?"

What? "You want to help me?"

"I think it only fair since ye are putting me up for the night."

"Who said anything about you staying the whole night?"

"Surely, lass, ye dunnae mean to toss me out in that storm?"

"The snow might end before morning." She could not have Niall in one of her beds as there was only one free one, and that was the one she used when she napped in Fergus's nursery, waiting for him to fall asleep. How could she ever lie there again knowing Niall had been in the very same bed? She wouldn't toss him out in the cold, but she also was not going to have him spend the entire night under her roof.

"So, is that yer decision? To put me out the minute the snow stops?"

"No. Well, maybe." The emotions running through her were conflicting at best.

And hampering those swirling feelings even more was Mrs. Ramsay, who chose this precise moment to come tiptoeing down the stairs, pitchfork vertically aligned only a mere thread away from Niall's spine. The stout little cook looked her way. "I have the ruffian covered; Miss. Ye may do what is needed."

Catrina winced. "You can put down the pitchfork, Mrs. Ramsay. It's just the laird."

Mrs. Ramsay leaned forward. "Och, for the love of God, indeed it is."

The pitchfork remained in her hand.

Niall moved away from the stairs.

Mrs. Ramsay came down one step, her face now redder than ever. “What were ye doing stalking around Rose Cottage?”

“I wasnae stalking the area around Rose Cottage, Mrs. Ramsay,” Niall said.

Stepping off the stairs, Mrs. Ramsay shot Cat a confused look. “If he wasnae stalking us, why did ye bring him home?”

“The storm picked up.” Cat turned her gaze back to Niall. “What were you doing out on the main road in this weather? You never said.”

“I needed to get out of the Abbey.”

“In the middle of a storm?”

“It wasnae snowing when I left. And I didnae think it would snow as I was out.”

Mrs. Ramsay harrumphed. “That’s the problem with ye men. Ye don’t think when ye should.” She slammed the pitchfork’s handle against the floor.

Niall shot Catrina a pleading stare.

It took everything in her not to laugh, but retaining her composure was a must. So too, was ensuring the laird survived Mrs. Ramsay’s fury. “Is the soup ready? It smells even more delicious then when I left.” Hopefully her honey-coated words would force her dear cook to lay off the laird.

Mrs. Ramsay simply shook her head. “Aye, ‘tis ready, though I dunnae ken why we should be feeding Mr. MacHendrie. ‘Tis Christmas Eve and the man is imposing, if I may say so.”

Inching back a step, Catrina cleared the way for Mrs. Ramsay to head toward the kitchen.

“I dunnae wish to cause ye any trouble, Catrina,” Niall said, still standing near the row of coat pegs.

“A bowl of chicken soup is no trouble.” She lied. It would be near impossible for her to eat with Niall at her table. He always made her hunger for nothing but him when she was in his presence. “Would you care to join us?”

“Aye. Thank you.”

At least the matter of her starving on Christmas Eve was settled, though she doubted her eyes would mind for at least they’d get their fill of a tasty dish by taking in the sight that was Niall MacHendrie.

He brushed by her arm as he made his way to the kitchen. “I am glad to

see ye still have yer fiery spirit about ye, lass.”

“The spirit that caused you to refer to me as, and I quote, ‘Ye Sassenach witch’?”

“Ye remember.”

How could she forget anything he’d said to her while they were courting when half the time, he had been whispering the most wickedly delicious things at her ear? “Your words were unforgettable, your lairdship. And I *ken* you *ken* it.”

Niall stepped forward. He reached out and tucked a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. “I was a fool to nae discuss things with ye in London.” He kept his hand at her face, the warmth of his fingers seeping into her cheek.

Catrina’s breath hitched. She didn’t know whether to slap the man or... well, she simply didn’t know how to react to his bold manners of touching her as he was, other than to stare at him, dumfounded like a schoolgirl who had suddenly discovered that breathless feeling of first love.

Niall suddenly dropped his hand from her face and silently headed for the kitchen.

Chapter 4

Taking such liberties with Catrina Lennox wasnae what Niall had meant to do. But the lass still owned his heart. Letting those emotions go was a must and it had to begin this verra minute.

Cat entered the kitchen and sat in the chair opposite Niall's.

A trace of rose perfume floated his way. Until he'd met Catrina, he didnae find the flower's common scent to his liking. But on Cat, the fragrance took on a new note, reminded him of mist-shrouded hills after a storm when the true beauty of nature lay waiting to be revealed. How he'd dreamt many nights of stripping Catrina of her secrets. Of bringing her to bloom like the true flower he always sensed she was.

Mrs. Ramsay placed a bowl of soup in front of him, the aroma of chicken and onions quickly overtaking Catrina's perfume. "Waste a single spoonful and I will have ye washing the pots as I dunnae cook for naught," she said.

He stared across the worn, wood table. "I ken there are many roads in the wilds of Dundaire, but I must admit, Wolf Lane was not one I had visited before ye brought me here today." He studied Catrina's face; her light blue eyes enchanting as ever. Damn him, but he could get lost in the depth of their gaze. Which was why he promptly looked away and focused on the celery floating in the chicken soup. He was here strictly to settle the matter of Robbie's final wish.

"We are rather remote," Catrina said in that pleasant and proud voice of hers. A voice that was quickly making his battle against sin a losing one.

"Aye. And Dundaire is a wee different than London, eh?" He continued staring into the bowl.

"It is." Cat paused.

He stole a glance at her, but only enough to watch her gaze drift to the spoon she was aimlessly stirring. "I do miss London."

And yet she'd come to Dundaire, which was a mystery in and of itself, as this part of Scotland was unlike other areas of the country. Even to its own residents it was an eccentric place. Just because Cat had inherited the cottage, didnae mean that was the sole reason she had chosen to give up London. "Other than inheriting Rose Cottage, what brought ye to Dundaire?"

“An injustice.”

Niall jerked his head up, but before he had the chance to question Catrina’s answer, the wail of a bairn scratched at his ears. Could it be Robbie had a *child*? Did he dare dream he could have a piece of his brother back? Of course that would also mean his suspicions of Robbie and Cat were viable.

He fisted his left hand, then quickly flexed his fingers. Regardless of the truth, he was man enough to face it. He had to be as it couldnae be changed.

“Fergus,” Catrina said, rising and then dashing from the kitchen.

Niall stood, then retook his seat after Catrina had left. He may be in one of Dundaire’s less refined areas, but it didnae mean he had an excuse to forget the ways of a gentleman.

Staring across to Mrs. Ramsay, he quirked an eyebrow.

“Dunnae be giving me that look, sir. Ye should be glad Miss Lennox announced ye before I jabbed ye in the *arse* with my pitchfork.”

He supposed that was a miracle he should be thankful for. Especially after having had his *arse* frozen this morning. Two assaults to his bum were two more than he cared to endure. “Who were ye expecting Miss Lennox to bring home with her, that ye needed to arm yerself with a weapon?”

“*The Christmas Rebel.*”

He nearly choked. Hitting his chest and regaining his breath, Niall composed himself. “Ye do ken we havenae heard from *The Rebel* in nigh a year. Aye?” Putting Robbie’s troubled past to rest was a must. Though he wasnae sure what to do about his brother’s child. The bairn he’d heard wailing a few minutes ago must be the full reason Robbie had wanted his inheritance left at Rose Cottage.

“Aye, but just because the brute hasnae been up to his thieving ways this year, doesnae mean he is gone for good.”

If only Robbie were still alive. “How long have ye worked for Miss Lennox?”

“She came here a little less than two years back. ‘Twas a compromising situation—no thanks to *The Rebel*—that forced her to leave London for Dundaire. But make no mistake, the lass is the best mother Little Fergus could hope to have. And I serve them both with respect.” She tsked. “That beast, *The Rebel*, is bloody lucky Miss Lennox is the woman she is.”

So Robbie was in fact the father of Catrina’s child.

He shook his head.

He should never have taken Robbie to London. But even more important,

he should have been a better brother to the lad as he obviously had failed him. If Robbie couldnae confide in him about what went on between him and Catrina, it was all because he had not been much of a father figure to the lad. Though he had to admit, the whole scheme of things was more than a wee puzzling to him. How could Catrina have been courting them both at the same time? “Did ye ever meet *The Christmas Rebel* in person?”

“Thankfully, no,” Mrs. Ramsay said. “I came to this house after the deed was done. But even so, I doubt there is a living soul in all of Dundaire who knows what that beast’s face looks like. Even Miss Lennox has never set eyes on the brute.”

Confusion rattled Niall’s brain. How could Cat nae ken what Robbie looked like? She’d seen him enough times at the house in London. “Are ye certain about Miss Lennox nae being able to identify *The Rebel*?”

“Aye. She told me so herself. Said Little Fergus’s father was nae a man she had ever met, but kent for fact that he was *The Christmas Rebel*.”

At least there was that, Robbie’s reputation remaining intact. But it was disturbing to think his brother had taken advantage of Catrina. He couldnae imagine Robbie taking a woman in the dark, never revealing his face to her. That didnae sound like the brother he kent. Though the lad did bear a great deal of anger over their parents’ deaths. Mayhap he took that anger out on Cat? The thought pained him. “And he never visited in the time before the bairn was born?”

“Nae.”

He definitely needed to have a talk with Catrina. A verra deep and important talk.

Mrs. Ramsay glanced toward the window. “Och, but it is coming down heavy now.”

“I am glad Miss Lennox found me when she had, or I’d probably have frozen to death.”

Looking back to the table, Mrs. Ramsay stirred her soup. “Ye should have conferred with yer cook, Grace, as she is good in predicting the weather.”

So he’d been told.

Catrina returned to the kitchen, a plump little boy carried in her arms. She sat down at the table and turned the wee bairn around.

Niall felt his mouth drop open. There was no mistaking the lad’s heritage as he had the same, rare combination of green eyes and red hair, as had Robbie. Of course Catrina had red hair, but her eyes were blue.

Fergus smiled at him. The bairn reached for his hand and held on tight.

God, but it was like reliving the night Robbie died. That grip, that strong hold his brother had staked on his arm. He wanted to cry, to scream in joy, to tell the wee bairn he had a family. A family outside of his mother, of course.

Zounds! But what was he thinking? Reality washed over Niall like a wave caused in a loch by a charging kelpie. To be a part of the bairn's life, he'd have to reveal his brother's identity. And he wouldnae have Robbie's soul condemned for eternity. Even if he had done the unthinkable to Catrina.

Niall gently pulled his hand away from Fergus. "He is a handsome lad." It was all he could say at the moment, his heart beating so fast.

A gust of wind rattled the kitchen window.

Niall stood. "I fear I have stayed too long. Disrupted yer day enough, and with it being Christmas, I have no right to intrude further. I'll take a blanket and spend the night in the stables."

Catrina shot him a concerned look. "You will die out there."

He'd die if he spent another moment in this house surrounded by the woman he loved but couldn't have, and the nephew he wanted to love, but couldn't acknowledge. "I must go."

"I will not have it, Niall. You're spending the night and that is my final word."

Mrs. Ramsay dropped her spoon. It clanked against the table. "But we dunnae have an extra bed, Miss."

Catrina shook her head, her fiery red curls bobbing around her flawless face. "We most certainly do." She stood and placed Fergus in the highchair next to the table. "His lairdship may stay in the nursery, in the bed where I nap waiting for Fergus to fall asleep."

The last thing Niall needed was to sleep in the bed where Catrina Lennox had lain. Just thinking about her curvy form would keep him awake all night. Not to mention her scent. That intoxicating rose fragrance stirred his soul. "I wouldnae care to put Fergus out."

"I doubt he'll be upset with sharing his room with you."

"I snore."

A soft smile flitted across Catrina's lips.

Damn him to hell, but he did nae need to focus on Cat's tempting mouth. "Mayhap I can sleep on the floor in here."

"I will nae have a man sleeping in my kitchen, sir." Mrs. Ramsay's face went red.

“Then it is the stables.” Niall turned and headed for the hall to retrieve his coat.

Catrina followed him, the stomp of her boot heels cursing at his ears. If this had been any other situation, as in if he had never lost Katrina, he’d have turned straight back, taken her in his arms and divested her of those damn breeches and tattered gray woolen jacket that covered—from what he could tell by the rolled up cuffs—a worn linen shirt, all of which didnae do justice to her beautiful form. And he’d do it all while devouring those luscious lips of hers so she couldnae protest.

He stopped in the hall.

Running his hand through his hair, Niall took a moment to just breathe, to collect the wee bit of sense he still had left in his soul.

How was it that sin insisted on following him everywhere? Was there truly no justice left in this world? All he’d wanted was to fulfill his dead brother’s wish, which by all means should have been a valiant act. Not a deed that had him stalking into the life of the most charming woman ever to stir his blood.

A soft hand settled on his shoulder.

Niall held his breath.

“Please,” Katrina said from behind him. “You cannot sleep with the horses for you are not a horse. And it is far too dangerous for you to attempt to return home. And before you even think it, it’s also too dangerous to try to ride out to the tavern in town.”

He kent that, damn it. But Katrina didnae ken the danger she was asking for by suggesting he stay the night under her roof.

Staring at the small set of narrow stairs in the hall, Niall noted that the finial, carved in the shape of a pineapple, leaned to one side. “I will stay but only if ye allow me to pay for the night.” He needed something to focus his energy on or he’d die just from the mixed feelings that were storming through him.

Catrina stepped up next to him, a small tear showing in the sleeve of her jacket. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Allow me to mend the finial or allow me the use of the stall next to Mischief’s, for the night. Ye dunnae have other options, and as laird, that is *my* final say.” Let Cat challenge him on that!

“Touché, *my laird*. In truth, I would welcome the finial fixed, as I can’t count the times I’ve caught my sleeve on it.”

He nodded to Catrina. “Then it is settled. Now where do ye keep yer tools?”

Mrs. Ramsay entered the hall, a wood box gripped in her right hand. “Ye should find all ye need in here. Though I am warning ye, sir. Ye must behave yerself during yer stay at Rose Cottage or ye will face my pitchfork with certainty.” She dropped the box on the last step, then shook her head before returning to the kitchen.

“You’ll have to forgive Mrs. Ramsay,” Catrina said, a delightful pink hue tinting her cheeks. “She means well. Of that I can assure you.”

“I ken. I have a butler and a cook who are just as loyal to me as Mrs. Ramsay is to ye.”

A squeal emanating from the kitchen interrupted their conversation.

Catrina glanced away. “I should go back to tending to Little Fergus.”

She was a good mother and it pleased Niall. “He’s a spirited bairn.”

Catrina smiled, an uptick of her lips that showed the love she had for her son. “He is an intelligent boy. And so full of enthusiasm. Most days I can barely catch a breath trying to keep up with him.”

Fergus sounded exactly like Robbie. How Niall wished he could tell Catrina her son bore the good aspects of his father but considering Mrs. Ramsay had said even Catrina hadnae kent *The Christmas Rebel’s* identity, it wasnae up to him to disclose it now. Robbie had only said to deliver his inheritance, he never said anything about revealing his identity. “’Tis best I get to work.”

“Of course, forgive me. I did not mean to go on about Fergus.” Catrina fanned her face with her delicate hands as she pivoted and walked away.

The essence of rose peeled from her worn clothes.

Bloody hell. The storm outside was nothing like the one he was facing inside this wee house.

Bending to search through the tools, Niall prayed fixing the finial would clear his thoughts of Catrina and her damning scent. If not, he doubted he’d survive the night. And he couldnae die before talking to Cat in private, before finding a way to breach the subject of Robbie’s inheritance. But the discussion would have to wait until Mrs. Ramsay was asleep, as his brother’s last wish only concerned Cat.

Chapter 5

After leaving Niall to fix the finial in the hall, Catrina spent the rest of the day entertaining Little Fergus. Which of course included the usual three hours of playing with a ball, regaling the babe with tales of his mother so he'd know her even though he had never met her, and talking in silly voices while using hand puppets. Well after dark, she finally tiptoed out of the nursery, careful not to make any noise that would wake her sleeping nephew.

She breathed a sigh of relief upon reaching the downstairs parlor.

With it being only hours away from Christmas Morning, now was her sole chance to weave the greenery that would decorate the mantle, as superstition dictated she didn't dare do so any time earlier. And if she'd learned anything from her mother's strange stories of Dundaire, it was that one never courted the darker side of superstition in this part of Scotland.

Opening the parlor door and then slipping inside the room, Catrina came to an abrupt halt as she settled her gaze on the arched window to the left of the hearth. She bit her bottom lip.

At the other end of the parlor stood Niall. He'd removed his waistcoat and even went so far as to roll up the sleeves of his shirt, exposing his fine forearms.

If she'd been attracted first to his firm *arse* or even the bulge in the front of his breeches, she'd have an easy way to avoid sin, as a proper lady should never focus her stare on such tempting parts of a man's body. But no. Her scandalous desire started with the less sinful areas of the male form, which meant her salacious mind could do all sorts of illicit wandering and not a single person around her would know. Of course there was also the matter of her previous relationship with Niall, which did not help her matter any. The memories of her time spent with him in London were wicked.

She silently sighed to herself.

Niall leaned toward the windowpane; his attention apparently focused on the snow-covered lawns.

She could not help but stare at him. The man had a build equal to those marble statues housed in museums, the ones that represented the gods of ancient times. Picturing Niall naked, rising from a lake, streams of water

flowing over what she knew was a well-toned chest and abdomen, was an easy feat. What was also easy, although horrifying to her supposed chase soul, was thinking of that water-blessed body walking out of her imagined lake and coming straight for her. And not simply to just approach her, but to take her in his strong arms and completely drench her clothing to the point she would have no choice but to remove them all.

Standing naked with Niall would definitely seal her path to hell. But since she couldn't take back her sinful thoughts, avoiding full condemnation didn't seem rational. There was no such thing as half-sin or lesser sin. A sin was a sin. She had learned that much from Moira. It hadn't mattered that her sister loved her unborn child, she was a woman marked by scandal and that scandal would follow her through life. Even through death.

The memory of Moira gave Catrina pause.

Though not because she cared to save her own soul. Her purse was what mattered more. One child in the family was already a stretch on her finances, and should Niall forget his gentlemanly ways, she was certain she'd give in to the man without protest. And she could not afford to raise her own child *and* Little Fergus.

But even with that thought running through her head, Catrina couldn't refrain from ogling her handsome guest. She missed Niall. And forgoing the pleasure of his company, a pleasure she craved so much, was not what she wanted tonight. So much of her life had already been framed out for her, first with caring for Moira and now with raising Fergus. Even that imagined quiet vicar she had hoped to attract would probably no longer offer for her. What harm could come from allowing herself to enjoy Niall's company for a few hours? It's not like she was about to sleep with the man. Though they had done enough wicked things in the past, that she knew darn well a bed was not the only venue for sin.

She continued to stare at Niall, the imposing figure that he was.

Wind howled outside.

Niall tilted his head. As he leaned into a stream of moonlight, blond streaks appeared in his brown hair, the bulk of which now sat tied in a neat queue at the nape of his neck.

Even in silence, the man commanded the room with an air of sophistication combined with raw, male sensuality.

Cat inched forward, the sudden urge to run to Niall overwhelming her. Thank goodness her level head kept her legs where they stood.

She fidgeted with the cuff of her shift, the coarse linen harsh against her fingers.

Niall suddenly looked her way. "I didnae hear ye standing there."

"I just came downstairs now." She didn't know what else to say as the truth was not an option. Telling the man she'd been staring at him would only open the door for reckless behavior. And at the moment the slightest encouragement was all she needed to act the tart.

Niall's hazel-eyed gaze softened. "I hope ye dunnae mind me being in here, but I wasnae ready to go to bed."

Of course she didn't mind. It's not like she had anyone else to spend the night with. "Not at all."

Niall stepped away from the window. "Mrs. Ramsay went to bed but instructed me to bring the greenery stacked outside the spence, into the parlor." He glanced at the pile of evergreen in the middle of the floor.

The man's help was a Godsend, thought Catrina, as last year she'd left a trail of pine needles across half the house when she lugged the branches herself.

"Is Fergus asleep?" Niall asked, a genuine look gracing his face.

The man's interest warmed her heart. "It took a bit, but yes. He's not one to go to bed willingly, but once he's in his crib, he does fall asleep fairly quick."

"I suppose at that age, it is easy to tire oneself out."

"Oh yes, though I believe Fergus's main reason for being exhausted is his efforts to tire me out. Most days I want to crawl into a crib before he does." She laughed.

As did Niall, making his way toward the pile of greenery.

He had the most amazing mouth, Cat thought. One that bore lips made for kissing. Lips that made her crave their burn on her skin. And she remembered that burn vividly, and all the places it had left its mark on her body—from her neck, to her breasts, to her thighs... even on that wicked place between them.

A shot of heat laced through her veins.

She gently squeezed her legs together, pressure mounting in her nub. Her gaze flew to Niall's fingers. Large and long, they were as wicked as were his lips, the memories of what they had done to her rushing to the forefront of her mind as if there hadn't been a day gone by since they'd last touched. Those fingers were the perfect complement to Niall's searing lips. They'd stroked her in places that were private and aching. Places that craved his

touch and submitted to its torment. She did not dare think about the man's cock, for if she did, she worried she would not be able to refrain from touching herself at the moment. And what image would that project to Niall?

Pushing her sinful thoughts away, Catrina crossed the room and then reached for the stack of greenery and plucked several boughs from the pile before lowering herself to the floor. "I enjoy this time of year as it makes me feel hopeful, as if there is nothing one cannot accomplish." *Like freeing myself from all inhibition and making abandoned love in front of the hearth.*

Niall gave her a pensive stare. "I feel the same, though I could do without the snow."

She doubted snow would be a problem if Niall knew what she was thinking. In fact, he'd probably welcome the cold after they were through acting improper.

Joining her on the floor, Niall reached for a length of greenery and began helping her untangle the strands of evergreen.

A flurry of pine danced on the air.

She loved the smell, made her recall the happy Christmases she'd had a child.

"Are ye happy here?" Niall asked, now fussing with a branch of evergreen strewn over his muscular thighs.

It was a strange question for him to ask her. "I am content. Though I am not certain I would say happy." She paused, fearful of Niall's reaction. "Listen to me, I'm complaining when I should be very grateful for all that I have."

"Dunnae fash yerself, lass. I have done a good deal of complaining myself, lately."

She picked at the evergreen needles dusting the front of her breeches. "I think Moira's death has been the hardest for me. She was my best friend, my world. I miss her dearly since she died."

"Och, I ken the feeling. Robbie departed this good earth one year ago, today."

She couldn't even begin to imagine losing a sibling on Christmas Eve. While Moira died not far before the Christmas season, she never associated the holiday with her sister's death. "I am sorry for your loss, Niall. Robbie always seemed such a jolly man."

"He was when around others, but in private he had become verra bitter. And though we were close, his last two years it seemed as if he fought me on

everything. Something was troubled the lad during that time and he refused to discuss it with me.”

“Moira was similar. She took some secrets to the grave, yet she was quite forthcoming about others. Though probably because she did not have a choice with those.”

“I reckon we all have some secrets.”

She hadn’t expected the statement, though welcomed it as it gave her the chance to talk about their past. “I left London because I did not have a choice. Not because of anything you did.”

“I appreciate ye telling me this.” Niall paused but only briefly. “As I mentioned earlier, I didnae visit ye to discuss *us* when ye left me, because Robbie needed me. He’d fled London. I had no choice but to go after him. Even today I was out because of him. My brother often road through these parts and being that today was the anniversary of his death, I promised him on his deathbed, I would come to these parts of Dundaire.”

The sadness that filled Niall’s eyes tugged at Cat’s heart. “At least you fulfilled your promise to him.”

He lowered his head. “In truth, there is one more thing I must still do. I had hoped to have it all settled by tonight, but it didnae work out that way.” Niall picked at the pine branch, his fingers combing through the tangled needles. “Ye are a good mother, Catrina. A verra good mother.”

Mother? “What do you mean?”

He raised his head. “To Fergus. Mrs. Ramsay reckons the same.”

Niall believed Fergus was hers. “I think I need to explain something, Niall. Fergus is not my son. He’s my nephew, Moira’s boy.”

The look of relief that swarmed Niall’s face was so vivid, it appeared as if it a heavy weight had lifted from his shoulders. He smiled. A huge, beaming grin. “That is the best news I’ve heard in a long time, lass.”

She was now thoroughly confused. “Surely you did not think.... But that would mean...considering the timing and Fergus’s age, that I... That I left you because of another man.”

The heavy burden that showed on Niall’s face suddenly returned. “I didnae mean to imply.... That is to say, I wasnae saying.... Oh, bloody hell, I best keep my mouth shut or I’ll not only put me foot in it but my whole damn leg and more if I continue.”

She smirked. “I am not insulted, so don’t worry about it. But I do wish you would have said something earlier.”

“Well, with Mrs. Ramsay saying ye were the best mother Fergus could have, I took her to mean ye *were* his mother.”

“At least that is settled.” She laughed. “Imagine me, a mother...” Cat brought her hand to her mouth she was laughing so hard.

Niall remained silent.

She composed herself, her nerves suddenly growing hot.

He looked at her. “Ye would make a fine mother. Ye are verra good with Fergus and I see no difference in the way ye treat him. Ye would make any man proud by giving him an heir.”

She was not having this conversation. Not with Niall. Not with the man whom she wanted to give an heir and more to.

Heat swarmed Catrina’s every inch. For a split second she wished she was out in the snow and not cooped up in a room with the tempting Niall. Though if the man was outside with her, she doubted even the worst storm could cool the rage that now brewed within her veins.

A loud crackle snapped in the hearth’s fire.

She jumped.

The evergreen in her lap slipped.

She reached for the falling branch just as Niall grabbed it.

Their hands collided.

Heat scorched Catrina’s skin. She must have the soul of a tart, for she made no effort to withdraw her fingers from under Niall’s hand.

He leaned in.

She lowered her gaze to his mouth and parted her lips.

A trace of sandalwood peeled from Niall’s shirt. Or mayhap it came from a place even deeper, perhaps his skin or his blood. Her mother had often told her and Moira tales of Dundaire where its inhabitants knew their true loves solely by their scent. To the world her own father smelled of pine, the soap he always chose for his bath. But to hear her mother speak of the man, he carried with him the essence of a palace orangery. Perhaps there was truth to the legends of Dundaire.

Catrina bent her head forward.

Niall brushed his lips against hers, took her mouth with such urgency, she hadn’t the time to think of propriety.

His tongue danced with hers.

Oh, the joys of being wicked! She should never have chided Moira for having fallen for her highwayman. What if they really had experienced a love

between them? Not that she was excusing the man for leaving Moira, but maybe in some way, at some time, he really had loved her sister?

Catrina moaned. She brushed the remaining greenery from her lap and inched closer to Niall. Moving her right hand upward, she skimmed her fingers over the fine cotton of his shirt, the heat of his chest searing her palm.

She prayed Mrs. Ramsay did not decide to check up on her. The woman would demand nothing less than a valid explanation and at the moment, Catrina could think of nothing that would suffice.

Niall pulled her closer. With a gentle tug to the pin that kept her hair in place, he undid her bun, the soft length of her hair falling down her back.

It was all coming back to her. Their heated moments of passion, their sin-riddled escapes in the dark corners of some of the best drawing rooms and ballrooms in London. And while she knew it was wrong to pick up where they'd left off, she did nothing to stop Niall. He would never accept a wife who played highwaywoman. And she needed justice for Fergus. Demanded it, in fact.

But nothing said they could not have tonight.

Gliding her hands down Niall's shirt, Catrina pulled the garment free from his breeches and quickly slipped her fingers underneath the cotton.

She froze. Allowed herself to feel the warmth of Niall's bare chest, to savor the taut muscles that rested beneath her palm. If this night had been planned, if this night was shared by them as husband and wife, she'd pray it never ended. But the reality was that this moment was a stolen one.

As if he sensed her sudden apprehension, Niall pulled back, breaking their kiss. "I beg yer forgiveness, Catrina. I had no right."

Embarrassment snaked through her blood. She straightened. "The sin is all mine. Perhaps it is best we forget it." Yes. What they had was in the past and needed to be forgotten now.

Without another word, Niall returned to sorting out the evergreen branches and then twisting the greenery into one long piece that would eventually fit the mantle.

She'd proven herself sinful tonight. She was no better than had been Moira, giving in to her base desire. And all this time she'd thought her sister wrong and weak. God save her, for she'd misjudged sweet Moira. Misjudged her indeed.

Sitting back, Catrina fiddled with the evergreen and tried to forget what she'd just done. Though it was not easy with her lips still burning from

Niall's kiss.

And to think the man was going to be sleeping in the room right next to her own.

Heaven help her, but she was not going to get any peace tonight.

Chapter 6

Niall waited at least a good hour after Catrina had gone to bed before leaving the parlor and venturing to the nursery. Not that it gave him the miracle he had sought as he'd spent the last fifteen minutes or so tossing and turning, his every thought consumed by the lass who had stolen whatever bits of good sense he had left in his daft head.

And to think poor Robbie had suffered through all his endless lectures when it was his own bloody soul that needed a talking to. What was he thinking kissing Catrina? The woman didnae say she wanted him back in her life.

Rubbing his hands over his face, Niall let out a deep breath. Robbie should never have put him in this position of delivering his inheritance to Rose Cottage. Of putting him in Catrina Lennox's path once again. Or maybe the rebellious lad did it on purpose. Wouldn't that be a kick. *The Christmas Rebel* playing *The Christmas Saint*. He had to wonder if Robbie kent that Catrina was caring for Moira. Even if, as Mrs. Ramsay had said, he hadn't visited the cottage, there was nothing to say during her time here, that Moira didnae meet Robbie in secret. After all, it was now clear that his brother kent about Fergus. If he hadn't, he wouldnae have left his inheritance to the bairn. And Niall had to believe it was indeed Fergus who was meant to get Robbie's money.

Bloody conscience. He'd fare a lot better if he hadnae any scruples. Men without morals didnae spend half the night awake fashing about what they should or shouldnae have done in the past or hours earlier as was the case of his kissing Cat. They also didnae fash about what they should or shouldnae do from here out forward.

Niall turned over. He grabbed the blanket and sheet and scrunched his fingers as hard as was possible.

Ice pelted the windows.

He stared across the room, watched the snow falling outside.

Shite.

If the storm picked up again, he'd never make it back to the Abbey before the set time he had told Edgar to come looking for him. And since he kent the

man well, he kent Dear Old Edgar would send out half the staff looking for him. And he'd never get that slice of Grace's pear tart, either. Not that he would mind spending the holiday with Catrina, Little Fergus, and the eccentric Mrs. Ramsay. Those three souls made this wee house a home.

He tucked the blanket under his chin and squeezed his eyes shut.

Rose perfume teased his nose.

Aw, for the love of all things Scotland, why the bloody hell did he reckon that move would do him good? Every Dundaire-born man—and woman for that matter—kent the tales of how some of the residents of this strange area of the Highlands could identify their future spouses solely by their scent. And while he never found those stories as anything to put credence in, he was starting to think differently at the moment. For starters, not all Dundairians could be wrong. Those tales were quite prevalent among some families in the area. Even among other MacHendries, but those kin came from different branches of his family's bloodline, not his direct line. He hailed from the sensible MacHendries, from the men who didnae believe in the tales of old. At least, not all of them believed in the myths even though the stories did linger in these parts. And yet, for all that he didnae believe, he couldnae deny the fact that Catrina's scent stirred him. And on the off chance the ridiculous myth was real, how did it work when two people meant to be together were pulled apart? Yes, he had found Catrina again, but that didnae mean she was ready to become his wife.

My wife.

He hadnae thought about marrying since that damn trip to London.

Niall cursed to himself.

He punched the pillow, the aroma of rose rising once again to his nose like some tempting succubus looking to steal his soul.

A soft little gurgle caressed his ear.

He sat up, his gaze searching for a mouse.

It found none.

A second sound flitted across the room.

Fergus.

Having spent most of the night fighting his own thoughts, he'd nearly forgotten he was sharing a room with the wee bairn.

Niall pushed back the covers and rose from the bed. He hadnae a single clue how to care for a small child, as Robbie was a grown lad by the time their parents died. And he certainly couldnae go fetch Cat. Not at this early

hour. Though his reluctance, if he was true to himself, stemmed more from that damn kiss he'd taken from the woman. Or more precisely from the embarrassment he suffered over acting so bold where he had no right to do so. He had no problem putting off facing Catrina again for as long as he could.

Approaching the crib, he leaned over the its side.

Fergus stared up at him, his chubby cheeks cradling a smile between them. A large smile, much like the one Niall remembered Robbie having.

God, but the bairn looked so much like his brother.

Fergus gurgled again. He reached for the small stuffed bear in the corner of the crib, then threw the toy.

“Och, but ye are definitely yer da’s boy. But let me tell ye this, keep up with that defiant attitude and it will win ye naught.” Niall plucked the stuffed toy from the end of the crib and returned it to Fergus’s side. “Now be nice to the wee bear. He’s a good looking *chiel*.”

Fergus laughed. And repeated his throw.

“Aye, ye are definitely Robbie’s lad. Ye ignore my good sense in the same way he had.” Niall shook his head but could do nothing about stifling the laugh rising in his throat. What he’d give to have Fergus grow up at Dundaire Abbey. But wishing for something that could never be, was useless. “I may not be in the position to give ye the family that ye should have, as I must remain loyal to yer da and he was firm on me restoring the family name first, but I will see to it that ye want for nothing. I have yer da’s inheritance and I have every intention of leaving it here when I return to the Abbey. Though I cannae tell yer aunt the whole truth as that would be breaking my promise to yer da.” Niall paused and stared into Fergus’s eyes. “But one day, God willing, I will be back and when I do return, it will be to take ye to yer rightful home, to Dundaire Abbey, the place where yer da and I grew up. I reckon ye will like it there.”

He thought about the future of his beloved home. With no children of his own, Fergus was his rightful heir. And there was no law stating he couldnae leave the house to whomever he wanted. It was his to do with as he saw fit, along with the property and everything else he owned. But it would have so much more meaning if he could share it all with Fergus now, while he lived, rather than leave it to the lad only after his death.

Fate was a verra unfair maiden.



* * *

Pacing the kitchen, Catrina folded her arms across her chest, the coarse wool of her shawl itching her fingers. “What man remains in bed past ten in the morning?”

Mrs. Ramsay harrumphed. “What woman leaves her wee nephew in the company of a man she has only just become reacquainted with after two years of not hearing a word from him?”

She should never have spent the morning explaining the details of her relationship with Niall to Mrs. Ramsay. That, and she did not intentionally leave Fergus in Niall’s company. “I told you, the sole reason I did not collect Fergus from the nursery before I went to bed, was because I was exhausted from the day’s events. I was not thinking straight.” The statement was a complete and utter lie. Her head was lost not because she’d been too tired to think with any sense of reason, she’d lost her mind because of that darn kiss she’d shared with Niall. A kiss she had no intention of discussing with Mrs. Ramsay. “Besides, even you said his lairdship is a good man. Just ten minutes ago.”

“Aye, I did. And he is still not a rogue. But he *is* still a man ye dunnae ken well. At least, ye didnae kent him well these past two years. People can change over time, ye ken.” The crack of wood smacking flesh rattled through the kitchen as Mrs. Ramsay slapped her trusty wooden spoon against her palm. She tsked. “I do hope with all my soul, that the rogue was worth it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am nae a lass who was born yesterday, Miss. I see that look in yer eyes.”

“What look?”

Mrs. Ramsay stepped forward and raised the wooden spoon still gripped in her fingers. “Aye. That look. The one that says ye were up to no good with Mr. MacHendrie after I went off to bed.”

She smirked. “I did nothing of the sort. Niall simply helped me with the greenery for the mantle.”

“As if ye needed the help.”

“He said you told him to help me. It was a heavy stack of evergreens.”

“Which ye managed quite well on yer own last year.”

“Not so. I left a trail of needles clear across the house. *If* you remember.”

Mrs. Ramsay switched out her spoon for a dish cloth. “I do remember, as I was the one to sweep up the mess. Still, I digress, lass. Ye kissed the rogue.”

She sucked in a breath so deep, she thought her lungs would burst.

“And there is my proof,” Mrs. Ramsay said.

Catrina flopped herself into one of the chairs and then smacked her hands over her face. She silently counted to ten.

Mrs. Ramsay patted her arm. “There, now, Miss. It could have been worse, ye could have kissed an outright brute. Like one of those fellows from *The Snarling Wolf*.”

Even threatened with death, she would never kiss one of Old Bruce’s cohorts. She dropped her hands from her face. “At least Niall is not *The Christmas Rebel*.”

“Och, if only yer sweet Moira had had the sense ye have. What went wrong with her, I will never know, as the lass seemed to have had a good head about her shoulders during the time I kent her. Of course by then she was also carrying *The Rebel*’s bairn. But still, I liked Moira. God rest her soul.”

Catrina agreed with Mrs. Ramsay’s assessment of Moira, but still wished her sister had confided in her more than she had. “I believe Moira was caught up in the dream of falling for a man of danger. Though she never spoke ill of Fergus’s father. Of course she didn’t speak much of the man, period. All I ever managed to get out of her was how one day he would come back for her, that he loved her, and that supposedly they were legally married at Gretna Green, though all licenses and the sort were in *his* possession. It was almost as if the man was waiting to come into some good fortune before he publicly acknowledged my sister.”

“If ye ask me, the man was a cad. He just used the excuse of waiting as a way for him shake off his responsibilities of becoming a father.”

Mrs. Ramsay was probably right about the fact, but dismissing Moira’s feelings completely, was never something Catrina was willing to do. Capture *The Christmas Rebel* and force him to make amends for Little Fergus’s sake, yes. But in the deepest depths of her soul, she knew she also would get the truth out of the man. As believing that her sister would go off and do

something so irresponsible as freely giving herself to a rogue without any real promise of marriage, was not the Moira she'd known growing up.

The stomp of bootheels thundered from the hall.

Catrina jerked her head toward the kitchen archway and quickly caught her breath.

Walking in from the hall came Niall, Little Fergus carried in his arms.

Mrs. Ramsay gasped.

Catrina quickly shifted her gaze to the shocked cook as the woman's voice only confirmed what she was seeing.

"Oh. My. Lord." The look on Mrs. Ramsay's face matched the tone of her words.

Niall frowned. "Ye will have to forgive me, Ladies. I am nae verra good with clouts and pilchers. But I did manage the lad's cap with nae a problem."

Yes, he did indeed manage to tie the baby bonnet and keep it firm on Fergus's head. If only he'd done half as good a job with the other end of her nephew, she wouldn't be worrying about Fergus *'blessing'* the floor or anything else his bottom touched. Not to mention a cap and a napkin did not cover a child. The poor little lad needed clothes on his arms and legs, as well. Catrina rose. "I thank you for...for washing up Fergus and changing him." She took the child and held him close as she was certain he must be freezing having only a napkin on. And an already wet napkin, to boot.

Niall barely looked her in the eyes. "I see the storm is picking up again."

"Aye," Mrs. Ramsay said, flitting around the kitchen. "I have already planned on ye staying for dinner as there is no sense in ye trying to make it home in the snow." She placed a plate with a single biscuit on it, along with a cup of tea, on the table. "Better ye eat up now as the latch on the storage barn needs mending. The blasted thing trapped me inside last summer for a whole day."

"Fixing the barn lock is not necessary, Niall," Catrina said, distracting Fergus with a spoon. "I do not expect you to keep mending things around the house just because you are snowed in with us."

"I expect him too," Mrs. Ramsay interrupted. "He's eating my supply of food, the least he can do is fix up a few things."

Niall smiled as he looked Catrina's way for a brief moment. "I dunnae mind, lass. as I am nae a man who sits around all day. I tend to keep busy when at home."

Catrina wasn't so sure she liked the idea of Niall spending more time with

them. What would she do with the man all day? Even if he did fix the one latch, the task certainly wouldn't take hours. "I'm going upstairs to dress Fergus." She turned to face Mrs. Ramsay. "If you need anything, you know where I'll be."

She didn't dare look at Niall as she wasn't sure she could face him again. Especially not if her gaze lingered on his lips. Those lips that set off a flurry of desire in her last night, that she barely managed an hour's worth of sleep.

She prayed the day went by fast because if she was forced to spend any time alone with Niall, no amount of penance would save her soul.

Chapter 7

After Niall fed Mischief and cleaned the stables, he headed for the storage barn.

Snow fell at a brisk pace just as it had yesterday afternoon.

He wondered how many more nights he'd have to endure the agony of being trapped in Catrina's presence. By now Edgar was probably fraught with worry, as was Grace. But he had no way of letting them know he was safe without attempting a ride back to the Abbey. And he really didn't see the need to put Mischief through such grief. It wasn't the first time he'd ventured out for a few days without notifying the household of his whereabouts. Though he had informed Edgar he'd be back by this evening, which was going to cause a problem when he didn't show up.

And probably not just with Edgar, but with the bold Mrs. Ramsay, as well. The stout little cook must have known what he was up to last night, or she wouldn't have been so forward with him this morning, ordering him about like she owned the cottage. She and Edgar were two of a kind.

Reaching the storage barn, Niall couldn't help but wonder if this was a place Robbie might have visited. Maybe he stowed away in the barn just to catch a glimpse of his Moira. The lad had certainly gone out enough without leaving word of his whereabouts the last two years of his life.

Damn, but he now had more questions than before. He wanted to know everything Cat knew about Moira's 'injustice' as she put it. But how did he even begin to breach the subject of asking her such intimate and, to a degree, scandalous, questions?

For the love of God, but he had better confront that damn Murray and settle the family affairs soon as he seriously needed to come clean with Catrina. She needed to know Robbie was not the brute she thought him to be. Though he didn't expect her to forgive Robbie for abandoning Moira. Or him for not divulging the whole truth, right from the start. Catrina was a strong female with a strong mind. Which she showed him again, just this morning.

The vision of her keeping her head down, refusing to look him in the eye, filled Niall with guilt. He shouldn't have acted so brazen last night. And now

the blasted snow had to pick up again.

Catrina didnae look pleased at the prospect of him spending another night under her roof. And who could blame her? He had no right stealing that kiss from her. Though if he had the chance to do so again, he more than likely would repeat his actions. Even knowing it wasnae right.

Damn me.

If only God would get things done and over with—stop this bloody storm, allow him to settle Robbie’s inheritance, and make right everything else that seemed to be going askew in his world at the moment—then maybe he’d have some peace in his life.

Dipping his boot toe into the snow, Niall cleared a path in front of the barn door and silently thanked heaven for the task he’d been sent out to do. Fixing the latch should provide him at least an hour away from Catrina. An hour he so desperately needed to himself.

He jiggled the lock to better inspect it. The contraption appeared to be working as it was meant to, though he couldnae say the same for the door itself. The large slat of wood stood warped on one end, making it stick to the frame. No wonder Mrs. Ramsay ended up trapped inside the barn last year. If she’d let the door slam behind her—which could happen to anyone without them even realizing it—the warped part of the outermost plank would more than likely stick in the door frame. And once someone went to reopen the door from the inside, and with the force they’d need to do so, the latch would easily slip back in place on the outside, on its own. Thank goodness the woman hadn’t gotten trapped inside during winter. She could have frozen to death.

Running his hand over the warped plank, Niall deemed the slat unfixable. Replacing it was the best option.

He proceeded with measuring the part of wood that needed to be changed out.

As he worked, wind blasted the field, brought a furious squall of snow down from the hills. If he didnae know better, he’d swear winter was here to stay as he’d never remembered a season so cold. Not even when he was a lad and back then every winter seemed to put forth a good dose of snow. This year’s storms even out did last year’s record. He’d never understand how Dundaire attracted the worst and strangest weather in all of Scotland. But it did.

A whiff of rose nipped at his nose.

Catrina.

He didnae dare look over his shoulder as he knew darn well who he'd find. And being alone with the beguiling minx wasnae going to help his conscience. Better he pretend to be unaware of Cat's presence than to acknowledge her, as his silence just might be enough to make her turn back toward the house.

Niall slipped inside the barn, careful to leave the door slightly ajar.

He studied the bowed wood from the interior side. Imagine if his nephew came out here after he learned to walk? A wee lad could easily die trapped in a hot barn all day. Or freeze should the lad be out in winter, and given that he was Robbie's boy, who knew what mischief lay ahead for the lad. Thank goodness he'd ended up at Rose Cottage when he did.

He stepped away from the door and turned around.

Rubbing his hands to keep his fingers warm, Niall glanced across the barn. At least a dozen wood planks sat scattered about the floor and they all appeared to be in good form, straight and strong. Though he wouldnae ken for sure if they would work until he started fixing the door. He sauntered over to the pieces and crouched.

A second trace of rose perfume, this time stronger than the last hint, danced beneath his nose.

"'Tis only me come to return the pitchfork," *Catrina* said, her voice growing louder as she approached him

Niall jumped to his feet and spun around. "Dunnae let..." It was too late. The door slammed behind *Catrina* who by now was several steps into the barn, setting the pitchfork against the wall.

"Don't let what?"

"Dunnae let the door close as it will stick. The latch wasnae the problem."

She quirked one red eyebrow as if she needed a minute to mull over his statement.

And he didnae blame her as she had her hands full just bringing up *Fergus*.

The look of realization slowly settled on *Cat's* face. "We're trapped, aren't we."

"Aye. But at least *Mrs. Ramsay* can get us out."

"I don't think that will be happening anytime soon." *Catrina* winced.

"What do ye mean?" He sauntered her way, his gaze locked on those enchanting blue eyes of hers.

Catrina stepped back. “Fergus is down for a nap and Mrs. Ramsay decided to take one herself. And once she’s down, she hears nothing.”

“And yet ye left Little Fergus in her care?” He continued toward Katrina.

“Well, I did not have the intention of being out here long.” Katrina inched back even further.

Niall pinned her against the wall. He brought his hand to her waist and pulled her close. “I will ask ye this only once. Did ye miss me?”

Gently, Katrina placed her hands on his shoulders. “With Moira being with child, there was a lot that consumed my thoughts. I barely had a moment to myself.”

Niall inched back a tad, put a bit of space between them. “So ye didnae think of me.”

“That is not what I said. Of course I thought about you. Probably more than I should have, in fact. But I tried so hard to push those thoughts away. And after Moira died in childbirth, all I wanted was to hunt down the bastard responsible for her death. That is why I was out yesterday. I have been riding out every day, visiting the area that was said to be *The Christmas Rebel’s* favored roads.”

The revelation filled Niall with guilt. But he couldnae tell Katrina about Robbie’s secret identity, yet. “Would ye be willing to allow me to court ye, now?”

“Any man who wants me in his life, must also accept Fergus. And Mrs. Ramsay, as she has become part of the family.”

“I have no objections to Fergus.” How could he, the bairn was his own nephew. “But as for Mrs. Ramsay, well, I have a cook. Edgar’s wife, Grace.”

“Is there not something we can do for her?”

Based on the sincere look in Cat’s eyes, he couldnae refuse her anything. “Aye. I’ll do my best to come up with something.”

She smiled at him. “Then I would very much like to start our courtship anew.”

He didnae see the point in going back to the verra beginning when they’d had shared a lot more than a mere few kisses. He’d proposed to her, for goodness’ sakes. “I had something a wee bit different in mind.”

“Such as?”

“I dunnae see the reason behind starting from the verra beginning, lass.”

A flush tinted Katrina’s cheeks.

“I didnae mean to embarrass ye, Cat. Believe me, that is the last thing I

would care to do. But I ken ye understand what I mean.”

“I do.” Cat paused and lowered her gaze. “May I ask you for something?”

“Aye. Anything.”

“My sister fell in love with a rogue. He ruined her and then left her. At least that is how it looks to me.”

“Sometimes, not all is clear, Cat. Maybe there was more to Moira and....” He paused for a moment, catching himself before revealing Robbie’s secret. “More to the situation of Moira and the man she loved.”

With her hands still on Niall’s shoulders, Catrina looked him in the eyes. “I know I should feel that way. And a part of me does. But I am ashamed to say that for most of the time, I get so frustrated at the outcome of their union. Moira is dead and Fergus has no mother or father. Moira swore the man she loved had actually married her. That they’d escaped to Gretna Green and Fergus was the result of their wedding night. She also once said the man promised to come back, though he never did. At least not for any significant time. I did catch Moira out and about some days. I think she went to meet her lover on those occasions, but she never cared to discuss it with me, and I never cared to push the matter. I surmised the man had business to tend to. That he wanted to make things right before telling anyone about their marriage. But whatever it was that had gone wrong in his life, Moira never revealed those details to me. Though she did say the man held their wedding license.”

So that explained it. Robbie was probably hoping to get justice for himself, to financially restore his own good name before telling anyone about Moira.

Jesus, but he should have kent long before the night Robbie died, what the lad had been up to. A good brother would have kent it all. He’d been so obsessed with fixing the family’s financial problem himself, he never reckoned his baby brother was attempting the same thing, only in a different way.

“The man could have been financially ruined,” Niall finally said. “And not by his own fault. Mayhap he wanted to clear his own name before having it attached to your sister’s reputation.”

Catrina frowned, a look that appeared to Niall as one born more out of sorrow than annoyance. “Moira hinted as much. But she never talked in depth about the situation. She was very loyal to her lover.”

The first thing he was going to do after getting back to Dundaire Abbey,

was go see that despicable Mr. Murray. The last of his father's destroyers must be confronted. "If yer sister said her lover...her husband...held their marriage license, then it must exist somewhere." He was going to search the Abbey from rooftop to cellar. That damn license had to be among Robbie's belongings. "Perhaps I can help ye sort out yer sister's situation."

"That's most generous of you, but it is not your problem."

"Did I nae say what goes on in Dundaire, is my problem?"

Cat smiled. "You are a gentleman, Niall MacHendrie. A true gentleman."

He wasnae certain Cat would continue to feel that way about him after she learned the secret he was keeping from her. Or after she learned what was going through his head, this verra moment, about what he wanted to do with her.

Niall placed his hand on Catrina's chin. He tilted her head upward. "Ye are the most beautiful lass I have ever laid eyes on."

"Looks do not last a lifetime."

"That may be true for the common woman, but ye are nae a common lass. Ye, Catrina Lennox, with yer good heart and enchanting beauty, have bewitched me. I will never see ye in any way but as ye are now."

Catrina blushed and then lowered her gaze.

Niall kissed her gently on the cheek, her skin smooth like silk beneath his lips.

A cold draft blasted the barn.

Catrina shivered. "I'm freezing." She leaned into him.

"Ye should have worn more than just yer shawl, lass."

"I know, but I did not intend to be out here long. I only came to return the pitchfork." She shivered a second time.

He wasnae going to be able to keep Catrina warm without getting close to her. Verra close. "How long do ye think it will take Mrs. Ramsay to wake up from her nap?"

"An hour. Maybe?"

His beguiling little minx would freeze to death by then. "I dunnae want ye to think I am taking liberties with ye, but I do believe if we huddle together, and share my coat, we might survive the hour."

Catrina didnae answer him. She simply brought her hands to his chest and placed her head on his shoulder. A trace of rose lifted from her beautiful red curls. "I cannot die," she said in barely a whisper. "Fergus has lost enough people in his life."

Niall's heart ached for his nephew. He and Catrina were all the lad had left in the world. "Dunnae fash about it, I willnae let ye die. Though I do believe we will fare better if we use the hay in the corner as a place to sit."

With a soft sigh, Catrina backed away. "This is turning out to be the most unusual Christmas I have ever had."

He gave up a slight chuckle as he led her by the hand to the pile of scattered hay on the other side of the barn. "'Tis the same here. Though I must admit, I am nae sorry about it being so."

"Nor am I. You've even made me start to think differently." She removed her shawl and unfolded it over the hay before sitting down.

"How so?"

"Maybe I need to focus more on raising Fergus and forgetting about chasing down *The Christmas Rebel*. What is important is that my nephew has a good, happy life. And I can provide that for him. I can't change the past, so why not let it go? At least some of it."

He wished he could be as forgiving with Murray as Catrina was being with Robbie. "In Fergus's case, I do believe ye are making a wise choice."

Without saying more, as he didnae trust himself to keep talking about the topic for fear of revealing something he shouldnae say just yet, Niall joined Catrina and then draped his coat over the two of them.

He prayed to God they'd stay warm enough to survive before Mrs. Ramsay came looking for them.

Chapter 8

Catrina snuggled as best as she could under Niall's coat while trying to remain the proper lady. But no matter how she moved, her hands, positioned as they were, either brushed against the man's strong chest or his hard cock. And her fingers itched to stroke both—unclothed.

She cursed under her breath.

Refocusing her thoughts would serve her well. Refocusing them quickly, even better. "Yesterday, I noticed your horse bears two different colored eyes," she said, struggling to pull her hand away from the front of Niall's breeches. "He's quite beautiful."

Her hand refused to budge.

Niall remained still. Either he was unaware of her wicked hand or he was enjoying her touch and craved more of it. Both of which did not help her cause a single bit.

"Aye, he is a beautiful beast," Niall said, his voice low and strained. "And a good horse, as well." He bucked slightly against Cat's palm.

Sweet Mother of God... If the man tempted her once again, she feared her fingers would act on their own volition.

"Have you had him long?" That damn horse was all that stood between her and sin. "I don't recall you riding a white stallion while in London."

"I didnae take Mischief to England, but he has been a part of the Abbey's team for quite some time."

Niall's answer didn't settle the question of him being or not being *The Christmas Rebel's* accomplice. And asking outright would do no good as the man was not the sort to implicate himself. He was too intelligent to do so.

Cold crept up her spine. "Mayhap if we are lucky, Fergus will wake early from his nap."

Niall smiled at her. He toyed with a strand of her hair, reaching out and coiling it about his forefinger. "Mayhap we are lucky just having this time to ourselves."

"Niall MacHendrie, you are a wicked man."

"I dunnae remember ye thinking me wicked when we were courting."

"Only because a proper lady would never voice such comments. In truth,

I thought you very wicked at the time.”

“And yet, ye didnae protest my behavior.”

She lowered her gaze. “Why would I have?”

“Och, lass. Didnae anyone ever teach ye nae to say such words to a man when he is this close to ye, alone from the prying eyes of others, and has done nae but think about ye for the past two years?”

Of course they had. But what fun would it be if she abided by all the rigid rules of propriety and morality? She’d done exactly that up until now and what did it all get her? Precisely nothing.

No. Catrina Lennox was done with being the proper lady. And to prove it to herself, she was about to be bolder than she’d ever been her whole life. “Did no one ever teach you to just accept a woman’s invitation rather than question it?”

“Ye dunnae ken what ye’ve just done, lass.” Freeing his hand of her hair, Niall reached for her face and gently stroked her cheek.

A thrill of pleasure snaked through Catrina’s veins. “Oh, I *ken* exactly what I’ve done.” She leaned forward, her heart racing. Parting her lips, she took the initiative and boldly kissed Niall.

The man did not resist. He opened for her, allowed her tongue into his mouth.

He tasted of warm butter and biscuits and something unique only to him.

Ambrosia.

The word floated through Cat’s mind as she envisioned Niall on an imaginary Mount Olympus, his long, brown hair free and blowing wild in the wind, his body draped with nothing but a thin, chiton.

There was no denying her want for Niall. With two years of suppressed emotions and longings now bubbling to the surface, remaining chaste was an option rendered impossible.

Cat moaned.

She closed the small gap between her and Niall, her hand mindlessly skimming the buttons on the fall of his breeches. The fine wool did little to conceal the length and hardness of his cock, and unlike the statues she’d spied in the museums, Niall was far larger than his stone counterparts.

Memories of their first indiscretion—in the London dining room of Niall’s townhouse where their actions were blessedly concealed by the thick cherry wood table—rushed to the forefront of her mind. Even back then, she did she not find the revelation of his size, off-putting. He fascinated her,

forced her scandalous instincts to toss aside propriety. The fact they were in the barn, with the threat of possibly being discovered, only added to the explosive heat in her. Exploring Niall from head to toe, without clothes became a craving Cat could barely resist.

She shamelessly undid the first button of his breeches.

Niall moaned. He slid his hand from her face to her neck, and then down over the swell of her right breast, undoing the lace fichu crossing her chest. A trail of heat followed his fingers.

Catrina's nipples puckered on the instant. She arched her breasts toward Niall's hand, craving more of his touch. Thank goodness she'd chosen to forgo her outer garments and dressed only in stays over her shift and skirts for today. Though she would have been warmer fully dressed, her work at home was easier done in less clothing.

Niall slid his hand around her back, reached for the fabric ties of her stays and began unlacing them.

Cat pulled back. "It would be easier if I turned around." She didn't bother waiting for his response, but based on Niall's quick action, on how his hands deftly worked the ties through the loops and undid her stays, it did not appear to bother him. Left only in her shift and skirts, she returned to face Niall once again.

He wrapped his arm around her waist. "I ken words are nae the same as actions, but I cannae resist ye, Catrina Lennox. I want more than just today with ye."

Her heart swelled. "Are you asking me to marry you? Again?"

"Aye."

The last time she'd accepted Niall's proposal, her world turned upside down. But all she had was herself now. Save for Fergus, of course, but he was too young to run off to Gretna Green and marry. Which meant now was all for her.

"Catrina?" Niall furrowed his brow.

"I will always be yours, Niall. Always." She resumed their kiss.

Niall dipped his hand lower, worked his fingers under the neckline of her shift until he'd had the garment pulled below Catrina's breasts.

Cold air kissed her skin. Her nipples now protruded to a full pucker, the taught buds so firm, they ached. But it was a delicious tease of pain that stalked her body. She wanted more of it. And not just at her breasts, but also at that sacred place between her legs. She wanted to feel Niall there, in her.

She wanted him to take her completely.

Shifting her hand slightly, Catrina undid the second button on Niall's breeches and pushed the fabric fall, down.

Niall's long, thick cock sprung forward. He leaned into her hand.

She glided her fingers over his jutting cock.

He deepened their kiss as he plucked her right nipple with a firm tug.

A shot of heat fanned through her body.

She whimpered. It was only a soft little sound, but it was all she could muster as her voice was somehow lost to the exquisite sensations strumming her nerves.

In a flurry of moves interspersed with kisses and strokes, Catrina soon found herself naked and under Niall, his coat somewhere off to the side along with the rest of their clothes.

While it was a chore just getting out of her skirt and hip pad, being naked with Niall was liberating. And a long time overdue as she'd often dreamt of this moment, wondered what would have happened between them if she hadn't the need to run off to Scotland to help Moira.

She spread her legs—the sole parts of her body to remain clothed, her stockings and blue silk garters still on—and welcomed Niall to settle between her thighs, her gaze raking his muscled form from head to toe. She'd thoroughly lost all sense of modesty, as not so much as a single bout of shyness struck her nerves. She was also fairly certain no respectable lady kept her eyes open at this point but after last night's kiss with Niall, it was foolish to even think she could hold on to such a virtue.

Cat greedily took in the sight before her.

Niall looked magnificent in his gloriously bare body. With a chest and abdomen of taut muscles, a set of muscular thighs, and a cock standing long and firm, he was more than she could have ever imagined. More than she could have ever desired. Reaching up, she wrapped her hand around the length of him.

Niall bit out a hiss. "Och, Lass..." He closed his eyes but only for a second. He then lowered his gaze and watched her as she worked her fingers over the vein that protruded along his cock before she brought her forefinger to its bulbous top. A drop of moisture greeted her skin.

Cat licked her lips.

Niall pushed her hand away. "Ye are too good, Catrina." Leaning forward he sought her left nipple and ran his tongue over the tip.

She sucked in a deep breath. She'd never been so glad for winter and for being trapped in a barn. She also had never imagined her coming to Dundaire would have led to this moment. Scotland was never supposed to be about her. It was all about Moira and then all about Fergus. Finding her own personal happiness was not something she'd thought about in a long time.

Niall locked his lips over her nipple.

She gasped. An exhilarating strum teased her senses, sent her nerves into a delightful spin.

The heady aroma of sandalwood danced between them.

Catrina took in a deep breath, savored the exquisite fragrance as its woody and sweet notes mixed with the scent of their lovemaking.

She ran her fingers through Niall's hair, the silk-like caress of the brown strands greeting her hands.

He latched tighter to the peak of her breast and sucked, hard.

She bucked against him.

In response to her move, Niall skimmed her waist with his right hand, then glided it over her hips and down the outer side of her thigh until he gently caressed her leg, moved his hand closer to that wicked area that now begged for his touch. He slid his hand through her curls. And then delved between her lips, parting her so that his fingers had easy access to both her nub and slit.

He drew one long stroke over her clit.

Cat lifted, slightly, her nub craving more.

Niall was quick to oblige, though this time he did so with more pressure and a faster stroke, repeating his actions until she dropped her hands to his shoulders and dug her fingers into his flesh.

She licked her lips.

Niall slid one finger into Cat's slit, then pulled out only to return to fill her with two fingers.

A small, but glorious spasm rocked Cat's core. "I want more, Niall. I want...you...inside me."

"I am inside ye."

She rolled her head against the straw. "No. I want more than merely your fingers in me."

"Say precisely what ye want, Catrina. I need to hear ye say what part of me ye want inside ye."

Cat dropped one hand from Niall's shoulder and went straight for his

jutting rod. Wrapping her fingers around his thick girth, she stared him square in the eyes. "I want your cock in me, Niall." She guided him to her entrance.

"God, lass, ye are as wanton a creature now as ye were two years past."

She was. But only because of Niall. Because of what they had back then between them. His sinful words woke a deep part of her, and she'd forced that side of herself away since she'd left London.

Without another word said between them, Niall gently pushed Catrina's hand off his cock and then slid his tip inside her but refrained from fully entering her.

"Oh, do not tease, now, you rogue."

A grin crossed Niall's lips. "So I am a rogue as well as wicked."

"Yes. Very much so."

"Well, I dunnae reckon rogues behave verra properly."

She slapped him softly on the arm. "If *ye dunnae* take me now, *yer* lairdship, *ye* will end up a *verra* lonely man."

"Ye ken I cannae deny ye when ye speak like a Scot."

She smirked. "I *ken* the fact *verra* well."

"And ye say *I* am the wicked one." Niall did not wait for Cat to respond. He slid into her, first with a slow move, then withdrew and came back with at a far rougher thrust.

"Oh, yes, Niall. That is exactly what ye should keep doing."

And he did.

With each of Niall's thrusts, the bits of straw under Cat's back, poked at her spine, but with the pressure mounting between her legs, she barely felt the abrasive bedding.

The slap of skin against skin echoed across the barn as Niall picked up his pace.

Cat met each of his thrusts with eagerness until warmth spread through her body. She clutched his cock with her feminine walls, a wonderful spasm rocking her insides.

Niall continued with his fast rhythm. Sweat glistened on his muscled body. "Catrina." He cried out, gave one last thrust, his seed spewing into her. With his breath coming in short pants, Niall collapsed on top of Cat.

She ran her fingers over the back of his shoulders and then down his spine.

Niall turned his face toward her neck. "Please tell me ye will never leave

me, Cat. Not now. Not after this.”

“I have no intention of ever walking out on you again, Niall.”

“Good. Because I love ye, Catrina Lennox. I love ye with all my heart.”

“I love you, too, Niall MacHendrie. With all my heart.” And she did. Always had. “But I think we need to dress because if Mrs. Ramsay finds us like this, she’ll take that damn pitchfork of hers and poke us both.”

A soft laugh fell from Niall’s lips.

In haste, they dressed, her body still tingling from their love making.

Chapter 9

Mrs. Ramsay tugged open the barn door within minutes of Catrina and Niall dressing. Cat was never so glad to be wearing her stays, though the garment was a bit uncomfortable since Niall did not lace it up properly. The man needed serious lessons in more than just a managing bairn's clouts. But at least she was fully dress.

Mrs. Ramsay quirked one, copper-colored eyebrow. "Ye been stuck in her all this time?"

"Yes," Cat said without further explanation.

"And ye didnae shout for me once?"

"Of course we shouted for you." Cat fidgeted with her fichu, the lace ends sticking out half-hazard from her shawl. She did not care to think what impression she was making on Mrs. Ramsay at the moment.

"I didnae hear ye calling for me," the cook said, a look of bewilderment veiling her round face.

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Ramsay. I know you tend to fall into a deep sleep when you nap."

The cook shook her head. "No, Miss. I wasnae sleeping. I couldnae get comfortable so after I checked on Fergus, I returned to the kitchen. I would have heard ye if ye called for me."

Of all the times for Mrs. Ramsay to skip her nap, it had to be today. "Well..."

"The wind was quite strong," Niall interjected. "Ye probably didnae hear us because of it."

"I suppose." Mrs. Ramsay pursed her lips.

"Well, I think we should go back to the house, now." Cat headed for the door, not trusting herself to keep what she and Niall had done in the barn, strictly between them. Her trusted cook had a way with getting details out of her.

Mrs. Ramsay caught up with her while Niall returned to working on the barn door. "I reckon he was worth it, eh?"

"Excuse me?"

"I kent ye kissed him last night. Do ye reckon I wouldnae be able to tell if

he tupp'd ye?"

"Mrs. Ramsay!"

"Aw, lass, dunnae play the innocent with me. I ken what ye two were doing in the barn. Why do ye think I stayed away as long as I did?"

Cat stopped mid-stride; her feet suddenly planted firmly in the snow. "We could have died of the cold. I cannot believe you left us out here."

"Ha! As if a man like Niall MacHendrie cannae keep a woman warm." Mrs. Ramsey chuckled as she reached for Catrina's arm and gently patted her. "Thank ye for that laugh, Miss. Ye made my day." She continued to the house, a chuckle still falling from her lips.

Niall appeared at Cat's side. "The door needs more wood than I thought. At first, I reckoned ye had enough with what was in the barn, but ye dunnae have it all. I'll have to get more wood from the Abbey's supply and come back to repair it."

The door was the least of her concern at the moment.

"Cat?"

"What?"

"I was speaking to ye about the door."

"Oh. Yes. It can wait. I truly appreciate you taking the time to fix it for me."

He gave her a puzzled look. "Is something wrong?"

"No."

"Then why are ye nae listening to me?"

Because it was Christmas Day and everything in her world was going right for a change. And right never seemed to fit in her life before. "It's Christmas. We're about to have a lovely dinner of goose and pudding. And I have the best company in you and Mrs. Ramsay and Little Fergus. I do not care to think of anything else today."

"I am glad ye feel that way, lass. As I am looking forward to spending the rest of the day with ye. But I must head back to the Abbey after supper, now that the storm has ended."

She did not want to let him go. "I thought you'd stay until at least tomorrow."

"I wish I could. But alas, I have to set some things right back at the house. However, I will return as I would truly love for ye and Mrs. Ramsay, and Fergus, to come live at Dundaire Abbey."

"Before we are to marry?"

“I see no reason why ye should remain here. The Abbey will give Fergus plenty of room to crawl.”

She could only imagine the trouble her nephew could get into once he started to walk. “I would love to stay at the Abbey. But I will need a few days to take care of a few things, myself.”

Niall dropped his gaze to the ground. “I hope ye dunnae think this hasty of me or improper. But I also see no reason for us to wait to marry. I have some business to tend to first, but after that, I would be a verra happy man if we married without delay.”

Cat loved that Niall wanted her in his life so dearly. “Of course.”

He reached for her hand and led her back to the cottage.

The aroma of cooked goose and plum pudding filled the hallway.

Mrs. Ramsay emerged from the kitchen, her fingers fidgeting with the ties of a new, clean apron. “Supper is served, Miss. I’ll go fetch Little Fergus.”

“Allow me, Mrs. Ramsay,” Niall said. “Ye go set yourself in a seat at the table.”

“Why, Mr. MacHendrie, ye are more than a gentleman than I originally reckoned.” She turned back toward the kitchen.

Niall glanced at Cat. “Ye dunnae mind, do ye?”

“Fergus slept the quietest last night. I think he likes you. So, no I do not mind you bringing him down for supper. But please, if he needs a new clout and pilcher, just bring a set down with you and I’ll change him.”

Niall smirked. “So ye dunnae fancy how I change the bairn, do ye?”

“You tried.” She rested her hand on his arm. “And that is all that matters. You gave it your best.”

He leaned close to her. “And did I give it my best in the barn?” Niall whispered.

Cat felt her cheeks flush as they heated almost instantly. “Nae. You gave it more than your best. Though I should warn you, I am going to demand nothing less from here out.”

“Och, woman. Ye will have me in my grave before we marry if I am to keep up with that performance.”

She gently pushed him away. “I highly doubt that, my laird.”

Niall turned and took the stairs two at a time.

She watched him until he vanished from her sight as he turned the upper hall’s corner.

Life had never been so good to her.

Chapter 10

With Fergus in his arms, Niall stepped lightly as he made his way down the hall to Catrina's bedroom. "Is this your Aunt Cat's room?" he asked the gurgling bairn.

He popped his head inside the open doorway. "It looks as if it is, lad." Venturing to the bed, a whiff of rose scent floated his way. To think soon he'd have that exquisite scent marking his library, his dining room, the Abbey's parlor and every other inch of his house. Especially his bedroom.

After today, he was going to do everything in his power to be the best person in Catrina's life. The best husband, the best lover, the best friend. She deserved that and so much more. And he had every intention of giving her everything that was his. As soon as he set things straight with that bloody beast, Murray. He didnae want to have the man hold a single thing over his head. He may have been able to force his father to give up most of what he had, but never was Niall going to put Cat through what his own mother suffered.

He leaned over the bed and dropped the small pouch he'd been carrying in his free hand, on the pillow.

Fergus squealed.

"Ah, ye like that do ye?" He picked up the pouch and dropped it once again. "I reckon ye think it's as nifty as that bear ye love to toss around."

Fergus gurgled.

"Well, this is nae a bear, lad, But a verra expensive and exquisite necklace for yer aunt. It belonged to yer grandmother, though she never had the chance to wear it. It will look beautiful around Cat's neck. But ye mustn't say a word about it, as I want Cat to find it before she goes to sleep tonight."

Fergus mumbled several sounds Niall had no clue how to decipher. But he smiled at the bairn just the same, delighted to be spending Christmas with the boy. "Yer da would have loved ye greatly. I can assure of that."

Niall walked out of the bedroom and back down the hall to the stairs. "Ye have his hair and his eyes. One day soon, I'll show ye a portrait of him."

He entered the kitchen and handed Fergus to Catrina.

"You two were quite engrossed in talk, I see," Cat said with a smile.

“Man talk, that is. So dunnae question the lad as we have agreed to keep it strictly between us.”

Mrs. Ramsay harrumphed. “Already causing trouble for the wee bairn and ye have only been here one day.”

“Mrs. Ramsay,” Cat said, “It’s Christmas.”

“Och, lass. I’ll let it go.” The cook eyed Niall. “But dunnae be getting it into yer thick skull that ye can make a rogue out of our Little Fergus. The bairn will be a gentleman when he grows up.”

He loved how Mrs. Ramsay was so protective of Cat and Fergus. Even without needing another cook, he knew the three of them would fit in just fine at Dundaire Abbey.



* * *

Dinner was a delightful event with many laughs and an abundance of good cheer. Niall even spent time playing with Fergus, keeping the bairn occupied while Cat cleaned up the kitchen and Mrs. Ramsay read by the hearth. Though it was not easy convincing Mrs. Ramsay to take a few hours to herself. But she’d insisted on giving the cook the rest of the night off as Mrs. Ramsay never failed to do all she could for her and Little Fergus.

And now Rose Cottage was quiet.

Niall was in bed.

Fergus was in his crib with a properly fastened clout and pilcher.

And Mrs. Ramsay remained downstairs in the kitchen, rereading the newsheet from last week.

Cat approached the bed and immediately went for the small velvet pouch on her pillow. She hadn’t a clue what could be inside, but the faint trace of sandalwood that lifted from the fabric assuredly belonged to Niall.

He’d given her a gift.

And he’d done so in secret.

A flurry of excitement had Cat’s nerves on end. But in a good way.

She sat down on the bed and quickly untied the bag’s silk cord and rolled the edge of the pouch down.

Inside the bag, the fine cut of an emerald-shaped ruby sparkling in the room's flickering candlelight, caught her eye.

Cat withdrew the jewels.

And gasped, the sight of Mrs. Murray's ruby and pearl necklace shocking her to the core.

She dropped the jewels back into the bag and bolted from the bed.

How could Niall have done this to her? He knew how she felt about *The Christmas Rebel*, about how the man was the cause of Moira's death. And now he gives her a necklace *The Rebel* stole himself? Her initial instinct that Niall was the infamous highwayman's accomplice was right.

Damn me.

Cat dashed from the room, her heart racing like that of a wild, charging beast's. She fled down the stairs and into the kitchen, tears falling from her eyes.

"What is it, lass?" Mrs. Ramsay asked from her seat by the hearth. She rose from the chair.

"It's him." It was all Cat managed to say in between sobs.

"It is who, Miss?"

She tossed the pouch of pearls on the table and shook the gems free. "*The Christmas Rebel.*"

Mrs. Ramsay glanced at the necklace. "Forgive me, Miss, but I am nae following yer meaning."

Cat pointed to the pearls. "That is Mrs. Murray's ruby and pearl necklace. The one *The Christmas Rebel* stole from her last year. Niall left it on my pillow tonight. As a gift."

Mrs. Ramsay leaned in and plucked the necklace from the table. "Och, lass. Are ye certain about this?"

Cat nodded. "Yes. Mrs. Murray showed it to me one day when I went to pick up the shawl that I mended for her. There is no mistaking it. That necklace is the one *The Rebel* stole."

"But, Miss. I cannae believe that his lairdship is the same soul as *The Christmas Rebel*. Why would a man of his wealth and prominence, take to being a highwayman? It makes no sense. Even to my nae-so-sensible head."

"I know it doesn't. But it is the truth."

Wind blew against the window.

Cat jumped.

Mrs. Ramsay returned the necklace to the table, and then softly rubbed

her hand over Catrina's arm. "Dunnae fash about it, Miss. We will get to the bottom of this first thing in the morning." She stepped away and fetched the tea kettle. "Now have yerself a seat and I'll put on some tea for ye."

"No. I have to take care of this now."

"But ye will wake the bairn."

She was not going to fetch Niall. "I'm going to the Murray house."

"At this late hour?"

"I must."

Mrs. Ramsay followed Cat into the hall. "But how will ye see in the dark? Surely the roads are like ice now, with the sun gone down."

"I have ridden Sprite several times at night. Even in winter. Besides, the Murrays do not live far off." She grabbed her coat and the breeches she hung next to it. "Help me out of my skirts, please."

Mrs. Ramsay did as she was asked. "I wish ye would wait 'til morning, lass. What if there is a good reason for Mr. MacHendrie having the pearls?"

She couldn't take the chance that Niall would attempt to cover up his sinful deeds. He was either *The Rebel* himself, or the bastard's accomplice. There was no other answer. "For Moira's sake, I can't take the chance of losing this one opportunity to get justice for her. Mr. Murray is a powerful man. And despite Niall being the laird, it does not excuse him of committing a crime."

She was out of one outfit and into another before Mrs. Ramsay handed her the pair of worn boots she used for stalking the roads in her search for Dundaire's highwayman. Once Cat was fully dressed, she slipped on her coat. "I'll be back by morning. Whatever you do, please do not let Niall leave. Mr. Murray will see to it that his men take custody of the bastard."

With a frown, Mrs. Ramsay nodded. "I think ye are making a mistake, Miss."

"If I'm wrong, then so be it. But I cannot take a chance with getting justice for Moira." And with those words, Cat was out the door and off to the stables to saddle up Sprite.

Chapter 11

At the first light of dawn, Niall was in the kitchen looking for Catrina. All he found was Mrs. Ramsay and a bare table. “Good morning.” He pulled out one of the wood chairs and sat.

“I have nae made breakfast this morning. Nae even tea.”

Something was wrong. “Where is Catrina?”

“She’s left. And I dunnae advise ye to go looking for her.”

Oh, God, not again. “What do mean she’s left?”

“Ye should have told her ye were *The Christmas Rebel* before ye took advantage of the lass in the barn yesterday.”

“I assure ye, Mrs. Ramsay, I am nae *The Rebel*.” He didnae address what they’d done in the barn, as that was not a topic he was about to discuss with Catrina’s cook.

“Then what were ye doing giving Miss Lennox, Mrs. Murray’s stolen necklace?”

“Come again?”

“The lass saw them on Mrs. Murray. The woman was wearing them the day Cat went to fetch a shawl she was to mend for her. Catrina often took in simple mending for the gentry. It is in part, how the lass keeps food on this table.” She knocked the wood surface in front of her.

Christ. He had no idea Catrina knew about the ruby and pearl necklace. “The necklace isnae Mrs. Murray’s.” Niall’s words came out clipped.

“Are ye telling me there were two of the same made?”

“No.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a deep breath. “I have some explaining to do.”

Mrs. Ramsay glared at him. “Verra well. Sit yer sorry arse down and I’ll put on the kettle. But breathe one lie and it willnae be Mr. Murray ye’ll have to face, but the end of my pitchfork.”

He did as was requested as Mrs. Ramsay looked to be in a mood that would indeed see him facing the prongs of that damn pitchfork. “Mr. Murray was once my father’s business partner. One of several partners, in fact. When things went wrong, they blamed my da. But in truth it was Murray who gambled away their shipping company’s monies. And I have proof of it.

Though my da didnae. He was forced to take the blame himself as well as bail out Murray. But it didnae end there. The bastard continued to ask for more money, even went so far as blackmailing my father. Or more precisely, my mother. My da had no choice at the time but to give Murray the necklace as one of the payments for the man keeping quiet about the blackmail situation. There are other details, but that is the sum of the story.”

Mrs. Ramsay placed a teacup on the table. “And how did ye come by the necklace if it was already in Murray’s possession?”

He hated to betray Robbie, but at the moment, Niall didnae see a way to remain loyal to his brother. “My brother, Robbie, stole all the items that Murray and his henchmen stole from others. On his deathbed, he asked me to promise him that I return all the goods to their rightful owners, and only after I’d done that, was I to also take what was left of his inheritance and bring it to Rose Cottage. Though Robbie never had the chance to tell me why he wanted his inheritance left here, as he died in my arms before finishing our conversation.”

With all color drained from her face, Mrs. Ramsay fell to her chair. “Dear Lord.” She blessed herself. “Yer brother was Moira’s love. Fergus’s father.”

“Aye. He was *The Christmas Rebel*.”

“Now it all makes sense to me. Why Moira remained true to yer brother. He was, as he had told her, coming back to her once he settled certain matters.”

“Aye. Robbie thought he could restore our family’s name on his own. Though he never told me what he was up to, until the night he died.” Niall stood and pushed back his chair. He went and fetched a kitchen cloth and pulled the tea kettle off the hook in the hearth. “I suspect Robbie didnae want Moira to go through the same grief our mother had suffered. It is the same reason I have said nothing to Catrina yet. As it was my plan to confront Murray after the season.” He poured Mrs. Ramsay a cup of tea.

“Ye are a good man, Mr. MacHendrie. Stubborn, but good.”

He put the kettle back on the hook. “Where did Catrina go?”

“Och, Jesus.” Mrs. Ramsay was out of her chair so fast, she nearly dropped her teacup. “She rode out to Mr. Murray’s house.”

God, but he had to stop her. He had to settle the matter with Murray before the man went and did more damage to the MacHendrie name. “I’ll be back,” Niall said, dashing into the hall.

He didnae have to go far as the side door slammed open, Murray charging

through, a rifle pointed straight at him.



* * *

He was nae going to let the man kill him. Nae now, nae when he had his life almost back. “Before ye think to shoot me, Murray, ken this, I have the proof about yer sins that my father could never find.”

“I dunnae believe ye, Mac Hendrie,” Murray said, the rifle still aimed in Niall’s direction.

Cat remained behind Murray, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Niall. I had no idea...”

“Dunnae fash yerself, lass. This is nae yer fault. I should have told ye everything the moment we were reunited.” He started toward the door.

Murray jutted his left arm out, blocking Niall’s way. “She’s mine.”

“Ye willnae take anything else from me, ye bastard.”

“Yer mother would never have betrayed me.” Murray glared at Niall.

“But she did,” Niall said. “On her deathbed she confessed to me, and to Edgar and his wife, Grace. As well as to Lord Lycansay.”

“She confessed our indiscretion? Even to Lycansay?”

He kent that would get the bastard. Lord Lycansay never said a word to anyone, as he kent Niall wanted to discuss the matter with Robbie first. But now there was no reason to keep things secret anymore. “Aye. She insisted on trusted witnesses. And since Lycansay is a distant cousin, she kent the man would keep Robbie’s true lineage a secret until he had time to discuss it with the lad.”

He stepped forward. “And do ye ken the worst of it? Ye killed yer own son. As Robbie was *The Christmas Rebel*. He was merely taking back that which belonged to Mother all along.”

“Oh, God.” Murray’s face went white as snow.

Niall grabbed Murray’s rifle. And then he punched the man square in the jaw, forced him to fall to his knees. “I will see ye hang for my brother’s death.”

“And my sister’s,” Cat said, her hands fisted at her hips.

A coach pulled into the yard.

Through the open door Niall watched Edgar and Lord Lycansay, along with the authorities, exit the carriage.

“Yer time is up, Murray.” Niall pulled Murray to his feet and turned him over to Lord Lycansay.

Catrina ran to him. “I’m so sorry, Niall. I truly had no idea. I thought...”

“Shhh... ‘Tis all right, lass. ‘Tis all right.” He held her tight. “I love ye, lass,” he whispered. “Always have and always will.”

Epilogue

*Dundaire Abbey
Early summer, 1777*

With her belly swollen due to her carrying Niall's child, Catrina waddled onto the terrace and attempted to sit herself down at the table. She wasn't having much luck.

On the other side of the short stone wall lining the terrace, she spied Niall pulling Fergus in a small cart. Her nephew squealed, as usual.

Niall glanced up. He immediately stopped to retrieve Fergus from the cart and ran up the steps leading to the terrace, where he handed the boy over to Mrs. Ramsay who was only now emerging from the Abbey.

Niall dashed to Cat's side and pulled her chair back further giving her the access she needed to easily sit. "I wish ye wouldnae come outside anymore, lass."

"I am tired of staying in bed."

"But the bairn will be here soon."

"Yes, and he or she will be quite fine. Even better if I get some sun and some fresh air."

"She's right," Mrs. Ramsay chimed in. "Ye cannae keep Mrs. MacHendrie boxed in like a fragile china doll." She tsked, then sat Fergus in his highchair.

Niall remained at Cat's side. He unfurled her napkin and placed it on her lap.

She stretched for the teapot, but her hand didn't make it that far as Niall plucked the pot and poured her a cup of tea before she had the chance to do so herself. "I *am* capable of doing things on my own, you know."

"And if ye spilled the tea? Then what?"

She removed her napkin from her lap and placed it back on the table. "Enough, Niall. The bairn will be fine. I will be fine. No wonder Robbie ran off with Moira. I have half a mind to do the same at the moment."

Edgar rounded the table. "Please let me ken when ye are leaving, Mam. Me Grace and I would like to accompany ye." He glanced at Niall. "And it

matters not where ye are going.” He pulled the chair out next to Cat and nudged his head for Niall to sit.

Catrina stifled a laugh.

“Ye reckon this is funny, wife?”

“I do. *Verra* much so, *yer* lairdship.”

“Speaking like a Scot now, will get ye nowhere Sassenach.” Niall huffed.

Edgar continued to glare.

“Oh, all right.” Niall flopped in the seat. “Are ye all happy now? Am I far enough away from the Lady of Dundaire for all of yer approvals?”

Edgar shrugged.

Mrs. Ramsay merely rolled her eyes.

Cat reached for his arm. “It’s a start, dear. A small one, but a start just the same.”

Niall leaned forward. “Just remember, lass, there was a time when ye welcomed me being near ye. *Verra*, *verra* near ye. In fact, I remember ye even leading me precisely to where ye wanted me to be.”

Her face flushed. “Niall! You are wicked.”

“Och, lass. Ye kent that about me before ye wed me.”

So she had. “Even wicked, ye are the Scot most wanted by my heart.”

Niall winked at her.

Edgar’s wife, Grace, came out to the terrace and placed a cold raspberry tart on the table. She turned to Cat. “Wait ‘til ye taste the pear tart, Mam. I make it every Christmas Day.”

“I am sure it is a delight,” Catrina said, then looked over to Mrs. Ramsay who was staring at the raspberry tart almost as if she wanted a slice, but didn’t dare request one for fear of giving Grace the upper hand. “As is your plum pudding, Mrs. Ramsay.”

Her trusted cook beamed. “Perhaps this Christmas we will have two desserts on the table?”

Grace remained silent.

Edgar clipped her with his elbow as he served Cat a slice of raspberry tart.

“That would be a delight,” Grace finally said smiling at Mrs. Ramsay.

Niall leaned forward and dragged a teacup off the silver tray in the center of the table. “By the way, my little Sassenach witch,” he said to Cat.

“I am not so sure I am little at the moment.”

“Ye will always be little to me. But please, let me finish as I have some

verra good news to share with ye.”

“Go on.” She brushed a crumb of peach tart from her gown’s blue skirt.

“Edgar and I found Robbie and Moira’s wedding license this morning. It was in a trunk my brother kept under his desk.”

“So he and Moira were indeed married!” Cat had never been so glad in all her life. “Then that would make Fergus a legitimate MacHendrie. According to the law, at least.”

“Aye,” Niall answered, a genuine look of happiness on his face.

“Do you think Murray will be a problem?”

“No. For the man to acknowledge that Robbie was his, he’d have to also acknowledge the crime he’d committed against my mother. She never told anyone what he’d done to her, how he’d forced himself on her one night in the dark hallway of his own manor during a winter ball, until the man blackmailed my father saying he and my mother had had an affair. It wasnae true. He did the unspeakable to her, and she never wanted Robbie to carry that burden. On her deathbed she officially told us everything. And my father never looked at Robbie as anyone but his own son. And he’d kent for a long time what Murray had done. Lycansay will remain true as well, unless Fergus ever cares to ken the truth.”

“The secrets we all have,” Cat said.

“Aye. And in this house, there are many.”

A low vibration shook the ground.

“Did you feel that?” Cat quirked an eyebrow.

Niall smiled at her. “Some say the houses of Dundaire are living, breathing structures.”

“Surely that’s a myth.”

Niall shrugged. “If there is any truth to it, I reckon Dundaire Abbey would say its family is nae a perfect one, but a loving one.”

And she’d agree with that, wholeheartedly.

With a smile gracing her lips, Catrina leaned back and enjoyed watching her husband, Little Fergus and Mrs. Ramsay. She may have lost Moira and would never get over of the pain of her sister’s death, but she had a happy family once again. And for that, Cat was grateful.

About Angelique Armae

USA TODAY best-selling author Angelique Armae has published over forty novels and novellas. She is a native New Yorker who, thanks to amazing ancestors, is half Italian, can trace her Irish roots back to the Scottish Highlands, and has a whole plethora of other ethnicities in her. She loves all things royal and is owned by a long-haired Tuxedo feline. As a child her favorite toy was Emerald the Witch, a small doll with green eyes, green hair and purple skin. She spends most days writing, unless her cat deems otherwise.

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Secretly Marvellous

by Virginia Taylor



Chapter 1

Lady Mary Thornton stared blindly at the uneven stone floor of her local church as she trailed out into the vestibule. The hollow sound of her footsteps emphasized the emptiness in her chest. Her shoulders sagging and her heart heavy, she made her way outside. Her only ambition to date had been to marry and have children. Seeking this end, she had been a dutiful daughter, kept herself neat and tidy, learned how to run a household, and worked for charitable causes.

The outer edges of her mouth lifted cynically with the knowledge that she had been wasting her time.

The rectory gate closed behind her with a protesting squeak. Being a Thornton, she couldn't let down the side. If she happened to see anyone, she would appear to be her usual bland self. She knew she had no looks to speak of, and no talents other than reading music notes correctly, and being able to sing in tune. In her spare time, she had helped the village children, who had recently begun rehearsing Christmas carols for the coming season, by playing the piano two days a week in the rectory.

She began to shuffle along, focusing on the ground beneath her sturdy walking shoes, now understanding how cleverly used she had been.

Although disillusionment sat heavily on her shoulders, she stopped for a moment and blew her nose. After hauling in another deep breath, she trudged past a line of bare winter trees. With no other choice than to make the best of her situation, she began to form a plan to persuade her brother, Lord Eden Thornton, to take her back to London with her older sister. Eden and his wife, Della, planned to return next week in the never-ending quest to marry off Lady Lucy.

Eden had been trying to marry off Mary's sister for the past two years, but with no success. She had refused her first two offers. According to Mama, the season had worn out Lucy, who had been brought back two days ago to be nurtured at home. With little else to do, Lucy had been refurbishing her London gowns. As well as her ability to sew a fine seam, Lucy took the opportunity to show off her other talents, namely answering questions put to Mary, and laughing at Mary's attempts to have her own opinions.

Her eyes still a little watery, Mary heaved a shaky breath, and decided to take the quick way home rather than trailing through the soggy fields where she would be tempted to mire herself in the mistakes she had made in her life.

In the normal run of things, Mary would have made her debut at eighteen, but with her prettier sister still dithering, twenty year-old Mary would not be making her debut next season either. Until today, she hadn't particularly minded, for she disliked idle chitchat and talking about other people. She honestly enjoyed organizing the household for Mama who depended on Mary for keeping the house running smoothly.

With the cool air blowing on her face, she began to walk toward the wide main road between the rectory and her brother's house, her pace slowing into a shuffle as she reached the harder packed soil.

She had barely straightened her shoulders and wiped beneath her wet chin when the air began to vibrate with the thundering of horses' hooves. She stopped, turned, and stepped back onto the grassy verge. A high perch phaeton pulled by two glossy chestnuts raced quickly toward her. The driver looked mountainous, his many-caped overcoat flapping in the breeze. His tall hat sat angled low in his brow and his face was half-covered by a brown woolen scarf. He didn't spare her a glance. Normally, on a country road, a driver would tip his hat as he sighted a walker, but this one was in too much of a hurry.

She stepped back to watch him pass. As he drew closer, the wheels of his carriage began to tip the verge. Wary now, she took another step back and tripped over, landing on her behind into a cold puddle. She sat, eyes closed with defeat, enveloped in wet clay and muddy water, watching the back end of a clinging groom disappear into the distance. The worst day of her life now topped by being cold and wet, she slowly rose to her feet. Dazed for a moment, she stared down at her waterlogged gown. After gulping back more stupid tears, she wrung out her skirts, rearranged her hat, and began to march home.

She reached the end of the long, curved driveway leading to her brother's manor house, and noted the mud-splashed phaeton. Before she could find an iron bar to beat one of the wheels to death, the front door opened, framing the butler, Franning. He stood, waiting for her. She crossed the threshold while he removed her wet coat and hat with two fingers. Although he caught her furious gaze, he wisely didn't say a word. At least he had sense enough not to make matters worse.

Trailing water, she passed a footman on the landing of the stairs. He murmured needlessly, "My lord has a visitor." He glanced downward at the muddy hem of her gown.

Her shoulders lifted with the deepest breath she could manage. She absolutely did not want to meet Eden's churlish caller. She would much prefer to have a hysterical fit and lock herself in her bedroom. Since she rarely lost her temper, she had no idea where to start, or even who would either notice or care. Entering her bedroom in the main wing, she wished she had one of those horrible brothers that other people seemed to have, one who didn't continually invite friends to stay and make use of his hospitality. Unfortunately, people loved being with Eden, because he knew how to make money, and every stinking person in the whole wide world wanted more money. She kicked her wet shoes into the corner.

Although, like everyone else in the world, she loved Eden, who had been described as a golden god, she wanted to live in home of her own with a husband and children. Despite the fact that he was rich, her dowry would not come from his estate, but from her mother's small inheritance from Mary's wastrel father, which meant she had the tiniest pittance in the world. Without marriage, she would be a burden, or one of those useful aunts who took care of everyone's children.

She tossed her hat onto her bed. She left her coat on the floor. Her eyes moistened again. Flinging herself onto her bed in her damp gown, she added enough angry tears to drown her sorrows.

When she had finished, she blotted her face and rang for a maid, who brought her a cup of hot milk. Slightly revived after finishing the drink, she chose a muddy green gown to wear. In the village shop, she had liked the color of the fabric, which she thought matched the color of her eyes. Lucy had described the color of her eyes as 'sooty blue' but Lucy had been in a good mood that day. Colors didn't particularly interest Mary, who didn't mind what she wore, as long as she was adequately covered.

Some years ago, Della, who had an eye for colors, had helped her buy suitable gowns to wear, but Della's concentration span resembled that of a hen once the grain had been consumed. Mary now left to choose her own, went back to buying any old color that would hide her behind the veil of anonymity.

Grabbing up a shawl whose pattern included muddy green as well as blue, she wandered down the hall, reluctantly heading for the drawing room,

knowing she had to greet Eden's churlish guest.

The footman opened the doors to the low hum of conversation. Della, Lucy, and Mama sat grouped around a central figure, an elegantly dressed gentleman with magnificent shoulders and one of those brushed forward, fashionable hairstyles. Her heartbeat sped up and her cold cheeks flushed. She stood, frozen to the spot.

When he noticed her, he stood, a polite, questioning smile on his face. Clearly he didn't remember her. The humiliation cut deeply.

Eden also rose to his feet. "Ah, the youngest member of my family. Mary, I'm sure you remember my friend from Oxford days, the highly travelled earl of Westerham?"

As one Della, Lucy, and Mama turned to stare at her, while the earl of Westerham strolled toward her. Her mouth dry, she took a step back. In looks, Eden had no competition, but this man, with his even features, and his air of confidence, would confuse anyone into thinking he was an extremely handsome man. He wore a brightly patterned waistcoat in green and gold with a jacket that had been tailored by a master to cling to his wide shoulder and emphasize his narrow waist. Before she had time to take a deep breath, he carefully lifted her hand, and bent over as if he meant to kiss her knuckles. He missed, but only because she tugged her stiff fingers out of his grip.

"I'm sure we must have met before, Lady Mary," he said without a glimmer of recognition on his face as he arose to his full height, more than six feet tall. He would be at least thirty now, Eden's age.

So, he was sure, was he? Clearly he hadn't remembered her. Since he didn't, she decided she wouldn't remember him, either. "I doubt that." Mary's lips curved with what she hoped was polite disbelief. Handsome or wealthy, insincere men used polite words as a mere formality, and not a true statement of fact.

Normally, she didn't mind polite insincerities, but had met the earl before he was an earl, while Eden was at Oxford. She'd been so impressed by all his charming friends that she lumped them into a group she silently named 'The Incredibles.' Although she would never believe any teasing word that came from their lips, handsome males always made a huge impression her, being so plain herself. Individually, they were each in their own way highly attractive, and none of them would ever be likely to say the same about her. Mainly they discussed their tutors, gambling, horse racing, and another subject spoken in lowered tones. She assumed this modicum of discretion

was used when they talked about their female friends.

“I’m sorry for being late, but I had to change my gown.” She aimed an accusing stare at the thoughtless earl, who narrowed his eyes and stared back at her.

Her mother appeared astonished, as well she should. Mary rarely bothered changing her gown for visitors. “You didn’t need to do that, dear.” With a smile, she motioned Mary to sit beside her on the large couch, even going to the extent of moving a cushion.

“I had no choice,” Mary said in a loud voice, for once in her life trying not to be overlooked. “I took the main road home and a phaeton passed so close to me that I fell into a muddy puddle.” She shot a narrow-eyed glare at Lord Westerham.

He rubbed the back of his neck and lifted his eyebrows, staring down at her in a silent admonishment. But not a single word of apology came from him. Apparently he agreed with the common opinion—that her complaints were not worth acknowledging.

She glowered at him, knowing full well that he had been the driver of the phaeton. Not that she had proof, but she didn’t need to be a genius to recognize that the phaeton outside was the same one that had passed her on the road. “My best walking gown is now ruined,” she said in more definite voice.

Westerham’s eyebrows lifted. “Do you normally walk alone along a main road?” he asked her in an autocratic voice. “Perhaps the driver didn’t notice you, not being accustomed to seeing ladies unaccompanied.”

“Mary!” her mother said in a cross voice. “You know you should take the hills’ path. It’s much safer.”

Her day had been bad enough without being downgraded into the servant-class by Westerham and chastised by her mother. She had the urge to saunter insolently out of the room. Instead, she dropped her gaze and sighed, not about to leave the scene of the crime. Her awkward presence would discomfort the earl far more than a quick retreat.

She sat in her designated place, and accepted her designated role as the dull sister who would leave the other to shine. Lucy did her best, because she had been angling for Westerham for the past two years, but even she couldn’t compete with Eden’s insights, which the earl clearly found fascinating. Strangely enough, although he was polite to everyone, he didn’t single out Lucy.

During the conversation, he mentioned that he accepted Eden's offer to have him stay for a few days, his excuse being that he would like to see Eden's method of planting the fields, 'if it wasn't too much trouble.' Since Eden loved educating anyone, his handsome face expressed his pleasure.

Dinner that night would be full of interesting conversations if the two began discussing Eden's theories, rather than weddings and funerals, which were the usual topics in this household full of women.

Chapter 2

Beldon, the earl of Westerham, climbed into a warm bed that night, glad to be out of London and not having to listen to the usual witless conversations. Instead, he'd been highly entertained by Thornton and his delightful family.

Once, he'd had a happy family himself. Now every room in his home echoed with silence.

Four years had passed since the battle of Waterloo. He had been prevented from joining the army, being the heir to the Westerham estates. His youngest brother had been killed in the fighting and his second brother had been maimed. Many other families had suffered the same misfortunes, but two days after he heard about his brothers, his father died, leaving Westerham one of the richest men in England, a hollow gift he hadn't wanted so soon.

At first he had tried to drown his sorrows in drunken episodes, but reality had eventually brought him back to his responsibilities. His obligation to his family name meant he had to marry and produce the next heir. One young virginal lady after another had paraded before him hoping to tempt him into matrimony. Although he knew he had to take the plunge at some time, he had put off matrimony as long as he could. His current mistress suited him and kept him contented. She had no agenda other than to please him, and his money pleased her. However, the time had come to gather up any vestige of charm he had once possessed and try to begin a new life.

During the past year, he had researched family lines, had attended balls, and been introduced to every debutante in society, hoping to find a suitable female on whom to confer the honor of his title and lands. She could have no more from him, since his heart had long since turned into a hole in his chest.

Then some weeks ago, Thornton had mentioned his sister, Lady Lucy, had spent the past two years on the shelf. Westerham, of course, had met her. He had met every eligible young woman, unfortunately, without being able to see the merit of one more than any other. He decided a few days spent with his friend would serve two purposes. He could consider Lady Lucy in the comfort of her normal surroundings, and he could combine this with pacing out the fields with his friend, testing soils, and discussing crops or watering

plans.

Since his only need in a wife was to produce the next heir, the idea of having Thornton in his family appealed to him. Unless Thornton's sister had turned into a witch, he could do his duty by her and give her a son or two. After that, she could live as she liked and he would supply her with a generous allowance. A marriage of convenience seemed to have worked well for his father. His mother had no complaints. If she had, she had never voiced a single one.

After meeting the entire family, including Lady Lucy and her rather angry sister, Lady Mary, whom he certainly did remember, he changed into formal attire for dinner. Being the first to arrive in the drawing room, he busied himself glancing outside at the changing weather. He drank a very nice sherry while contemplating the dark clouds racing across the sky.

Eventually, the door opened. Della, the current Countess of Thornton, stepped into the room, trailing shawls as usual. Thornton's perfect match forgot everything except the precise order and timing needed to play every intricate melody she had ever heard on the piano. Her affinity for music even led to her creating her own melodies to play. The next to arrive was Thornton's pretty, fair haired sister, who dressed in layers of pink, with a rose patterned shawl draped stylishly over one shoulder. The rest of the fabric drooped from her elbows. She greeted him with the schooled smile of a lady who expected to marry well.

Next, the dowager Countess Thornton arrived, her shawl unwinding as she walked. Not at all stylish, the lady wore grey and blue. Everyone stopped chatting and stood, about to go into dinner, when Thornton said, "What about Mary? Isn't she well?"

His mother looked surprised and glanced about the room as if she had misplaced her daughter somewhere, but couldn't remember what she looked like. Della blinked as if she just woken up. She wouldn't notice if the Prince was missing when she had other things on her mind. Finally the doors opened one more time and Lady Mary entered. He sighed. The scruffy pest was dressed like a dust mop. Apparently, she was still determined to remain her sister's background shadow, despite always having been far more interesting than Lady Lucy.

Earlier, his dislike of her gown had caused his annoyed answer when she accused him of splashing her with mud. He couldn't bear to see her still wearing other people's old clothes in an attempt to shine the light on her

sister. But worse than that was that she had said they had never met before. She couldn't possibly have forgotten him when he hadn't forgotten her. Long ago, he had thought that he had brought her out of her shell, but clearly not.

However, an abject apology about not noticing her on the road wouldn't clean her gown, which more than likely resembled the one she had worn earlier. Even if she had no taste, surely she had a maid or a relative who would help her choose more suitable fabrics and colors than she wore? This one, in a decaying green, had been made with no style whatsoever. Since he knew he had been the one who had splattered her in mud, he would replace her gown with one more suitable for her when he went back to London.

As he moved toward her, meaning to begin a civil interaction, the butler threw open the double doors leading into the dining room. Precedence said that he should take her mother into dinner. With no other choice, he changed direction and moved toward the dowager Lady Thornton. As he passed Lady Mary, his cuff link caught in the fringe of her shawl. Providence had provided him an opportunity to spark an interesting confrontation with this young woman who was determined not to know him.

He tugged and the shawl slowly slipped, aided by a downward movement of his arm. Taking a step back, he trod on the material. Caught between his cuff link and his evening shoe, the fabric ripped.

Lady Mary put up a hand to try to keep him still but he was quite determined to finish what he had started, and managed to lengthen the rip.

"My apologies, Lady Mary," he said with a sweeping bow. "I hope you will allow me to replace this."

"It's old. It doesn't matter," she said through clearly gritted teeth. If a stare could kill, he would be stone cold dead. "I can repair it."

He doubted that. The fabric would always look darned, but he had another plan for tonight. Lady Lucy, sweet and pretty, deserved to have a husband who would cherish her rather than a man who would need nothing more from her after she had produced an heir. As the possessor of the required strength of character, her younger sister Lady Mary would cope with him without making a melodrama out of her whole life. His previous interactions with her had shown her to be a realist rather than a dreamer.

He straightened, bundled her shawl and passed the balled fabric to the butler as he passed, before turning to Lady Lucy. Sliding the shawl off her right shoulder, he said, "I'm sure you don't mind letting your sister have this. She has bare arms and needs a little more covering."

For a moment, Lady Lucy tightened her expression. She gave herself a moment to recover her aplomb before she said in a sighing voice, "Of course, my sister may borrow my shawl. If I notice a draught, I will send a servant for another."

"I thought you would understand." Turning to Lady Mary, whose jaw had slackened, he put her sister's shawl tenderly around her shoulders. Lady Mary swiveled around and stared blank-faced at him. With a polite inclination of his head, he said, "That color suits you much better." More than likely the color could have been bettered, but he didn't mind putting Lady Lucy further into the background, thereby offending her so much that she wouldn't want to hear a word of the proposal she expected from him.

He hoped he had the reverse effect on Lady Mary, but if so, her face showed no gratitude whatsoever. Mentally shrugging, he strode back to their mother and escorted her into the dining room.

From his position at the table, on the right of the dowager, he watched the byplay between the sisters. Lady Lucy tried hard to recover her poise, but her stiffened posture said that she had been put out, no matter what she said. Her younger sister sat, blinking hard, gazing at the pattern and tangling her fingers in the fringe.

One unexpected benefit was that for a moment when she had glanced down at the shawl, she had sparkled like a raindrop caught in a flash of sunshine. More than likely, he was the only one who noticed, but since she didn't glance around the table to if she had an effect on anyone else, he knew she was used to being ignored.

Later, when the ladies had left him and Thornton alone in the dining room to sip port, Eden said in ruminative voice, "Mary looked pretty in Lucy's shawl. Perhaps I should buy one for her instead leaving her to choose. She always chooses muddy colors for herself."

Westerham shrugged. He realized Lady Mary wanted to be overlooked, but rather than pointing that out to Eden, he said, "Why bother? She either doesn't know, or doesn't care, how she looks."

"She should, though. Don't you agree?"

"She is your sister. You would know her best," Westerham said, wondering why he cared that Lady Mary seemed defeated. "But I see no reason why a star shouldn't be allowed to shine sometimes."

Thornton stared at him as if he had just invented the slide rule. "A star?"

"Or a hidden gem if you must be literal."

Thornton continued to stare thoughtfully at him until he changed the subject.

Chapter 3

Mary hated Westerham. She hated his smarmy smile, his perfect face, and his deceptively polite voice. She hated the way his mind worked, and she hated being teased, especially by a man who had every single advantage in life. She knew full well that everything he'd done to annoy her had been deliberate.

The worst day in her life hadn't been completed until before dinner tonight. The first episode this morning had lowered her into the depths of despair, the second almost buried her in mud, but the third, having her shawl ruined, had sent her into such a fury that her mind began to plot how to get her revenge on Westerham. Killing him would only be a mercy compared to what she planned for him.

The shawl that had cost her mother at least a pound, now sat in two folded pieces. Mary couldn't resurrect the fabric, which now had no use except possibly to make a new bodice. She pulled her brush roughly through her hair until her scalp tingled and her arms ached, while angry tears streamed continuously down her face.

When she finally slipped into bed, her nose was so swollen that she had to breathe through her mouth. Her mind repeated 'I hate him, I hate him, I hate him,' all night, without being clear about what she hated the most about him, the words, the deeds, or the handsome face.

In the morning, she awoke with a splitting headache, a puffy face and swollen eyes. Looking like a goblin who'd spent the night changing fairies into demons, she went down to breakfast. Fortunately, no one remarked that her eyes looked red. She had behaved badly last night, and she knew she had. Nevertheless, she had no intention of apologizing. Normally, she would but the worm had finally turned.

As soon as she had finished eating, she gritted her teeth, grabbed a basket from the back lobby, and strode out to the herb garden where no one would confront her about her behavior. With the basket at her feet, she sat on the cold and wet rock wall for possibly an hour, gazing at her shoes, the dewy grass, and a nervous worm that couldn't decide where to hide next, reminding her of herself, the worm that couldn't quite turn yet.

After a while, a pair of polished boots stepped in front of her, attached to

a pair of legs covered by beautifully cut tan trousers. Her gaze sped from there to the face of Lord Westerham.

“Are you here to gather herbs?” she said in what she hoped was a disinterested tone.

He shrugged casually. “Do I appear suitably dressed?”

She ran her eyes from his feet to his sensual mouth. Unfortunately, her eyes had lingered too long on his perfect form and she realized he would think she was admiring him. Red-hot embarrassment flooded her entire body. “Since you are not, you may leave, sir,” she said in an adamant voice, turning away from his interested gaze.

He inclined his head to the side, his expression bland. “I came out here to speak to you.”

“I’m not in the mood for conversation.” Her voice hardened.

Shrugging with disinterest, he said, “I would like to make you a proposition.”

“Please go away.”

He sat beside her on the wall. “I’m beginning to think that you are trying to annoy me.”

“Good,” she said through her clenched teeth. Her neck stiffened into an ache.

He stared into her eyes. “And yet, I still have the strange urge to help you.”

“You can, by leaving me alone.” She narrowed her gaze at him.

He remained silent while he gazed at the grey sky. In profile, he looked magnificent with his clear-cut brow, his aristocratic nose, and his perfectly shaped lips and chin. Finally, he turned to her. “I think I owe you an apology. You won’t believe me after my behavior yesterday, but I am truly sorry I didn’t notice you on the road.”

She slumped, defeated once again by his polish. “You can’t be blamed. No one else in the world notices me, either.”

“And that sort of pessimistic thinking is exactly why no one notices you. The best way to make someone else care for you is to care for yourself, and stop being a negative Nellie.”

“I don’t need your advice about how to live my life.” She lifted her head, annoyed about hearing his assessment of her.

He shrugged. “Perhaps not, but I could atone for my carelessness yesterday by helping you.”

“The way you helped with my best shawl? Don’t you realize that I can’t bear you? I don’t want to look at you or talk to you.”

“I did you a favor by ruining your shawl. You can’t wear that color and even a woman with poor eyesight would know that.”

She raised her voice and stared right at him. “I can wear any color I want.”

“But why?”

She slowly averted her gaze, trying to think. Somehow, he had turned her words against her. “Why can’t I like the colors that I like?”

“You can, but you don’t have to wear them. I don’t like rotting seaweed as much as you clearly do, judging by the color of your gown and shawl last night, but my coloring would allow me to wear that green you wore. I like carrots but if I wanted to wear a carrot-colored jacket, my valet would likely strangle me with one of my cravats. Can you imagine me in a carrot-colored jacket?”

She concentrated, trying for a visual concept of a color on a person, and came up with nothing. “Carrot-colored jackets haven’t been in style since last century.”

“That’s beside the point.” He frowned and scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t know why I am wasting my time with you.”

“Nor do I. I told you to go away. Please accept my invitation.”

His shoulders lifted. “Today is one of those rare days that I want to be of use. Tell me what is upsetting you. The real reason. Not the one you had for wearing that ghastly shawl last night.”

“What was my reason for wearing my *niciest* shawl last night?” She narrowed her gaze.

“You wanted to be invisible.”

Since he read her thoughts so clearly, she couldn’t keep arguing. She quickly filled her lungs with air. “I still don’t like you.”

“And you still want me to go away.”

She nodded.

“I’m considered to be a good catch. Most young ladies your age would try to keep me in conversation.”

“That doesn’t seem too hard. You never stop talking.” She caught herself before she allowed a reluctant smile to cross her lips.

“You’ve been privileged today. I usually don’t spare more than three words to debutantes.” His eyebrows lifted as though he had surprised himself.

“You haven’t broken your record. I’m not a debutante and I don’t normally speak to arrogant rakes.”

“Do you usually have the last word?” He almost sounded interested.

“I usually don’t have any words. I’ve learnt not to talk too much so that I don’t bore people.”

“Self-pity is self-defeating.”

Her breath hot in her chest, she rose to her feet. “Who are you to judge me?”

He stared up at her, his expression one of simple query. “Would you accept my hand in marriage?”

She leaned over and tried to shove him off the wall with her palms on his shoulders. “I’ve had enough of being ridiculed by you.”

He grabbed her wrist. “That hurt,” he said with a pained look on his face.

“Don’t be so pathetic. I hardly moved you.”

He slowly stood to face her. “That’s the first proposal I have made in my life,” he said in a mock-offended voice. “A man would prefer to be politely rejected.”

“Oh, my heavenly father,” she said in two tones below a scream. “If you think you are convincing actor, you have another think coming. No one would believe a man as polished as you could manage a sincere proposal as badly as that. You clearly think I am a fool.”

“Hush. You will hurt my feelings.”

“If you have finished annoying me, I would prefer to get back to scrubbing the dishes in the scullery.”

“Think about it, Cinderella.” His eyes narrowed with calculation. “Even if I could have a fake betrothal for a few months, you could be of use to me. I could hide from all the matchmaking mothers for the first time since I inherited my title.”

“And I could be made to look like a fool when you cry off. Why would I be so stupid?” She managed to keep her tone superior while her thoughts raced from ‘what if?’ to ‘what rubbish!’

He kept his gaze on hers. She tried to read his expression but his facial features got in the way. All she could see was a pair of eyes shaded with mystery, a soft straight mouth, and an evil dimple that flickered in and out. His deliberate charm annoyed her, but his attractiveness waylaid her thought processes.

“I won’t call off the engagement. You may, if you give me two months of

your time first.” The dimple disappeared.

She finally realized that he was serious. “Two months?” Time stopped while she considered his proposal. On the one hand, she would have a season in London. On the other, she would look foolish if she agreed and he laughed at her. Gambling on the first, she stared deeply into his wary eyes and nodded.

Chapter 4

Westerham sat in Thornton's drawing room, gazing at the miserable weather outside, wishing he had explored his sanity before, roughly twelve hours ago, he sprung the idea on himself of marrying Lady Mary. He whacked his palm against his forehead, and then sat with his elbows on his knees, and his chin supported by his hands. Now, he would have to ask for Thornton's permission to address his younger sister. He would also have to think of reason why he had decided on her when he had arrived with the clear intention of offering for her prettier, older sister.

Thornton had proposed a match with Lady Lucy a month ago. Society knew that she was destined for a titled and wealthy husband. Society knew that she had rejected at least two suitors, both wealthy and titled. She dressed with style and she had 'connections.' As a wife, she would abide by the rules, produce a family, and support her husband when needed. Her conversation wouldn't swerve from the politic—unlike her younger sister's, which was downright challenging.

Westerham put his head in his hands, and sighed. The younger sister interested him. Lady Lucy would look aghast if he spoke to her the way he easily spoke to her sister, who had no trouble understanding his cynical comments. Her strong will meant that she would let him go his own way without weeping or wailing or causing his household to be disrupted. She could find her own amusements, whereas Lady Lucy would be one of those women who would have 'ailments' to keep company when her husband started to wander.

However, despite Lady Mary being more suited to him, marrying a young lady who hadn't yet been presented would cause a wave of gossip in the highest circles of society. Since he wouldn't be marrying her for her money or her looks, people would gossip about her for months, speculating about the reason why he wanted a brat who would rather push him off a wall than put up with his questioning.

His long scrutiny of her had shown him what he already knew, that she wasn't as plain at all. She had clear skin, light intelligent eyes, and a slim build. Her shoulders were straight, her posture perfect, and she still hid her

intelligence behind a veil of reticence. Her attempt to punish him for not noticing her on the road had been brave but, if she remembered him, foolhardy. He preferred people to speak their minds and not keep up a pretence of being meek, and then explode with impatience later.

Although he hadn't noticed her on the road, he was more interested in the fact that not noticing her had offended her more than muddying her gown. Therefore, he had metaphorically sat back and watched her trying to take her revenge on a man who had been careless, but little more. Trying to put his thoughts in order to sound sane to Thornton, he meshed his fingers together.

He could say he was instantly attracted to Lady Mary, though Thornton likely wouldn't believe him. The story was almost true. One summer ten years before, he had listened to an earnest child who had been lost and confused after the death of her father. Having younger brothers of his own had taught him the value of confidences. When he had heard, and not attempted to downplay her fears, she had begun to express her opinions freely. Without sisters of his own, he found her views on life fascinating.

After a few days, she had followed him like a baby duckling, leading her into overhearing conversations that she demanded to have explained. Since most concerned opera dancers, he refused, leading her to keep nagging until he explained in a discreet way that chaps liked the company of pretty ladies. This had amused him, until he had lost his sense of the ridiculous four years ago after hearing of his younger brother's slow and painful death.

He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Seeing her again reminded him of his middle brother, who stoically bore the wounds he received in the war. She shared his stoicism. Even the mud-splashing episode had shown that she would bear whatever life threw at her without a blink. As well, she looked lost and lonely. He couldn't have fallen in love during one interaction. He merely had a normal manly urge to protect the weak, which Thornton wouldn't want to hear from a man offering for his sister.

Thornton knew Westerham had spurned well-born beauties for year after year, which let Lady Lucy off the hook without being insulting. If Westerham didn't require a beauty, he would surely be more attracted to a lady's mind, rather than her style. His mouth curved cynically as his fingers tapped on the armrest of his chair. Lady Mary had a habit of choosing her clothes from the ragbag. The thought made him blow out an impatient breath. Even now, he didn't understand what her attraction was. He hadn't been able to stop himself proposing marriage to her, and not because he wanted to be married,

but because he wanted to be near her. He hadn't craved the presence of a woman, let alone a resentful, argumentative scrap of a female in his whole life.

Not once.

Never.

He'd never had his heart broken, and no mistress had ever had him at her beck and call. He knew he couldn't be in love. More than likely, Lady Mary gave him the reason to think about the responsibilities to the position he had disregarded four years ago. He nodded to himself. Thornton would surely believe that without wondering how she had given him the reason, but Westerham could find an answer on the spot, if need be, but need probably wouldn't be. Thornton would find something else to distract his agile mind.

The door cracked open. Thornton stood resting his hand on the doorknob. His bright gaze settled on Westerham speculatively. "Are you waiting for me to show you around the property?" His tone said 'let's go.'

Westerham nodded, and rose to his feet.

"I saw you talking to Mary in the garden. I must apologize for her. She's been difficult lately. She is usually sweet and quiet."

"I'm sure she is, but I think she won't forgive me for splashing her with mud on the road." Westerham checked his cuff links, knowing that he lied. She wouldn't forgive him for ignoring and then insulting her, when they'd once been comrades. He had hoped for her cooperation initially, but not now that he had been revived by his conversation with her in the garden. Now he had other thoughts in his mind, the main one being interest. A young, single woman who didn't try to flirt with him was a rarity. His secondary thought involved a connection between her naked body and his bed, for reasons unknown to him. Possibly he yearned to earn a woman rather than buy one. He blinked himself back into sanity.

Thornton held the door while he waited for Westerham to follow him outside. The tour of the hilly fields enlightened him as to Thornton's new ideas. Most could work on Westerham's property too. He decided to send his land manager here to see for himself the ideas that he ought to follow.

Eventually, after a long tramp and many more discussions about new ideas, Thornton stopped and turned to him. "Shall we end this tour now, and grab a meal at the local tavern?"

Westerham nodded. Mounting his horse, he followed his host across the pastures, noting the transparency of the sun in the wintry sky. Gleaming

through a haze of clouds, pale rays cast lengthening shadows in the late afternoon chill. Arriving in the cozy taproom, after being bowed into a booth by the host, he seated himself with Thornton in the vicinity of a warming fire. A heartening meal arrived during discussions about new ways of planting and nurturing crops. Talking with Thornton energized and wearied Westerham in equal portions.

“I think I must marry your sister to pay you back for today.” Satisfied with the events of the day, Westerham leaned back against the slats behind him.

Thornton laughed. “My ideas are free and I don’t doubt that Lucy will agree to your offer.”

Westerham dropped his gaze. “I find that I prefer disagreeable women.”

“That’s perfectly understandable, old chap. If you want her to argue with you, I’m sure you will think of a way to encourage her.”

“I can argue with your sister, Lady Mary, without even trying.”

Thornton dropped his gaze. “I think her affections are already engaged. But, you are right. She is fun to argue with. She’s bright, you know. I don’t think she will suit your purpose, though.”

“Do I have purpose?”

“I’m guessing you want a marriage of convenience. Well, I know you do. You can’t possibly fall in love in one day.”

“How long did you take to fall in love with Della?”

“One day. But it took me six years to convince her to marry me.”

“I’m too old to wait for six years. May I speak to Lady Mary about my intentions?”

“Even if she didn’t have another in mind, I doubt she would want a husband who would be content to leave her to her own devices while he continued to pursue his own pleasures elsewhere.”

Westerham diverted his gaze. “But Lady Lucy would?”

“I would expect her to decide for herself.”

“Surely you would consider the same choice for Lady Mary?”

Thornton heaved a breath. “Lucy longs for riches and a position in society. She’s had her chances, but she has refused them all, because she is willing to wait until she finds the right man. I don’t know her criteria, but I suspect she will base her decision on logic. Mary lives on her emotions. The two are opposite in every way.”

Westerham tried to think logically, because logic was all Thornton

understood. "I can see that Lady Mary is rather more excitable than her sister. That's what attracts me to her." He didn't know if he was lying or not. All he knew was that he definitely wanted her. "I think she may see the same in me. Although I will mourn the death of my brother for the rest of my life, I have stopped trying to punish myself for not being able to be at his side. I may have more in common with your younger sister than you think."

Thornton stared at him for a long moment, tapping his fingers on the table, his eyebrows drawn together. Finally his sunny smile appeared. "You have my permission to speak to her. But don't be surprised if she hands you your head in a basket."

Westerham half-smiled, knowing he had to look unsure of himself. "I'll speak to her when we get back to Thornton Manor. If she says 'no,' I will be most surprised." Naturally. She had already agreed to his modified proposal.

"Arrogant bastard." Thornton rose to his feet and pulled Westerham to his by shaking his hand vigorously. "Good luck."

As he rode back to the house, visions of Lady Mary's slender shapeliness and pearly white skin filled his thoughts

Chapter 5

Mary brushed out her hair one more time and tried a looser knot. She took her time scrutinizing every detail. Perhaps Westerham was right and she could make more of her looks if she tried. However, she doubted that changing only her hairstyle would make a difference. Naturally, she cared how she looked, but whatever she did, she always resembled herself.

Sometimes she wore a gown that she thought suited her, and other times that same gown made her look dreary. She rarely heard a compliment, unlike Lucy who asked people how she looked, which meant she only ever heard gratuitous compliments. Lucy gave people no chance other than to compliment her. Mary had fallen into the same trap, and often told Lucy she looked pretty in something, when the gown had made no impact on her, whatsoever. Only Lucy's face and sweetness made the impact. Logic said no gown would make a difference. Hairdos, in Mary's opinion, were the same. They depended on the beauty of the wearer.

She stared at her new looser style for some time before ringing the maid's bell. When Nan, the upstairs maid arrived, Mary rose to her feet. "I want a maid to help me with styling my hair," she said to the youngest of all the maids. "Do you think you could?"

"No, miss. You want Alice."

"Alice? Isn't she the new downstairs maid?"

"Yes, Miss, but she used to help her former mistress dress, and she braided my hair for me yesterday in half the time that I could. Shall I ask her for you?"

Mary nodded, and within five minutes the maid with the scarred face and neck knocked on her door and entered.

Mary glanced away from her reflection in the mirror, trying not to concentrate on the maid's blemish, a red mass that ranged from the lobe of her right ear to her shoulder. "I was told you have done hair before."

Alice nodded, her brow creased. "Would the mistress mind if I helped you?"

"If you do a good job..." Mary thought about her next words. As the youngest daughter, she didn't have any autonomy in the household. "I will

ask Mama if you can be my personal maid.”

Alice moistened her pretty lips. “Sit by the mirror and I will see if I can please you.”

Three hairdos later, Mary still had no idea which one suited her. Alice swore the first did. She took Mary’s hair back to the severe style again, with a twisted knot on top and a hint of soft curls around Mary’s face. Mary finally nodded, trying to see why that particular style should look better than the one before. She finally concluded that each of the styles had merit, but this one somehow made her eyes look larger. “Now, choose which gown would make me look soft and pretty, if you will.”

In the bottom of Mary’s dressing trunk, Alice found an old gown that Della had purchased for her at least three years ago. “This one would suit you with a few changes.”

“What would you change?”

“I would remove the shoulder frills. Not because there’s aught wrong with ‘em, Miss, but because frills is more suitable for someone in the schoolroom.”

“Do you have time?”

Alice demonstrated how much time she had by pulling a stitch here and there until the gown sat frill-free. Mary stepped into the new creation and took the shawl that Alice handed to her, the blue and green one she had worn yesterday with the green gown. The shawl draped loosely over one shoulder, making the blue gown suddenly appear very fashionable.

She couldn’t have been more surprised. As far as she was concerned, being attractive depended on how all a person’s features were put together—the size of the eyes, the length of the eyelashes, the position of the cheekbones, the sharp angle of a jaw-line, and curving of the lips. Attractiveness might be attributed to a combination of the right features, but putting all the right garments together helped almost as much to make a person stylish.

For the first time in her life, she almost had confidence in her appearance. Trying to swallow her doubts, she walked downstairs to the drawing room, hoping she hadn’t been foolish to believe Westerham when he’d said he would ask Eden for her hand.

Even if he had been installing dreams into her head, her last hour hadn’t been completely wasted. She had learned that she could look better if she accepted advice. Advice had no relation to listening to sweet words and false

promises. For the rest of her life, she didn't want to hear another false promise. Although Westerham said her would marry her, she had heard those words before: those words that had no meaning whatsoever to her. She had decided not to believe a single word that issued from Westerham's lips unless she stood in front of the altar with him, the likelihood of which remained quite remote.

The waiting footman opened the drawing room doors for her. She passed through with a regal tilt to her head that she had never used before. Mama's face turned to her, her eyes wide, and her mouth beginning to curve with pleasure. "What a pretty gown, Mary? When did you buy that?"

"Three years ago. I had a few trimmings removed by the downstairs maid, Alice. She also did my hair. Apparently, she was a dresser for her former employer." Mary waited with a hopeful tilt of her eyebrows.

Mama scratched her head with her crochet hook. "A dresser? Why was she working as a maid?"

"Perhaps someone forgot to tell you about her former experience. The other maids knew, and I wish I could have her for my maid," Mary said in a rush, although she knew the scarring on Alice's face kept her downstairs. Only the prettiest females could be ladies' maids. Mary raised her eyebrows while maintaining her sweetest smile. Mama would never be maneuvered from a position of being in the wrong, which made her difficult to handle by a daughter with so little tact that she rarely had her own way. She had tried and failed many times to copy her sister's way of manipulating people.

"The other maids know?" Mama latched quickly onto most the vital part of Mary's sentence. If others knew and she didn't, she had no way out of giving Alice her rightful place in the house. However, the 'right' place might not be with Mary but with Lucy, whose maid was no more than competent, and could be passed on to her younger sister, instead.

Mary nodded solemnly. "I think she may be the right maid for me. She isn't as experienced as Lucy's maid, unfortunately, but I can give her a few challenges that should help her to grow." She loved her sentences, which combined all the words Lucy and Mama loved to throw at each other, but mainly about her.

"Take her, take her." Mama threw her gestures all around the room as if she was tossing the maid at Mary.

"Thank you, Mama. She will save us money because she is quite good at refurbishing old gowns." Satisfied that she had earned her own maid by

learning how to get her own way and not being at all embarrassed about taking what she wanted for the first time in her life, Mary sat on the plump couch newly bought for the room by Della, who was gradually ridding the house of all the last Earl's oldest furniture.

Mary had barely picked up her tangled embroidery silks when doors opened again. "My lord would like to see Lady Mary in his study," the footman announced portentously.

"Why on earth does he want to see you, Mary? What have you done now?"

Mary rose to her feet. "I'll find out," she said, her heart beating in her throat. She wouldn't be asked to see Eden for any reason other than that Lord Westerham had spoken to him.

She drew an enormous breath that expanded her chest into an air balloon, and floated behind the footman along the hallway to her brother's private sanctuary. A flourish of the door let her into a room lined with bookshelves. Eden's paper-covered desk faced the doorway. The light from the set of windows behind him threw shadows onto his face. She saw him as a black silhouette. Two tall-backed upholstered armchairs sat in front of his desk, one occupied by Westerham. He stood, turned toward her, and bowed formally. Her smile wavered.

"Sit," her brother said with a casual wave of his hand.

Westerham waited for her to sit and then he took his former position in the other chair, his elegant fingers meshed together. He smiled reassuringly at her. Even though a moment of panic filled her, she noted his self-possession. As usual, he had dressed impeccably, wearing a black jacket with tan trousers, both of which fitted as well as everything else he wore. His linen shirt had been impeccably starched. She estimated that he squandered a small fortune on his wardrobe.

Her brother eyed them both as if he had never seen either of them before. "Lord Westerham has asked for your hand in marriage."

She swallowed. "Hmm," she said clearly.

"What do you think of his proposal?" Eden continued with his usual patience.

"Oh." She stared at Westerham, whose eyes gleamed with silent laughter. "Well. I'll marry him if—"

Westerham held up a hand to stop her speaking. "Yes, or no, Lady Mary. You already told me you wanted to marry me."

“You spoke to her first?” Eden frowned and rubbed the back of his neck.

Westerham nodded. “I wouldn’t want to be embarrassed by a refusal.”

Eden turned to Mary. “Do you want to marry a man almost ten years your senior, who has far more life experience than you do?” For a moment, he looked entirely serious, an expression she rarely saw on his darling face.

“Of course, he’s had more life experience than I. He has lived longer. And yes, I do want to marry him. Please.”

Eden used his pondering face. “I think I should give you time to think about your answer.”

She stared straight at Westerham. “I have thought about his proposal since yesterday, when we first discussed the matter. I am quite sure that if I don’t say *yes* right now, he will find someone else. I would prefer to be his first and last choice.”

Westerham offered her a surprised glance. Unlike others, he seemed to hear her words as she meant them. Other people appeared to translate what she said into utter nonsense. “I plan to take her back to London with me to live with my mother until the wedding,” he said in a mild voice. “She has no daughters of her own, and would be delighted to take Lady Mary under her wing for the rest of the season.”

Mary almost pitied the poor countess, who had no idea that her son planned to marry a woman he barely knew. However, she had stipulated that she must have a partial season in London before she married, and Westerham had suggested a stay with his mother, a purported social butterfly.

“I see you two have discussed the entire matter.” Eden, rarely surprised by anything, let out a long sigh.

“Of course.” Westerham stood, inclined his head, and held out his hand for Mary to take. “We shall tell *your* mother now.”

“I’ll come with you so that you have someone to catch her when she faints,” Eden said obligingly. “I think she still sees Mary as a sixteen year-old.”

Mama had the expected misgivings, managed a quick recovery, ignored Lucy’s stiff posture, and managed to get her head around her second daughter leaving the next day to meet her new in-laws.

“You’ll want Alice with you,” she told Mary in her panicking tone. “How fortunate that we found her before we knew the news. If you are leaving tomorrow—oh dear, this is so sudden.” Her crochet hook came out again and scratched her head with vigor. “Will we have the time to pack? We won’t

have time to buy your ...”

Since Mary thought her mother might mention undergarments, she interrupted. “I’ll be in London. I’ll be able to buy anything I need. And in a few days, Della and Eden will be in London too.”

Then Mama started her version of organizing the trip, which consisted of throwing orders helter-skelter at the servants as well as Mary and Lucy. Lucy tried her best to appear overjoyed, but she had suddenly been supplanted as the marriageable daughter, and needed time to recover. She went to her bedroom to collect something or other, and as expected, didn’t emerge.

Having had time to think last night, Mary knew where to find the trunk she needed. The list in her head now being aired, she found Alice to be more than helpful, especially when she discovered she was also going to London.

That night, Mary’s last in this household, as she entered the hallway on her way to dinner, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned. Westerham caught up with her. “You did well,” he said in a low voice that stirred the hair around her ear. “One would suspect that you want me.”

Behind the irony, she recognized his tone of doubt, but the hidden meaning surprised her. ‘*Do you want me?*’ he seemed to be asking. Three months ago, she wouldn’t have understood his meaning. Wanting a person hadn’t occurred to her. During that time, she had discovered that someone ‘wanted’ her, and she had been taught what ‘want’ meant. The word turned out to be a physical need, which certainly hadn’t been reciprocated by her.

Now, the tables had turned and she did want something. Him: and in a physical way. She had, ever since their face-to-face meeting yesterday. Unfortunately, she had over-reacted, knowing that, ten years ago, his charm and kindness brought her out of her own watchful world and into one where people trusted others with their thoughts and aspirations. His direct manner had impressed her. Even now, he didn’t bother with polite, inconsequential words. He said exactly what he meant, but underneath, she could hear the wry humor of his thoughts. He would never have considered hurting the feelings of the lesser beings in the world. She had been ten years his junior, but he had treated her opinions with respect, no matter what she had said. Even now, he implied that the least important of the Thornton sisters deserved to be noticed.

Now, as a grown woman, the sight of him caused her breath to shorten. Being Eden’s sister, she was used to seeing physical perfection in a man, but Westerham had a little more—an air of hidden sensuality. Her whole body

reacted to him with an ache of yearning.

Even when she turned her gaze away from him, her mind barely wandered away from thoughts of his smooth and hard body. Her imagination settled her hands on his wide shoulders, and slid her palms down his chest to his narrow hips. His masculine hands, shapely and graceful, would reciprocate by gently drawing her up against his body, while he smiled at her and lowered his lips to hers. She breathed out her longing, and glanced away.

Without another word, she preceded him into the dining room.

Chapter 6

Westerham hadn't expected to be obsessed by Lady Mary. As a virginal young lady, she should have shocked by his words, had she understood the meaning, but the sultry expression her face said she didn't mistake what he meant by '*want.*' And yes, she had lived in most of his thoughts for the past two days.

Since he had every intention of marrying her, he would find out how much she wanted him. To be physically attracted to his promised bride seemed more than convenient in these days of arranged marriages. He didn't doubt she was no more than a short term fancy and that his heart was in no danger. Her habit of saying exactly what she thought would soon cool his ardor. Fortunately, she needed to do no more than produce the required children and then she could go her own way.

He wondered about his need to think ahead, when his needs were immediate, but this sort of immediacy was new to him. He wanted her with an ache that had burrowed into his chest and surged around his body with every beat of his heart. The meal that night dragged on and on while he had to listen to all the arrangements her family wanted put in place before he left.

He had no doubt Lady Mary would handle the apparently endless list of details her mother seemed to think were important. Lady Mary's efficiency with her words hinted that she had the same efficiency of mind. This afternoon, she had handled her brother with ease and plain speaking. She hadn't wavered from the plan.

Perhaps he didn't quite have her measure but she appeared to be as desirous of him as he was of her. Her desire didn't surprise him, for desire came to everyone sometime in life. More than a physical attraction would be unlikely, since she hadn't yet been exposed to society, where she would meet many interesting gentlemen. If she wanted to take a lover after she had produced his heir, as long as she bore no children other than his, she would be a satisfactory holder of the title of the Countess of Westerham. Although he ought to choose her less passionate sister, he couldn't see past Lady Mary, whose entire person appealed to him far too much.

"And as soon as you arrive, send us a note, Mary." Her mother had a

habit of rambling on, not omitting even the smallest detail. “We want to be sure you are safe.”

“Yes, Mother,” Lady Mary said for the umpteenth time during the long meal.

Westerham’s gaze met Thornton’s. Both sighed at the same time. Fortunately, no meal lasted forever.

After the household retired for the night, Westerham slept like a log. At dawn, his valet clattered a washing bowl onto the window table and pulled open the curtains. Within half an hour, Westerham sat in the breakfast room with Lady Mary and Thornton, who was also an early riser.

After hastily consuming a few bites to eat, in that way avoiding the presence of the rest of her family, he handed his betrothed and her maid into Thornton’s travelling coach. Westerham’s valet and tiger would follow in his phaeton. Before he sat beside her in the forward seat, Westerham leaned over and said in Lady Mary’s ear, “I hope you don’t mind that we didn’t wait to hear more of your mother’s instructions?”

She gave a soft laugh. For the first time she showed him an open face, one free from tension. The loss of the lines on her forehead and the slight dimpled impressions beside her lush mouth eased his mind. “I stopped listening after the sixth time,” she said, her bright eyes sparkling with mischief. “Mama does tend to emphasize her points. But, oh dear. I can’t remember if she wants me to send her a note if I arrive safely.”

“I expect not,” he said, following her lead with a straight face. “Surely any mother would trust her daughter to a man she met two days ago, who wants to take her away from her family instantly.”

“But she trusts Eden. She depends on his judgments, and Eden trusts you.” She gave a casual shrug and again her mouth curved with mischief. “I have Alice to protect my reputation while I am travelling.” Lady Mary untied the ribbons of her brown felt bonnet, settled it between them on the seat, making a barrier between him and her. Her hooded, fur-lined cloak should keep her warm enough for the short trip to London.

The two carriages passed through numerous tollgates, and the trip remained without incident, until being held up by a locked gate for half an hour while Westerham’s driver negotiated a fair price. After five minutes, with the rain drizzling down, Westerham had stepped out, willing to pay the inflated price to save time, but apparently a principle was at stake, according to Lady Mary, whose obstinately crossed arms showed her willingness to sit

with the carriage blocking the way until doomsday.

Therefore, half an hour later than he had expected, Thornton's mud-splattered coach pulled up outside his town house. The butler opened the door to a sharp rap on the knocker, his face a picture of surprise. "We were not expecting you, my lord."

"I have brought my betrothed, Lady Mary Thornton, with me." He stepped back and indicated Lady Mary.

The butler eyed her and her maid, and turned rigid with amazement. "Yes, my Lord," he said in a faint voice. "I'll send a footman to notify your mother."

Westerham escorted Lady Mary into the small salon where a fire had been lit. His mother used this as her sitting room when she was alone. However, she hadn't yet come down for dinner, and the room hadn't had time to warm up. He added two more logs to the flames. Still wearing her fur-lined cloak, Lady Mary moved closer the heat to warm her hands. Her maid sat nearby, staring around the room at the framed paintings of various flowers.

Meanwhile, the butler left and came back with a maid carrying hot chocolate and a plate of biscuits. "Should I bring forward dinner tonight, my Lord?" he asked, before he left, possibly noting Lady Mary's pinched face.

"Do so, please." Westerham experienced the odd desire to take Lady Mary into his arms and warm her with his body. Which thought led to blatant thoughts of her body close to his, naked. He leaned back in his chair and concentrated instead on her chaperoning maid's presence.

Minutes after the hot chocolate had appeared, his mother threw open the doors. "Beldon, wherever have you been? I expected you home a week ago," she said rushing toward him, stopping short when she spotted Lady Mary and Alice.

"May I introduce Lady Mary Thornton, to you, mother? Lady Mary, do meet my sweet mother."

Lady Mary stood and managed a low curtsy with grace. His mother, who really was sweet, rushed over to snatch her up into her arms. "You would be one of Lord Thornton's sisters. I see the good looks run in the family." She kissed her on each cheek.

"Yes. Unfortunately, not Eden's looks, but our father's." With another dimpled smile, Lady Mary glanced at Westerham.

"My dear, you are lovely. You don't have his coloring, Thornton's I mean, but you look very much like him, in more restrained way."

“She will be staying with us until Christmas.” Westerham leaned back, confident that his mother would question him closely the moment she got him alone.

“Of course she will. How wonderful. Now, is this your maid?” Mama said, glancing at Alice.

Alice arose and curtsied. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mama rang for the butler, who promised Lady Mary that her maid would be settled in nicely, and she turned back to Westerham with a querying glance at him.

“Lady Mary consented to be my bride. You are now meeting your daughter-in-law to be, for the first time.”

His mother froze, but in his whole lifetime, her social poise had never slipped. He hoped for the same in his bride-to-be, but at this stage he didn’t know her grown-up persona well enough to predict her behavior.

“You could have told me when I raced into the room. Now I’m sure your fiancé thinks she is marrying to a mad house.”

“No such thing. I’ve never had such a warm welcome in my whole life. When we told my mother, she almost had conniptions.”

“I can’t imagine why. My son is wealthy, handsome, and kind to his family. I would have thought any mother would want him for her daughter.”

Lady Mary nodded. “She did, but for her other daughter.”

“But he fell in love with you, instead? How romantic.” Mother still didn’t ask why Lady Mary had been brought to stay with her instead of being at home and preparing for her wedding. “It’s so good of her to let us have you for a while, and let me get to know you first.” She pulled Lady Mary down to sit on the couch with her, still holding her hands.

Westerham decided not to tell her that he planned a quick wedding. “I shall have my secretary post a betrothal notice in the paper within the next few days.”

And that seemed to be *that* as far as his mother was concerned. She ordered dinner to be served as soon as possible and, regrettably made sure that Lady Mary’s bedroom was close to hers and not his.

Chapter 7

Mary glanced around her new bedroom in the family wing. The room had a tall window curtained with blue velvet, which would let in the early morning light. A matching blue satin coverlet lay on the bed. The maid who had escorted her, told her that the countess would be right next door, and Lord Westerham at the top end of the hallway. Although she hadn't thought of visiting her betrothed's room, she was glad to know that the countess would be close by to guard her virtue. She had no plan to bed the Earl, although she would happily tease him with hints about her willingness as long as possible. One life lesson she had recently learned was the men only cared for women until they had them.

Her hairstyle refreshed, she dressed in her best evening gown. Finally ready, she made her way down the curved staircase to the formal sitting room, aided by the careful guidance of a liveried footman.

Westerham rose to his feet, and smiled at her when she entered. As usual, he looked breathtakingly handsome in his evening blacks. Her heart took a moment or two to settle into a normal rhythm. She managed to return his smile, but only with a slight quirk of her lips, absolutely certain that not appearing too easy to please increased his interest in her.

The countess wore a lilac gown that Mary's mother wouldn't dream of buying, and would describe scathingly as unsuitable for a woman of her age. A single layer of dark purple covered the red underskirt. The countess clearly knew which colors and styles suited her.

Mary dropped a curtsy. "I think I shall enjoy shopping with you," she said to her hostess with what she hoped was a charming smile.

Apparently, her smile scale had been adequately weighted, for the countess returned one of her own, taking Mary's arm to escort her into the dining room, a large and draughty area containing an enormous table set with a king's ransom in silverware. Since only three people expected to eat, the settings had been arranged with the earl taking his place at the head of the table, his mother on the right, and Mary on his left. As food on aromatic platters began to enter the room, the countess said, "We must put an announcement in the paper about your betrothal, Beldon. It would look odd if

I began shopping with Lady Mary without anyone knowing who she is.”

Panic narrowed Mary’s throat. “Oh, no, please don’t put an announcement in the paper yet.”

The countess stared at her, her eyebrows drawn together. “I presume your family knows you plan to marry my son? I certainly hope he didn’t abduct you and bring you here with a forged letter.” She showed that she was serious by glaring at Westerham.

“Abductions being my usual style?” Westerham gave a throwaway shrug. “Only to hide in London, where everyone knows me? That would be rather foolish, Mother, don’t you think?”

Mary kept her eyes on her plate, trying to hide the shakiness of her hands. “I would prefer to meet people as your mother’s protégée, before any announcement is made.” She took a breath, finding two sets of puzzled eyes focused on her. “No one knows me yet. I haven’t yet been presented, and to be suddenly brought out of the woodwork as the next Lady Westerham would surprise too many people. I really don’t want to be gossiped about, and that’s what would happen if no one had been introduced to me first.”

The countess stared closely at her for at least a minute without speaking. “I think I understand,” she finally said, picking up her fork again. “You don’t want people to assume this is a forced marriage.”

“After all I have done to deserve my reputation, I doubt anyone would believe I can be forced into marriage,” Westerham said with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Since Mary knew he had proposed to her because he thought she would be a biddable wife, she had no trouble believing his statement. “As a matter of fact, I would like to have a taste of my own season before I am wed.” She held her head high, telling the truth for a change.

Westerham leaned across and closed his warm fingers over hers, as if to comfort her. “I agree. I don’t want to be known as a man who has snatched a wife from the nursery. Your season will be short, you know, a bare two months. I hope that will satisfy you.”

“It shall, if I can buy a few new gowns.” She held her breath, hoping to take a shopping trip. If she looked neat, but not particularly fashionable, and nothing at all like the earl’s notorious mistress, no one would believe that he had any interest in Mary. That way, she would guard him from derision when she left to go back into seclusion.

“You need more than a few,” he said, his eyelids seductively lowered.

“As long as you are not tempted to be greedy.”

“Beldon!” His mother sounded shocked. “You have money enough to buy her anything. Don’t begrudge your beloved this small request. And please allow me to enjoy the luxury of having a daughter to dress for a London season.”

Mary sat, staring at her plate, her eyes unexpectedly prickling, scared she might show her true feelings. She was a dreadful person. These two had instantly and gracefully complied with her request, and not only that, the countess had been more than generous to say she would help her choose a gown. Because of this, Mary would be sure to be dressed tastefully.

Promising herself that she would let them down without causing a scandal, she began to eat, forcing herself to swallow each wretched morsel that she didn’t deserve.

“You have the best mother in the world,” she said to Westerham in a husky voice.

“I think you have one of the best. Imagine being Thornton’s mother,” he said, aiming his words at his own mother with a delightful quirk of his lips. “She has nerves of iron. He would wear a parent down with his constant ideas and challenges. I remember him at school. The tutors would leave his rooms with their brains utterly depleted.”

“Your habit of over-exaggerating everything is ...” Mary took a deep breath. “Interesting.” Lifting her head, she wished he wasn’t so genuinely nice. If only she had met him as a grown woman a year ago. If she had met him before she had messed up her life, she wouldn’t be messing with his, now.

After a restless night’s sleep in her new bed, she awoke, glad she had a task for today, frivolous perhaps, but she couldn’t wait to shop with a woman of taste. Aided by Alice, she quickly dressed while Alice described her tiny annex next door in a pleased voice, speculating about all the servants in the house she had met so far. Apparently, the upstairs maids had little work since the master rarely lived in the family home. According to gossip, he slept ‘elsewhere’ most of the time, either that or stayed out until the early hours and then came back and shut himself in his bedroom until midday. The servant’s gossip said he would soon start showing signs of turning over a new leaf since he had met Mary, which was supposed to flatter Mary.

She turned her head away, not wanting to hear this. Only a fool would believe a rake like Westerham would reform for the sake of a plain woman he

barely knew. No one would. But if she hadn't accepted his foolish proposal, she would have no chance of experiencing anything in her life other than within the tiny circle of her family.

She wore the blue gown again. Last night's green had received another frown from Westerham. She already knew he disliked the seaweed color but her only other evening gown was brown and she already knew he despised brown.

The morning beginning with a chilly frost, she wore her warmest pelisse, the brown. Her brown hat was awarded a long sigh from Westerham at first sight. She had little hope any of the London dressmakers would begin dancing with joy as she entered the premises, singing "*How glad I am to be seeing brown worn this season.*"

The first dressmaker the countess recommended had premises in Regent Street. Westerham opened the door, causing a bell to tinkle. Mary had thought he would disappear rather than visit dress shops, but he seemed to know his way around. A tall, thin, female, dressed in black, who had turned from her close inspection of the delicate lace on the skirts of a white gown, greeted him by name before glancing at the countess and Mary. Her eyebrows almost shot through the ceiling. Mary couldn't imagine why a dressmaker would be surprised by seeing two female customers when clearly the gowns in the shop were made for women.

"My mother and her protégé, Lady Mary Thornton." Westerham used a casual tone of voice. He indicated his mother and Mary. "Mrs. Petersham, the owner of this fine establishment."

Mrs. Petersham curtsied to the countess.

The countess inclined her head. Mary copied her, but she wondered why he didn't introduce his mother by name. The only conclusion that came to her mind was that Mrs. Petersham already knew who he was and therefore knew his mother was a countess. Interesting.

"My mother would like to buy a few gowns for Lady Mary," he continued. "Show her everything that might suit her."

The first armload consisted of mainly white gowns. Clearly Mrs. Petersham thought Mary, being introduced as a protégé, was a debutante. Although she would love to enlighten the woman, she could only look foolish if she said she wasn't. While she was standing and dithering, Westerham did nothing more than scratch his eyebrow. Mrs. Petersham, glanced heavenward, turned on her heel, and took the gowns into the back room.

The next armload brought forth a pink, a blue, and a yellow gown. “I think we ought to test the colors against Lady Mary’s skin,” the dressmaker said, glancing again at Westerham. “To see what suits her coloring the best.”

“Have you anything in seaweed green?” Mary asked with the intent to provoke Westerham. “That’s my favorite color.”

Westerham ignored her. “She will try on each of these.”

Mary heaved a sigh. “Do you think I should bother with the pink?” she asked the countess.

The countess nodded, shooting Westerham a frown.

The long mirror told Mary what she already suspected, that she looked like an idiotic maiden in pink: slightly embarrassed, slightly flushed. The coolness of the blue suited her, she thought, being demure and rather plain. The countess nodded her approval. The yellow emphasized her eyes, making the color look closer to green than grey. She could only afford one gown. Since she didn’t want her whole wardrobe to be in blue, she chose the yellow. “What price is this?” she asked Mrs. Petersham.

Mrs. Petersham turned to Westerham. “A hundred pounds,” she said with a proud smile. “The lace was imported from Belgium.”

Mary huffed out a breath. She couldn’t afford to buy a thing at that price. “Could you show me gowns with less lace and trimmings, before I decide.”

“Lady Mary, when my mother is offering to buy you a gift, you don’t need to ask the price,” Westerham said tightly. “She knows her budget.”

Mary pressed her lips together. “I can’t allow your mother to buy gowns for me. I have my pin money.”

“Find more gowns for Lady Mary, with less lace,” he said in an autocratic voice to Mrs. Petersham. “She will need at least five.”

Mary glared at him. “I will decide how many I need.”

The dressmaker’s face began look strained. She glanced from Westerham to Mary again. “But if I can find more for, say, fifty guineas, wouldn’t you like to try them on.”

“Find some.” Westerham had begun to sound annoyed.

After the woman left the room, Westerham said to Mary, “*We do not bargain about the price of gowns.* Especially not when the gowns are intended as a gift.”

Mary’s cheeks heated with embarrassment. She glanced at the countess, who had not said a word, and whose face remained a blank sheet. “Please accept my apologies, Countess. I have not a single social skill, and deserve

the reprimand.” She stared down at her shoes, dying inside.

A hand reached out and took hers. “I doubt my son is the person to correct a lady as to her manners. He has the manners of a complete boor, himself.”

“No, please not the whip again, Mama,” the aforementioned said in a sadly irreverent voice.

His mother crossed her arms and made a deadly squint of her eyes. “I mean it, Beldon. Lady Mary is doing her best under trying circumstances. It can’t be easy having you choose her gowns for her. I know I wouldn’t let you choose mine.”

“But you have excellent taste, Mama, and I don’t need to.” The expression of saintliness on the earl’s face made Mary want to push him through the door onto the wet paving stones outside. She gave a sound like a huff, which brought his gaze back to her. “You need my help or you would dress like a second daughter wearing her sister’s cast-offs.”

Since she did wear Lucy’s old gowns, Mary swallowed her next words. She stared at the floor. Finally, after spinning out the silence long enough to collect an ounce of graciousness, she let the countess give her three gowns, hating every moment of accepting a gift that she wouldn’t be earning.

Next, she was led to a hat shop. “It is perfectly acceptable for man to buy a hat for his betrothed,” Westerham said in a smooth voice before she entered the shop. “If he wants to buy more, that would be his pleasure.”

His mother raised her eyes to heaven when Mary glanced at her, but no more was said. The Westerhams choose three hats for her, each more gorgeous than she had ever imagined owning. Since she couldn’t bear to appear ungrateful, she managed a nice-Lucy smile.

Gossip about which invitations for which functions to accept kept the trip back to Westerham House interesting, not that she had any input. She knew a few names, of course, but not those of this year’s debutantes, although some of the family names sounded familiar.

Finally, the countess had a list in her head, she said. She had accepted one for tonight, previously. As soon as she arrived home, she planned to send a footman to the Livingstone’s house with a note that said that Westerham had arrived home and would also be accepting on late notice and if the Livingstons didn’t mind, she would bring along a protégée of her own to their supper party.

During the next hour, the countess had word that the Livingstons would

be delighted to see her protégée. “Naturally,” she said, with a wicked smile on her face. “I’m being escorted by my son. Every hostess still in town will be envious of Mrs. Livingston for being one of the first hostesses to have inveigled him into her salon.”

Since the earl also heard her words, Mary glanced over at him. He stared back and shrugged. At least his head hadn’t enlarged in the last few minutes, hearing that other people saw him as important. To her, he was simply another man anxious to use a woman, though his use wasn’t quite as bad as some others she would never mention. Westerham, at least, was prepared to marry a wellborn woman before he tried to make love to her.

When she finally went upstairs to visit her new purchases, she found Alice trying to smooth the folding creases from the yellow gown. “I think I might wear this one tonight, Alice. I have a pair of shoes patterned with yellow leaves and a gold buckle that would do nicely, if you can remove the stain on the toes.” The shoes had belonged to Lucy, but she had worn them on a wet night. Being stained, she passed them to Mary who thought she might be able to dye them brown and make them wearable. She had only bought the shoes with her to wear walking, since they were already damaged.

Alice took the shoes from Mary’s trunk and inspected them. “I should ask a footman. They know all the tricks about shoe cleaning.” She hurried out of the room with an interesting smile on her face.

The footman she brought back with her was young and handsome, since most footmen were employed for their looks. He said he could do the job within the hour. Alice took her time handing over the shoes, which was a tactic that Mary needed to learn—how to keep a man lingering and looking. And the footman did stare, though mainly at the scarring on Alice’s neck. He appeared more sympathetic than revolted. After he left, Alice blushed for a while, amusing Mary no end. If she couldn’t find happiness, more than likely Alice could. Alice had a kind and helpful nature which most people would find endearing.

“Would my green shawl look well with the yellow gown?”

“No, Lady Mary. That green shawl would make the yellow sickly. It’s a right shame you don’t have another.”

Mary’s shoulders sagged. “I think the earl would strangle me if I wore it tonight. But I can’t wear my coat, not at night.”

“Perhaps my lady would have one that she might allow you to borrow?” Alice kept her gaze on the blue patterned carpet.

Mary shrugged. "I'll wear the green. I'll soon find out if she has one she might allow me to borrow. Westerham will tug mine off my shoulders and grab hers for me to use instead."

"I'm sure he would do no such thing." Alice's eyes rounded.

Mary smiled to herself, thinking she may have learned a few tricks to enter into her book of manipulation of Westerham.

Chapter 8

Westerham wondered why Mary hadn't previously bothered making the most of herself. Dressed in the yellow gown, her skin shone a pearly white. Her seaweed shawl had at least been draped with style, though the color still appalled him. Fortunately, his mother noticed the clash of colors before they left the house and sent her maid scurrying to fetch her orange silk. "Though, really Westerham, she should have an evening cloak," she said, eyeing her protégée fondly. "We shall buy one tomorrow. Fur-lined, I think."

The saintly expression on Mary's face almost made him laugh out loud. The wretch had clearly goaded him into this. "She'll certainly need a cloak tonight. Do you have one?"

His mother's maid scuttled off again. At least Mary had the courtesy to look guilty.

He handed his mother into the carriage. Mary followed. He would quite enjoy tonight, showing off the lady he planned to marry and bed, though hopefully not in that order. Being chaste didn't suit him at all, not when he had temptation close by.

Since no one knew he was betrothed to Mary, he didn't have to stand around the ballroom floor watching jealously while other men lined up to dance with the newest arrival. Instead he frowned at anyone who couldn't be trusted to handle her decently. Since he appeared to be the only person who qualified, he stood around trying to appear disinterested while she danced with every eligible gentleman in London.

Finally, the musicians began to play a waltz. Fortunately, Mary's last partner had left to find another, and Westerham happened to lurking near enough Mary to be at her side in four steps. "Would you do me the honor?" he said holding out his hand to her.

She stared regally at him. "I may have promised the waltz to someone else."

"Unless you promised this dance to the regent, who is not here tonight, I will not give way. You are my betrothed," he said, bending close enough to make his one of her curls tickle his cheek. "And don't you forget it."

She blinked innocently at him, although he doubted she had an innocent

thought in that clever head of hers. Almost half smiling, she said, "So, you think I chose the right gown, do you?"

He blew a hiss of air through his teeth, glancing away from her. "I think you chose the wrong man to tease." A glimmer of a smile answered him. Even his dire tone didn't intimidate her. For no reason he could explain, his heart clenched.

Moving her onto the floor, he began the first forward step. She gazed deeply into his eyes, and followed his movements with a drift of her skirts. Clearly, she had been taught well. He lost himself in the music and sheer pleasure of holding her close. Not only that, but he enjoyed the exercise and the cooperation between a man and a woman that made waltzing a shared experience. Although he had the urge to ask, he would not disturb the silent complicity to discover why she flittered around the question of making an agreed-upon date for their marriage. He knew she wanted a season first, and he could wait until Christmas, but no longer than that to possess her.

However, something about her worried him. He had seen their attraction as mutual. He would give her a passing touch of his hand, and she would return a secret smile, or glance at him when she heard something amusing and wanted him to share the joke. When he looked at her, he recognized the melting expression in a woman's eyes that told him that she desired him as much as he desired her. With marriage ahead, he saw no reason not to, at least, kiss her.

Although he could easily find an excuse to be alone with her, every time he had today, she had disappeared with some excuse or another. Any other woman would somehow rid herself of a chaperone, or pass him a note with directions to a meeting place. Of course, the women he knew were not shy young virgins. He couldn't, although he desired her, meet her in a private place and make love to her. Living under the supervision of his mother had made kisses difficult, but not impossible.

The expression in her eyes told him that she knew he wanted her, and yet she hadn't moved toward him. He realized they had only been in London for three days and a wise man would be patient. A hungry man grabbed what he needed. He could only remain cool for a certain time before he had to find out for himself if she did, indeed, want him for reasons other than him being a suitable husband. Although she could bear his children without desire for their sire, an event common in the highest circles, until he had rediscovered her, a suitable match had been all he looked for. Now he wanted so much

more. If her desire for him didn't match his need for her ... he would be a disappointed man. And he wanted her more every day.

When the music ceased, he kept her arm on his and moved toward the main doors of the ballroom. "I plan to have a glass of punch. I'm sure you want one as well."

She pulled back a little. "What makes you think that?"

"You're sweating like a pig."

Her jaw dropped. She raised a wrist to check her cheek. "I'm not. I'm as cool as a glass of champagne."

"Accompany me into the supper room, please." He lifted her hand onto his forearm and aimed her in the direction of the door. Her expression turned wary. She took a step back, perhaps recognizing the determination on his face.

Reaching out with a firm hand on the small of her back, he guided out of the ballroom, past the supper room, and down the hallway. Although he didn't know his way around this house, he could easily assume all the rooms on this floor were utility rooms, and that the bedrooms would be on upper floor. She walked beside him, glancing at his face from time to time. Apparently his determined expression kept her from speaking. Opening the door to one room after another, he continued until he found a utility room, which would serve his purpose, in the event that no one had had the same idea first. Fortunately, not.

Finding a lantern on a shelf just inside the doorway, he used the efficiently placed tinder-box to strike a flame. The lantern light flickered on shelves containing a plethora of discarded objects, from old banded trunks, casks without bungs, old serving dishes, and a cast iron pot, to rows and rows of plates in all patterns, possibly the leftovers from sets in the family in days gone by. Despite being filled with relicts, the place looked clean and neat, as if visited at least weekly by a duster. Swinging her into the small area, he carefully took her into his arms. He gazed right into her eyes. "Do you know why I brought you here?"

She dropped her gaze to his shirtfront. Her eyelashes tickled her pink cheeks. "I'm not sure."

"Because I have never had the opportunity to be alone with you since we arrived in London." Wrapping her in his arms, one around her shoulders and the other across the flat of her back, he said gently, "Do you trust me?"

She nestled her face into the collar of his jacket. "I suspect I shouldn't."

One of her hands slowly moved to grip his jacket at the waist.

“I simply want to hold you close. I haven’t been alone with you since you came to town.” He rested his cheek carefully on the top of her head, careful not to disturb the styling, detecting a faint whiff of rosemary.

“That’s very kind of you. I hope I’m not burdening you or your mother with my insecurities?”

He leaned back and stared into her eyes. “I suspect I have been lax not to have noticed that you feel insecure.” For a moment, he tried to concentrate, but her pliable female body affected his thinking ability. “You have been the perfect daughter-in-law. My mother appears to be genuinely fond of you. I, of course, still want you.”

Her eyes met his. “You mean you want to make love to me?”

Her frankness changed his yearning into one of stark need, which he would deny unless she proved receptive to his advances. His pride would expect no less of him. “If I did, I wouldn’t attempt to take advantage of you in a storage room,” he said, hoping his tone sounded light rather than strained. He lied, of course. Given permission, he would take her anywhere at any time.

“Why would you, since you keep a mistress for that sort of thing?” A calculating gaze met his.

He breathed out, not only examining the greenish grey of her eyes, but also her expression, one of wariness: interesting to see, for he certainly did keep a mistress for ‘that sort of thing.’ Whether his face told her the truth, he had no idea, but this was not a discussion he was willing to have with the woman he planned to marry. “Let’s go back to the question about kissing you in a storage room before we move on to one about my private life.”

She put up her palms and shoved him back toward the closed door. “You asked if I am comfortable with you here. I’m comfortable up to the moment a kiss ends.”

He experienced a moment of wariness himself, knowing he would have tamp down his desire with an inexperienced, well-born lady. At least he would be allowed a kiss. After that, who knew? Drawing in a deep breath, he slid one hand to the back of her neck, maintaining eye contact. She glanced away. Her hair tickled his cheek as he tilted down his head, and breathed her faint perfume, a mixture of violets and roses. She turned up her face and his lips gently met hers. He began with a soft touching of his mouth to hers, adjusting his body to fit closely against her. Then he lifted his head and

leaned back to focus on her expression.

She continued glancing expectantly at him. Shadows flitted and flickered in the room. He obliged her by wrapping his arms around her shoulders and lowering his mouth to hers. Her quick gasp of breath stiffened her back, but he had no intention of frightening her. Outside, faint voices of servants asked and answered questions. He kept his lips softly against her while she began to move her hands to the sides of his chest.

He deepened the kiss when the full length of her body pressed against his. Trying to concentrate on nothing other than her mouth, he noted the softness of lips, and the thunderous beating of her heart. His skin heated. He lifted his mouth, beginning with a testing angle, finding a fit and, finally, a shattering response. Her lips clung to his while her body writhed against his. Wondering if had been insane to start kissing her here, he continued, knowing his male reaction had entirely left his control. However, he still remained breathing deeply enough not to push her back against the shelves and lift her skirts. *He had a mistress for this sort of thing.*

Straightening his back, he tried to end the kiss by lifting his mouth, but his face pressed against her cheek while he breathed deeply, trying to regain control of himself. She reached up and touched the skin of his face. He immediately noticed the flush of her cheek, her red, thoroughly kissed lips, and the glittering desire in her eyes. He tightened his shoulders, and moved back, not prepared to go any farther, despite the evidence to the contrary straining at his breeches. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he said, grabbing another breath.

She nodded and gazed at the floor. “I like kissing you. Let’s do it again some other time.” With that, she moved him away from the door.

He grabbed her arm and she turned to face him. “Not so fast, fancy feet. Let me tidy you up before you go marching back to the ballroom.” Lifting a tendril of hair on her face, he tucked the curl behind her ear.

She clapped her palms against her cheeks as if to cool them. “Shall I tidy you?” Her gaze focused on the front of his breeches.

“That matter will be rectified best without any help, if you please. Just wait a moment.”

A moment passed while he reflected on his behavior. He certainly wouldn’t wait until he had wedded her after all.

Chapter 9

Mary opened Eden's letter, shakily taking out a banknote for the enormous sum of five hundred guineas. She had never imagined seeing so much money in her whole life. His accompanying letter said to use the money for her wardrobe. Her eyes prickled with tears. Gratitude filled every space in her heart. Her brother was the kindest man in the whole world. He had given her the same amount as he had given Lucy two years ago.

During this past weeks with the generous Westerhams, she had been measured countless times, pricked with pins, and turned around in circles in her attempt to share the limelight with this season's beauties. Now she had the means to pay for her purchases, a great relief to her, for she had no intention of taking Westerham's money when Eden had already promised he would help with her trousseau. Today he had kept his promise.

Now the countess needed to do no more than share her well thought-out plans for Mary's gowns that had begun to make her into a debutante worth knowing. Society had tentatively accepted her. One of the season's beauties at the ball a few days ago complimented Mary's taste. With three exquisite new gowns given to her by the countess, and an expert dresser, Mary looked fashionable enough to confuse even herself into thinking she had never looked better in her life. Now she had the money to buy whatever else she needed, starting with an embroidered shawl of her own. Her shoes also needed replenishment.

However, her success mainly depended on the countess and the fact that Mary appeared to be connected to Westerham in some way. The beauties whom had not yet won a husband in the lottery of life, still had hopes of him. When Mary had finished using him as her marvelous escort, she would throw him back into the pool of eligible bachelors.

So far, her few weeks in London had been filled with balls, musical evenings, supper parties, and visits to places like the museum and the art galleries. In exchange for his money and being scrupulously entertained by him, the rakishly handsome earl merely wanted an heir from her. Naturally, that would never happen. She meant to do no more than make false promises to keep him trailing after her. False promises worked on a man as effectively

as on a woman.

An expert, lying seducer had taught her this.

She doubted anything but Westerham's pride would be hurt when she ended the farce, an expectation that somewhat eased her mind. No one outside the family knew that he thought she would marry him. Of course she couldn't. A kind and considerate man like him deserved so much better.

For the past few days she had managed not to be left alone with him, for her own sake rather than his. His kiss had almost caused her to confess to him what she had done, but at this stage, when she didn't know if she would suffer the consequences, she thought she could keep her worries a secret.

She put the bank note into her reticule and walked downstairs to Westerham's study, a large room off the hallway. He spent most mornings here, no doubt taking care of estate matters, the same way Eden did. His door stood open. She noted the way the morning light reflected from the highly polished wood of his desk, which sat in view of the door. A halo of light shone on his head, giving his hair a burnished glow. "Make sure you get these into today's post," he said to his secretary in a mild voice. His gaze turned to her, noticing she stood in the hallway. "Good morning, Lady Mary. Do come in. Have you met my secretary, Mr. Plum?"

She curtsied to the gentleman, whom she had seen in passing. "Good morning, sir."

He bowed and, slightly pink faced, mumbled a few shy words in greeting. She smiled at him before focusing on her main object, the earl. "I received this bank note from Eden. May I have one of your footmen to escort me to the bank?"

The earl held out an imperious hand. "I'll bank it for you."

"I want the money today." This morning, she had developed a headache, and she didn't want to argue with him. She passed over the note.

"Attend to this, Plum."

His secretary nodded.

"He'll exchange the note for cash, I hope."

The earl shrugged. "If you want five hundred guineas in your hand today, I'm sure Plum can provide them. But that's too a great amount of money to be carrying around."

"I want to pay the dressmaker for the last gown I ordered, and settle my account with the milliner."

His forehead creased. "It's best to pay on delivery." He appeared put out.

“That seems a little callous when the dressmaker and the milliner have to buy the materials.”

“They would have them on hand. They only need to pay their workers.”

“Is that the way it’s normally done?”

Eyeing her with a steely gaze, he managed a terse nod. “What are your other plans for the day?”

Apparently, her only plan had been dismissed by him. She had to pay her bills before he did, for she had no intention of being beholden. If she said so, he would explain again that buying his wife, or in her case, his to-be wife, her season’s wardrobe would be his pleasure. Him buying a single article for her was a burden she didn’t intend to bear, especially not today when the throbbing in her head seemed to want to take over her every thought. Therefore, she had no choice other than to lie to him. “I must visit the library. Alice will go with me.”

Strangely, seeing him in his study wearing a plain brown jacket over mustard colored breeches made him look more approachable. In evening dress, when he shone like a star on a still night, she had kissed him in a storage room. Fortunately, since then, she hadn’t been alone with him. She’d made sure of that, for reality had set in for she had no plan to marry anyone. Nevertheless, the experience with him had been well worth having, delightful, in fact, even though kissing him had been her plan to keep him interested enough to let her finish her season.

“You won’t need money for the library.” He glanced down at the papers on the desk as if he dismissed her.

“I might want to buy ribbons while I am out,” she said, stubbornly, her head pounding.

He stared into her eyes, and shifted around in his chair, delving into his jacket pockets. Finally he found a handful of guineas, which he passed to her, perhaps hoping that his largesse would stave her off for a while. “That should be enough to buy ribbons.”

“How long before I can have my own money?” she said tiredly, rubbing at the small of her back.

“Are you determined to hold five hundred guineas in your hand?”

“Yes.”

He heaved a sigh. “Well then, later today.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. Now she had to find Alice, visit the library, *and* buy ribbons when she would much prefer to pay the dressmaker

the money she owed. At least that would get her out of the house and keep her away from him for a while.

That night, she began her menses, which explained her headache. Her weariness began to disappear. She attended a supper party in a much better mood, and laughed so hard at one overheard joke, that Westerham eyed her with suspicion for some time.

Chapter 10

Westerfield had trouble understanding Lady Mary's moods. One moment she was almost frenetically happy, sparkling with life. During those times, he wanted to hug her as if the physical contact might transfer her joy to him. The next moment she behaved absently minded, and stared at him as if she couldn't remember who he was. Amazingly enough, he accepted the latter with barely a blink. Not only did he desire her, he also liked her. She appeared to be able to manage any situation with grace.

The way she treated the servants was a delight to behold. Her dresser's eyes shone with stars when she gazed at her mistress, who could clearly never do wrong. The footmen hastened to open and close doors for her, and his butler, a stickler at the best of times, had relaxed a few of his rules to accommodate her, the latest being carrying her hat boxes as she walked up the stairs. Westerham could swear that one of the footmen was willing to fight for the right to be her carpet, but Lady Mary didn't appear to notice how she affected the people around her. She simply smiled and wandered where she would.

He tried to broach the subject with his secretary, Plum, who usually loved an excuse to gossip, but Plum simply said, "She cares for people."

All well and good, but did she care for him? After kissing her in the storage room, he had expected blushes or a conscious smile from her when they met at breakfast the following morning, but her face told him nothing. He couldn't believe she had forgotten the incident, except for the fact that she almost avoided him, during the next few days. That told him that she did remember but didn't want to repeat the experience. His former self would have said he should remind her, but she had somehow shattered his conceptions about himself.

He had thought he was a good catch. He had thought he didn't have a heart to lose. He had thought that he would never finish mourning the death of one brother and the maiming of the other. After revisiting his emotions, he decided that his sadness over the death of his second brother would last his whole life, but should no longer affect how he behaved. While he would always love and miss his brother, he had somehow learned to live without his

sage advice.

He also now realized his living brother didn't need constant sympathy. He merely needed an older brother who didn't keep reminding him that he was maimed, not that he had said so, but his patience with Westerham said that for him. In the meantime, Westerham had no other choice than to treat Lady Mary the way she treated him—with circumspect behavior. She gave him no sign that she noticed.

Instead, she had a busy week accepting invitations from all and sundry. He considered not accompanying her tonight for a violin recital. If she expected his escort after they married, she would need to rethink her priorities when accepting invitations. He sat, arms crossed, trying to shut his ears against the screech of the strings. Even the prettiness of the young debutante trying to impress her hoped-for suitors with her talents didn't mitigate his agony. As he tried to get the attention of Mary, hoping she would agree to leave, a tap on his shoulder caused him to turn. He arose instantly, his mood lightening.

Eden, Lord Thornton, stood, his arms folded across his chest, grinning like a fool. "Come with me," he said in a tone slightly above a whisper. His sideways flick of his head indicated the direction.

Westerham didn't even try to motion to Mary, who appeared to be wrapped in the atrocious music. Instead, he hurried out of the room with her brother. "When did you arrive in town?" he asked, as he followed Thornton to the supper room.

"About half an hour ago. Della refused to accompany me here, which is lucky for the violinist, because Della is short tempered and would likely grab that violin and bash it against the wall." Eden always spoke in extremes. His lovely wife would have crossed her arms and sat with an expression of saintly patience on her face. "As for me, I haven't had a bite to eat since we stopped at a hotel on the way here."

Westerham had scarcely found himself a plate on the buffet table, when Mary arrived in the room, pink cheeked with delight. She threw herself at her brother and hugged him. "So much money," she said, her voice breathless. "Thank you, dear Eden. I am about to be the proud possessor of another three gowns and two hats."

"Good," Eden said, patting his sister on the back, while trying to balance his half-filled plate. He glanced at Westerham as if he needed saving.

Westerham leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. Thornton

showed as much interest in hats and gowns as Westerham. As long as Mary didn't waste her money on gowns that didn't suit her, he didn't mind what she wore. In his opinion, she looked elegant now that she had started caring about her appearance. The difference between the bland Lady Mary who had accepted his proposal, and the Lady Mary who stood beside him at the supper table couldn't have been imagined even three weeks ago. Now, her elegance couldn't be surpassed. Add to that her personality, one of interest in everything, and her habit of caring for miscellaneous people, and he knew he had found the perfect wife.

In fact, so perfect that he decided to see his mistress the next day. No point in dragging out their association. She would accept her dismissal with a shrug, for the right price. Fortunately, he could afford to be generous. The thought of touching any woman other than Mary sent waves of repugnance through him. He wanted his fresh and pure Lady Mary and no one else.

When he had met her as an adult, he'd seen nothing but muddy colors and a drab face. She had seemed perfect for the role he meant to assign her, that of a convenient wife, who would be content to live quietly in his country house and stay away from him while he amused himself in town. Naturally, he would have provided every luxury, other than an attentive husband. Now being her faithful husband had become the most important item on his list of needs. He couldn't imagine himself anywhere other than at her side.

His Mary had a purity of bone structure that fascinated him. Even in the morning at breakfast, he sat mesmerized by her clean cut jaw line, the soft curve of her cheek, the way her eyelashes framed the beauty of her eyes, so large, so clear, so honest, so Mary. She walked with dignity, her motion fluid, her posture perfect. His mother adored her. His brother would too, since like her, he was friendly and open-hearted.

The only problem Westerham could see with her was that she didn't appear to have the same interest in him as he had in her. She treated him as casual marauder. He sighed, turning to Thornton. "Be grateful, you sod, that she is using your money for herself rather than passing it off to any beggar with a good story."

Thornton nodded. "Mary can't be trusted with money. Remember that. The last time I gave her notes to spend on herself, she had the piano in the rectory replaced. The rector knows his way around females, that's certain." He gave Westerham a knowing wink.

Mary appeared stricken. "We needed that piano for the Christmas carols."

She knotted her fingers so tightly together that her knuckles turned a pale ivory.

“If Della had known, she would have bought a better one. The piano he ordered was cheap and nasty. According to Della, it will constantly need repairs. And who will pay for them? Yes, you.”

“I won’t,” she said, her face hardening “Because the money he saved he spent on his furnishings.”

Eden looked puzzled. “Doesn’t the Bishop provide his living?”

Mary didn’t answer, giving Westerham the impression that she no longer wanted to support either side. She took the seat he offered to her with a strange expression on her face and sat with her arms crossed. Finally Eden involved her in a conversation about her mother and sister who would be in town within the next few days. Lady Lucy still needed a husband, a subject that engrossed the siblings for a while, Mary maintaining that Lucy deserved to have time to choose.

Westerham spent a few seconds on wondering why Mary had been so tight-lipped about the rector, who had clearly been embezzling charitable funds. “Your rector sounds like a sod of a man. He should be dismissed. Does the Bishop know?” he asked Mary who appeared to know more about rectory than her brother.

She turned to him. “He doesn’t know that I know. I overheard him speaking to a woman about it. I haven’t said anything because I don’t care what he does and I don’t want to speak about him again.” She rose to her feet. “I’ll no doubt see you in the next few days, Eden.”

Westerham watched her leave. “She seems a little moody tonight. She is usually even tempered. I wonder what has put her out.”

“You don’t have sisters, do you?” Eden scratched his ear. “Every month you have to put up with this. It’s terrifying. You need to watch your words when it happens.”

Westerham nodded. Fair enough. He would watch his words, making sure he didn’t say anything that could be misread. His mistress had put him through a fit of temper once when he hadn’t been careful about his word during her ‘time.’ At least he understood now, what Mary’s moodiness indicated. He would be patient and the world would still keep spinning.

Chapter 11

Three days later, Mary arose without cramps or a headache, and feeling cheerful. The few days she had been resting quietly, she had refused all invitations. She'd spent some of her time with her brother and her sister-in-law, who were preparing their town house for her mother and sister to arrive. No doubt she would go out and about with both after they called, but she didn't want to stay in the Thornton residence. She had become accustomed to the comfortable bond she had formed with the countess.

Now revitalized by the past few days of not worrying about her future, she had time to think and re-plot her life. Fortunately, she could return to the track she had begun many years ago, marriage, and then children, in the right order. However, she still couldn't see herself married to Westerham. His idea of a marriage consisted of the partners living separate lives after the requisite heir and spare were presented. She'd thought she wouldn't have a problem with that, because she had planned not to go through with the wedding. Her situation had now changed, but her fickle mind hadn't.

Unfortunately, Westerham's open attitude had caused her to fall deeply in love with him. Not only did he present with gifts, he presented her with his company, his undivided attention, and smiles that any woman would adore. Wherever she went, or whatever she did, he smoothed the way for her. As a woman who was used walking a rocky road alone, his attention was a pure luxury.

She spent her morning walking in the park with Alice, and her afternoon taking tea with Lady Westerham's favorite gossip-monger, who talked non-stop about everyone. Fortunately the various scandalous doings of people Mary didn't know didn't interest her enough to remember or repeat. While she nodded and smiled, she mentally put together her wardrobe for the ball tonight.

She happened to adore balls because Westerham always chose her as his waltzing partner. Since only her family and his knew about her betrothal, his attention to her had been noted by the society doyens, which greatly added to her consequence. Streams of partners rushed to her as soon as soon as he returned her to her seat and wandered over to prop his magnificent shoulders

against the nearest wall. Although her partners consisted of many eligible bachelors, having waltzed with Westerham, she couldn't blank him out her mind long enough spare a second glance at another man.

If she hadn't fallen in love with him, she would marry him, but the thought of being tied to a man whose interests didn't include being faithful to his wife would stab too many wounds into her soul to be able to bear. She loved everything about him, his physical attractiveness, his kindness, his stupid sense of humor, and even the mere touch of his hand. She loved the way he leaned over to smile into her eyes as if he had to aim every single curve of his mouth at her.

She thought about his smile as Alice dressed her that night. Although Westerham hadn't liked her in pink, and she had agreed with his opinion, she and the countess had recently chosen a musky pink ball gown with a layer of sheer, flesh colored fabric dotted with gold-embroidered clusters of flowers. The same embroidery encircled the neckline and edged the short puffed sleeves. Discovering that the pink being muted suited her better than the clear pinks she tried on before, she bought the delicate creation. In the shoe shop, she matched the tone with pink and brown dancing slippers.

"The countess has sent this for you to wear." Alice shook out a fur lined cloak in a pale beige color and proudly held it up for Mary to see. "She thinks the embroidery on your gown would catch on a shawl."

Suddenly Mary's throat clogged up. She knew she couldn't say a word without sentimental tears beginning to form. Turning toward the long mirror, she swallowed and breathed deeply. "How very thoughtful of her."

The idea of hurting the kind countess, and annoying Westerham by breaking her promise began to weigh on her mind. He had said he no longer had a mistress. He didn't say he wouldn't find another and he wouldn't have extramarital affairs. Perhaps not saying anything meant he wouldn't. Or, perhaps he wanted to evade talking about his plans.

Perhaps if she married him, he would see no need to find another woman.

However, she wasn't a skilled lover by any means, not like a mistress. She didn't much like the act, which had been used by her as a way to gain a proposal. She had assumed a proposal would follow, but only more 'testing' had followed. A sharp *no* hadn't worked, and in the end, none of that mattered at all. She'd met an earl who wanted a wife, preferably a good breeder who didn't expect him to love her.

At first, his proposal had sounded perfect for a woman in her situation,

but her head hadn't been screwed on correctly that day. She had still been worried about an event that hadn't occurred, knowing how the scandal would affect Lucy's chances of finding a good match. And now Mary had fallen in love with Westerham. Fortunately, he didn't love her. She couldn't break his heart no matter what she chose to do.

She could either marry him, as planned, expecting to be left by him whenever he spotted another woman he wanted to add to his list of conquests, or she could summon up the strength of character to offer an uncaring smile when he left. She dallied over staying with him, hoping he would learn to love her, but the day would come when the man who could have any woman he chose would notice that his country wife's appeal had begun to fade, as it surely would if he had to see her day after day.

Holding the fur-lined cape over her arm, she left her room and walked slowly down the sconce-lit corridor. She reached Westerham's room. The door opened. Westerham stepped out. His handsome face expressed surprise. In one stride, he stopped her by standing in her way.

"Good evening," she said, lowering her gaze and trying to sidestep him. He grabbed her wrist, and pulled her into his bedroom, swinging her around until she backed up against the door he had slammed behind her. Her back stiffened and her eyes widened with apprehension. His whole posture exuded menace. He couldn't have read her recent thoughts but nevertheless, she drew fresh air into her lungs.

Clearly he was annoyed with her, but she hadn't seen him lately except for his disappearing back when she sat down for breakfast. She hadn't minded then. Her dull headache had occupied most of her thoughts.

The flat of his hand splayed on the door beside her head. His eyes turned into glittering pools of mystery, before he half-shut his lids. She swallowed, her neck tense. Suppressing the urge to apologize, willing to do anything rather than be intimidated by him, she slid both of her palms to his upper chest, ready to push him away the moment he began to speak. She waited. The silence appeared never-ending.

Slowly and inexorably, he leaned towards her until his lips touched hers. A breath of shock eased into her lungs. Her chest had barely filled when he lifted his mouth and stared right into her eyes, again.

"I have missed you," he said gently.

She clutched the lapels of his jacket. "I thought you were cross with me. You haven't spoken to me in three days."

“I took the advice of your brother who appears to know more about women than I do.”

She wanted to say something scathing about men pretending to be dear little innocents when the polite world knew better, but the words died as she stared into his eyes. He dipped his head and his lips touched hers, gently, softly, tenderly. Before she'd had time to recover her poise, he stopped and started again, trying another angle, each of his forays more gentle than the last. He kissed her as if she was a delicacy he wanted to taste before eating. He kissed her as if wanted to spend his next hour experimenting with his kisses, without a hint of impatience about the main event.

Her heart began to race. Her breath became difficult to catch. She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry, she wanted to look away, but instead she simply smiled foolishly at him. The whole world consisted of him and only him. He smelled like fresh starch and mint. If he would hold her this way for a minute or two, her life would be complete. To be held in his arms for the rest of her life would be a dream come true.

However, her treacherous body had other ideas, none being at all innocent. Her face flared with heat, and her lips sought his again and again, her whole being filled with yearning. If she could have nothing else in the world, she would be content to have an hour or two of his time making love with him. Love. Nothing less, because she loved him. She loved every one of his words and his touches, she loved his family, and she loved every single minute she spent with him. Filled with longing, she slid her hands beneath his arms to his back.

He reciprocated by wrapping one arm around her shoulders and settling the hand of the other on the back of her neck. His head dropped and his lips met hers for the most beautiful kiss she'd ever had. He appeared to relish her, with light soft kisses repeated again and again. She chased his kisses with her own, breathless, hot, and hungry.

He pressed his body closer to hers and she experienced for the first time the evidence of his desire. His hardness thrilled her. Even if this was all he wanted of her, she would accept his proposal of marriage. She doubted she could live without him now. In just five weeks she had completely fallen head over heels with the wonderful Earl of Westerham.

When she thought she might die from longing, he grasped her upper arms and moved himself back from her. His glassy eyed look caused her to lift a pacifying hand to smooth over his freshly shaven jaw. She smiled and made

another move towards him, but he gave her the stop signal. “Lady Mary, don’t tempt me.”

With that, he straightened his jacket, pulled down his cuffs, glanced from head to toe at her and said, “You’ll do. Your hair is fashionably tousled.”

She took a gulp of air. “It’s very kind of you to help me this way.”

“Any time.” With a highly amused smile on his face, he held an elbow out for her to fasten her hand.

Chapter 12

Westerham left a somewhat dull conversation with one of his cronies when the musicians struck up with a waltz. After crossing the ballroom floor, he quickly dealt with Mary's suitors by simply parting the group and holding out his hand to her.

"This dance is promised to me, I believe." Without waiting for an answer, he offered an elbow, which she took with a conspiratorial smile. Her four admirers turned to watch her leave, none holding back expressions of either disappointment or outrage.

For the past week, Westerham had been keeping a close check on his emotions, suspecting that this perverse woman would turn him onto his head given the slightest chance. He'd had to watch her flirting with most unsuitable aspirants, and now he was so tightly wound that he considered being a complete ass and compromising her to make sure she married him.

If she'd been leading him on until she found someone younger and richer, he would show her that she couldn't find another who loved her more. Her honesty and humor had brought him back from the depths of despair and into the world of people who experienced real emotions.

Since he'd had ten seasons of being considered an eligible bachelor, he automatically led her into the dance steps he knew so well. He couldn't prevent himself gazing at the lovely curve of her cheek and her demurely lowered lashes, which was as much of her face that she allowed him to see. Since re-meeting her five weeks ago, he had learned about the power of love to change a life. Never forgetting that his brother had died, he'd lost himself in the mindless routine of self-allotted tasks. She had come into his life and had turned his whole world upside down.

Tonight, from the first step of the waltz, she followed his lead without a falter. In every way she was exactly the life partner he needed. From the start, he had seen that although she supported everyone around her, that life hadn't done the same for her. Her sister had held back Mary's season in London, but not only that, made her into the spinster daughter who'd been meant to take care of her mother when everyone else had left the nest.

His beautiful Mary had been meant for a husband who would cherish her

until the end of his days. She'd been polished during the recent weeks, and now she shone. He would be delighted to be her husband even if she had still remained drab and annoyed, for she had kept the kindness of heart that he and so many other people needed.

She turned her gaze as if she had heard his thoughts, and stared at him. His chest rose with an intake of breath. He could never have guessed that the thoughtful child he had met before his life had been fractured would turn out to be the perfect woman for him. He had begun his pursuit of her, preferring her quiet insurgence to her sister's complacency. Now he could see no other woman but her. "I love you," he whispered into her ear as he took her back to his mother.

She stared unblinkingly at him, her eyes large and bright, and her jaw loose.

He settled her into a chair, which she wouldn't occupy for more than a minute or two, judging by the amount of swains who circled around her. Rather than prop himself against the wall, he partnered Lady Havers, the wife of a friend, for a cotillion. Fortunately, his mother decided to depart at a reasonable hour, giving him a chance to also leave.

After arriving home, he paced around his bedroom, going through the pros and cons of visiting Lady Mary's bedroom. Even now, since she had put off announcing their proposal, he lived on tenterhooks, thinking she may be using him as an excuse to have her long-awaited season in London. He had discovered that, even with love, doubt didn't die. He wanted to be sure of her, but his fears remained.

If he bedded her before wedding her, she would not be able to change her mind about their marriage. He had to admit to himself that even from the start, he had recognized the shuttered expression on her face whenever he tried to settle the date. As he saw it, never having been in love before had been a major disadvantage to him.

Finally, he walked along the silent and dark hallway and gave a gentle tap on Mary's door.

The door opened a crack. "Yes, my Lord?" her maid said, peering out into the hallway.

"Is Lady Mary asleep?"

"Yes, my lord."

Without another word, she shut the door in his face.

He stood for a moment, twisting his cuff links around again and again,

until he finally managed a rueful smile. His thoughts had not been worthy of him. He would settle the matter one way or the other tomorrow.

The next morning, he strolled down to breakfast a little later than usual, since she invariably ate sometime after he did. His mother ate alone.

“Has Mary already been to breakfast?”

“I haven’t seen her yet, dear.”

He dallied at the table for as long as an impatient man reasonably could. Finally, after discarding the remains of his cold sliced ham and crumbling a scrap of torn off bread, he said, “Perhaps she isn’t well? Should we inquire after her?”

His mother nodded and called over a footman, asking him to check. The footman arrived back, his face carved out of wood. “She didn’t answer. Nor did her maid when I knocked on her door. I asked the upstairs maid to enter and see how matters were.” His chest expanded and his gaze lowered. “Apparently her room was cleared of her belongings, and she and her maid have disappeared.”

His mother rose to her feet. Her gaze searched the room as if looking for her words.

Westerham raced up the stairs and into the room to check for himself.

Without a word to anyone, she had gone.

Chapter 13

Mary had meant to go to her mother in Eden's townhouse. At the last moment she changed her mind. She would rather go home to the country than have to explain why had she left the Westerhams without a word. The hackney she hired didn't travel outside London, but the driver took her to a posting inn where she could buy a ticket on the mail coach. Fortunately, the coach passed through her local village and would arrive before dark that evening. After congratulating herself for arising so early, she purchased a seat for herself and Alice.

While two laborers clattered noisily onto the roof with their bundles of tools, the two other inside passengers stood aside to allow her and Alice to choose their seats first. After thanking them with a smiling nod, she stepped in and chose a forward-facing seat. Alice settled beside her, arms crossed and adopting a forbidding clamp of her lips, apparently not about to let Mary enter conversations with the sort of people who travelled by mail coach. To compensate, Mary smiled at everyone.

A tradesman, and an older woman, who had brought a basket of food with her, entered next. The door was closed and the horses started off into clipping trot. At the same time, the woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Potage, opened her basket, and announced she was hungry having missed her breakfast. She proceeded to feed everyone with the food she presented from her hoard. Since Mary and Alice hadn't taken a bite this morning, Mary was more than pleased to accept.

By midday, the coach had made eight stops, each stop taking less time than the last. Mary had been to London many times, but always in her brother's carriage, and in relative comfort, sped up by a gold coin offered at every turnpike. The coachman, after greeting everyone, arguing about the price to be paid, and dropping off a few parcels, pulled the coach out onto the main road.

"We shouldn't have another toll to pay for quite a while," Mary told Alice, who hadn't lived in her district until she had found her job as a downstairs maid. "Am I mistaken or is the sky getting darker?"

Alice checked and nodded in agreement. "I think it is beginning to rain."

While Mary glanced out the window at the light sprinkles, Mrs. Potage decided to give Alice detailed description of every one of her grandchildren, while Mary worried about the two tradesmen on the roof. She wished she had the nerve to ask the coachman to stop and let them come inside. Drawing a deep breath, she said, “Would anyone object to inviting the two outside passengers to sit inside?”

The tradesman, who turned out to be a carpenter looking for work, said he wouldn’t mind. Mrs. Potage said she would shift and sit beside Alice and Mary, and then proceeded to tell the carpenter exactly where he would find an employer. At the next stop, when the outside passengers came inside, soaked, she passed each a linen napkin to wipe their hair, while also remembering a few nieces and nephews who also deserved an introduction to strangers in a coach.

Mary enjoyed every confiding word, feeling more at home with this motley group every mile. The housekeeper at Thornton Manor was exactly the same—she knew all the local gossip, which helped her in her perennial efforts to become the village matchmaker.

A scattering of fine droplets joined and formed rivulets that raced in streams down the windows. The air inside the coach thickened. A heavier shower beat onto the luggage on the roof. With an audible jingle of harnesses, the horses slowed to a fast trot, and then the coach suddenly slewed sideways. The coachman’s yell of impatience surprised everyone.

Conversations between six people suddenly halted. The thundering sound of two galloping horses revealed a phaeton, whose presence had been unknown until the vehicle raced past, scattering globs of mud from the wheels onto the windows.

“That driver overtook too close,” Mrs. Potage said, in voice of outrage. “What sort of person would do that?”

“Someone with more money than sense,” Mary answered righteously, having had previous experience of gentlemen who drove sleek phaetons. She had met the man she loved by suffering the mud being splashed on her gown as he drove past. Her reminiscing put a rueful quirk on her lips and an ache into her chest.

The coachman’s swearing could be heard over the sound of jangling harnesses and the grate of wheel brakes forcibly applied. The team moved into skewed walk. Mary needed to hold onto her bonnet and the windowsill. Finally, a drawn-out creak and the vehicle shuddered to a halt, throwing the

passengers forward and then back again. Mary's bonnet tilted over her face.

Colorful language, peppered with insults blackened the air outside. While Mary made a quick readjustment to her headwear, retying her bow as she checked to see that Alice, in the middle with nothing to hold onto, hadn't suffered an injury, a sharp rap sounded on the window beside her head.

"Step down out of the coach, please, Lady Mary," said a loud and autocratic voice.

She glanced outside and saw Westerham standing with a stern expression on his face and his fists planted on his hips.

"It's my lord," Alice said in a stricken voice.

Panicked, Mary looked at the other passengers, who stared right back at her. "He's trying to abduct me," she said, her throat tight, holding the inside latch with a resolute grip. "He wants to marry me for my money."

"I heard that," Westerham said, the expression on his face unblinking. "But you are wrong. I want to marry you because I love you."

The carpenter moved to the window and took a stern inspection of Westerham. "He doesn't look love-sick to me."

Westerham forked his fingers of both his hands together and placed the mesh under his chin, and his head on one side, imitating a village maiden faking sweetness. He fluttered his incredible eyelashes.

Mrs. Potage laughed heartily. "I doubt an abductor would be willing to make such a joke of himself. Go on. Go to him. He clearly loves you, dear."

"Is she telling the truth?" the carpenter asked Alice, indicating Mary.

Alice glanced at Mary.

Before Alice had time to answer, the door flew open. Cold air blasted into the steamy warmth of the coach.

"She is telling half the truth. She has no money." Westerham stood in teeming rain, appearing larger than usual. The capes of greatcoat flapped noisily in the wind. His tall hat dripped with a flowing stream. "But yes, I do want to marry her. Would anyone other than a desperate man chase a woman in this damned weather?"

The breath left Mary's lungs. Thoughts of giving in and throwing herself into his arms came and left. She couldn't possibly marry this beautiful man, despite the fact that she would never love anyone more than she loved him. Staring at his handsome face, she tried to memorize each of his features from his defined eyebrows, his expressive eyes, the blunt end of his nose, and the delicious curve of his lower lip.

“Shut the bleeding door,” said the only passenger who had never spoken until then. “Go, missy, go.” He glanced Mary with dislike on his face. “We’ll all develop pleurisy if we have to wait much longer for you to make up your mind.”

An echoing yell come from the coachman’s box. “Go, Missy. He has blocked us in. Until he leaves, we can’t.”

Westerham waited for three beats, his head tilted slightly. “In the interests of everyone here, you need to come with me.” He raised a pair of questioning eyebrows at Mary, and held out a hand. “You will be safe with me, I promise.”

Her head began to throb. She had never been anything less than safe with him. Not for a single second had she felt oppressed by him or his argumentative words. He had been born a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, and every kind word or gesture to her struck an arrow into her heart. But she couldn’t evade a problem by running away. Other means needed to be employed.

Her shoulders slumped. “Ask the driver to throw down my luggage,” she said in a resigned voice. Standing, she inclined her head to the other passengers. “My apologies for holding you up.”

“Mine as well,” Westerham said with a cheerful glance at all. “Wish me luck.”

“You’ll need it,” the carpenter said in a sour voice.

The other passengers remained silently staring. More than likely they were still shocked by a large and impressive man stopping a mail coach to retrieve one single passenger. With her heart pulsing madly, she stepped out into a puddle, wishing the most upsetting day in her life would end. Alice followed, carrying her valise. Westerham’s groom took Mary’s case down from the roof, while the coachman stood with the water streaming from his weatherproof capes, watching with his arms crossed.

Mary let herself be marched to the back of the phaeton where Westerham settled Alice beside his valet, who could manage no more than a frown. His tiger didn’t turn, since he was holding the reins.

After Westerham handed Mary up into the driving seat, he took over the reins. As the horses began to move, he said, “We need to decide on our destination. I can take you back to your home, or back to London. The latter is the closest.” He had barely finished speaking when a heavier shower hit. Rain sleeted down.

Without another word, he turned his horses back to London. Mary sat in misery. She couldn't marry a man she had deceived and she didn't want to go back with him. "Perhaps we should halt somewhere until the rain stops."

Westerham gave her his inevitable bland faced stare, which meant she had stated the obvious yet again. However, he found an out-of-the-way inn and drew up his horses. "I've never stayed here. I have no idea of the food or the service. Are you willing to take a risk?"

Her mouth lifted on one side. She had never been willing to take a risk, until she did, and the resulting guilt would haunt her forever more. "Anything rather than put us all through more of this rain."

His tiger ran to the heads of the horses, and Westerham helped her down. Alice arrived at her side instantly. "You must be chilled to the bone, my lady," she said in a horrified voice that told Mary she must look like a water rat.

Mary nodded. "I can't wait to sit in front of a fire."

Her wish was granted when she entered the inn, whose main room held an enormous fireplace, one possibly built in Tudor times. A pot, emitting a delicious aroma of food, swung from a hook.

"Do you have a private room?" Westerham asked the host, a man who appeared to be utterly surprised to see a customer. "My lady will need to change out of her wet clothes," he said in the lordly way he used to get whatever he wanted.

The man seemed to be impressed. He drew back his shoulders and took a deep breath. "She could use one of the bedrooms," he said, looking hopeful.

"I'll pay for the room. In the meantime, I would like a meal prepared. I have three servants who also like to eat."

Mary and Alice were ushered out of the room by a woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Thorpe, the wife of the owner. She proved to be chatty and she described her daily menu. At this stage, Mary would eat anything hot. After she and Alice had changed out of their wet clothes, used the amenities, and stared at each other wordlessly for a minute or two, she returned to the main room. The tiger and the groom had disappeared, no doubt taking care of the horses.

When they returned, the host ushered them into the servants' room with Alice, leaving Westerham and Mary in the main room. No other customers appeared. Mrs. Thorpe described her menu in glowing terms too good to be true. However, since the meal almost lived up to her words, eating the hot

meal became the highlight of Mary's horrendous day.

The rain stopped in the late afternoon. "We need to make a decision," Westerham said untruthfully, for the expression on his face said he had already made the decision. "We can stay here tonight, or we can go on and find a larger place with better facilities. Before you say anything, the inn has two good bedrooms, currently unoccupied. You and Alice could have the one you used previously, and I would have the other. My men would sleep with the cook, who also lives here."

The die cast, as it were, Mary nodded and straightened her shoulders. She had been preparing herself for this all afternoon. Since she loved Westerham and no one else would do, she would finally take a gamble. Win or lose, she would cope, for at this stage, she *had* nothing else to lose.

Since she already had become acquainted with the bedroom, she followed Alice up the stairs again. Alice unpacked and made up a trundle bed for herself before asking Mary if she wanted to change for dinner.

"I suspect dinner will be an early supper and I can't see a need to change again, especially since I only brought two gowns back with me. If everything is done here, we may as well go downstairs again." Fortunately, the stairs had not been carpeted or Mary would have worn out the weave at this rate, moving back and forth like the pendulum of a hall clock.

The conversation over the meal wandered from the weather in general to speculating about the weather tomorrow, and then to the countess expecting him back this evening. Westerham asked Mary if she had sent a letter to the Thornton household to prepare them for her arrival. The answer being no, she shook her head, having her thoughts occupied with other less mundane matters.

Tonight she would seduce Westerham. She had prepared her mind to do so. Nothing would deviate her from this final course. If she deserved nothing else, she ought have peace of mind.

He could find out first-hand that he had proposed to a fallen woman. Then he would leave her be without a further protest. She didn't want to tell him how foolish she had been and that a woman with her stupidity didn't deserve to be married to a perfect specimen of manhood like him. Since he didn't love her, he would be annoyed but not broken hearted. Her own heart had shattered already, knowing that even if she promised to live in the country forevermore if she really married him, he still wouldn't want a fallen woman to be the mother of his children.

The interminable meal and the routine polite conversation lasted for another hour. Night had descended and the candle flames had begun to die down. The host came by a few times to find out if Westerham wanted try a brandy, or if he wanted another bottle of wine. The answer to both was a polite rejection. She hoped he would remain polite to her. Being rejected by a man once again would likely hurt, even though she had prepared herself for Westerham's disgust of her, by saying in her head how stupid and morally corrupt she was.

He escorted her up to her room, and left for his. Alice helped her out of her gown and into her old calico nightwear, which was all she had brought, being all she had. If she had put her mind to being a mistress, she would have had elegant lace or silk nightgowns. However, not been blessed with the requisite beauty to be indulged and fought over by moneyed gentlemen, she hadn't considered such a profession. At best, she could be a schoolteacher, though she suspected that she would go back to being the family drudge.

After muddling her head for an hour, she soundlessly slipped out of bed. Without a dressing robe, she wrapped herself in her travelling shawl, the green and blue one, and silently opened her door. She scurried across to Westerham's room, trying to swallow through the dryness of her throat.

Being as careful as she could to open his door soundlessly, she crept in, her sight already accustomed to the dark. By the light of the fire that had already diminished into red and black ashes, his bedroom looked the same as hers. His clothes, hanging over a chair, had been neatly prepared for travelling the next day. He slept on his side, facing away from the doorway. The lump in her throat expanded into an enormous cotton wad. She wet the insides of her mouth and slowly, slowly lifted his bed coverings.

Before she could change her mind, she slid into his bed. The heat from his body had warmed the sheets. At first she made sure her body didn't touch his for she didn't want awaken him until at least she had tried to seduce him. He continued to sleep soundlessly. Finally, she found the courage to turn on her side. Even then, every move she made took every ounce of her courage. Before she even started, he could turn over, see her, and tell her to take her scrawny body back to her own room.

However, he didn't notice her presence. The whole procedure being harder than she had presumed, she almost slid out of the bed and left before he awoke. She had never before tried sneaky behavior, being the sort of person who said what she meant and then left matters to fall however they

may. She had never tried to take what she wanted. On that thought, she questioned her motives.

She certainly wanted him in every way: as a wife, as a lover, as the mother of his children. If she weren't willing to take a risk, she would lose. More than likely she would lose anyway, but she also might win. He may not know that she wasn't a virgin. She didn't know how men could tell, for her first experience had been nothing but painful, but if she'd had a seal, none had been broken.

As she rested her face on the skin of his back, she realized he slept naked. She hadn't seen a hint of his valise, and could only presume he chased after her, assuming she would return with him that night.

Since he hadn't noticed she had crept into his bed, she doubted he would notice if she put her arm around him. She would certainly have to awaken him at some point. Lying so close to him, she discovered that he was warm despite his state of undress. Her hand slid under his arm and onto his hard chest.

A hand suddenly clamped her fingers. A rough sleepy voice said, "Is that you, Mrs. Cunningham?"

She stiffened with shock. "Who is Mrs. Cunningham?"

"No idea. But I also don't know who you are."

"Does it matter?"

"Unfortunately, yes. If you are Lady Mary, I suggest you go back to your own room."

She didn't answer. Instead, she snuggled her head into his broad back, leaving her hand on his bare abdomen.

His chest expanded with a sigh. "I see you insist on staying here. In that case, go to sleep, and we'll worry about this in the morning." He patted her hands like a kindly uncle.

"Face me," she said onto his hot skin.

"You will regret this in the morning." Very slowly, he rolled over. He collected her against his body by scooping one hand under her, and settling the other lightly across her back.

She stared at him in the dark, visually tracing his grey outline with the help of the moonlight. His eyes remained closed with his soft lashes feathering his cheeks. The only sign that he noticed her was expressed by the short, sharp movements of his chest, indicating he had a limited control of his breathing. Clearly, he was determined to remain a gentleman. At any other

times, she thought she might have appreciated this. Tonight she wanted him to see who she really was.

She combed her fingers through the hair on the back of his head, noting the crisp thickness, so unlike her delicate growth. While she still had the courage, she pressed her lips to his. His mouth softened and his chin lifted to rearrange the angle, but his kiss remained undemanding. He continued stroking the skin of her back in a gently soothing manner, as if she were a child who needed pacifying to calm down. She hoped he really didn't feel that way about her, for every moment she was with him she wanted to be his equal in every sense.

She wanted to be resilient and courteous and thoughtful, like him. She didn't want to press her opinions on others, and she didn't want to turn away anyone who needed her. Moisture clogged her eyelashes, for she knew she was not only a fool, she was unworthy of him in too many ways to count. At that moment, she almost gave up her idea of seducing him, but she couldn't leave matters where they stood. He would still presume she was a shy young virgin until her wedding night proved otherwise.

Until last night, she had assumed she could only keep prolonging the wedding date until he grew impatient with her and decided since no banns had been announced, he could leave the pretence of her being his mother's protégée as being the whole truth of her stay with them.

Tonight, she would give him a chance to back out of their betrothal without a scrap of guilt.

If she didn't give him that chance, she would never be good enough for him.

Overwhelmed with love, suddenly she had ceased testing him.

She began loving him as he deserved to be loved, with her whole heart and soul.

Chapter 14

Using the sparse light of the moon, Westerham gazed at the outlines of Mary's beautiful face. In the few weeks he had lived with her, he had discovered an endearing pest he would love forevermore.

Unfortunately, he had her nestled up beside him. No man in his right mind would share his bed with a woman he desired. If she kept tempting him, he would sooner or later succumb. Closing his eyes momentarily, he made himself breathe through the effect of her close proximity. His cock had given up the fight long ago. He clamped his hand on himself, trying to suppress his baser urges. He would marry her in less than a month. A special license sat on the desk in his study. If he remained determined to take a physical relationship with her no further, the experience of sleeping with her would do her little harm, even though the thought of her in bed beside him would make restless nights routine for him until the wedding.

Since she had not yet agreed to the date, the week before Christmas had been lodged in his mind. He had all the arrangements in his head. If he made love with her tonight, he would be able to proceed with ordering the flowers he would need to decorate the hallway in his house, and to arrange for close family and friends to be present as witness to him plighting his troth. Knowing Mary as well as he now did, he presumed she would prefer a quiet wedding. Since he didn't want a large and mainly ostentatious plighting of troths, he would have his second cousin, a vicar, perform the ceremony.

Although still unsure of his ground, he decided that if she stayed with him tonight, she would be consenting to an early wedding. Concentrating on her outlines in the dark room, a close scrutiny revealed that her eyelashes rested on her cheeks, and her soft mouth had relaxed.

Before he had met her, the everlasting nights had been his worst times. He had spent too many long sleepless nights unable to keep out memories of his bright and charming brother and his patient father. He missed each with an unceasing gnawing ache. His dreams would become nightmares with his father ignoring him and his brother wanting no further contact with him. In life, each had been his mainstays, but in death, each wanted no part of him. He would awake in the morning agonizing over what he could have done to

keep them alive, while knowing neither death had been either his fault or his responsibility.

He knew he had to move on, but for years his life had remained the same, a constant round of balls, parties, routs, card games, card games, and more card games, interrupted by various visits to gambling dens or his mistress.

Then, one sullen winter's day, he had met Mary: Mary of the sodden skirt, Mary of the ripped shawl, Mary of the unstylish gowns, Mary the confidante of his mother, the staunch supporter of his household staff, and Mary the holder of his heart.

She said she needed him. She said she wanted marriage and children. She said she didn't care about a title or wealth. She wanted no more than a family life, she said, which was exactly what he had lost. When she had arrived in his household, she had brought him a new life, one of balls, shopping, talking, laughing, noticing people all around him, and being part of the world for the first time in years.

While he had been showing her the benefits of being his well-behaved hideaway wife, she showed him her humor, her insights, and her instinctive generosity. He doubted she knew the effect she had on all around her. Every grieving household needed a Mary, but he'd been the lucky one. He had found her.

"Time for you to leave," he said into her ear, wishing he didn't have to send her back to her room. Since he had kissed her, he had thought of nothing else but spending the night with her. The wedding couldn't come soon enough.

Her soft hands clasped onto him, one on his upper arm, the other on his wrist. "I'm not leaving. I can't." Her heart thundered against his aching chest. "Please, let me stay with you tonight."

"We'll have time enough with each other once we have wed." The moonlight picked out pale threads in her hair. He fought his urge to rest his cheek on her head.

She remained silent, her heart beating against his chest. "I'll go if I must, but this is the first opportunity I've had to be alone with you. I have thought about sharing your bed since you kissed me." She wound her arms around his neck. Her body pressed more closely to his. "An arrow shoots through my heart every time you place my shawl around my shoulders, or open a door for me, or stand aside to let me go first."

He smiled wryly, slowly stroking her hair. "Common courtesy affects

you? You are very easy to please, my lady.”

“Normally I pick up my own shawls, open my own doors unless a footman spots me, and I’ve had people walk into me when they don’t notice me behind Lucy.”

“That will never happen to you again. All the more reason to marry me quickly.” Guilt made him shut his eyes momentarily.

His original plan more than a month since, had been to let her manage her household alone as soon as she had been safely ensconced in his country house. He had only been in close proximity with her for a few days before he had entirely changed his mind. Now he wanted her beside him for the rest of his life. Although this seemed to be a snap decision, he remembered her from days gone by as a thoughtful young person. He could compare this with his more recent knowledge of her. Why she imagined that she needed to be perfect in every way, down to her performance in bed, perplexed him.

Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. “I have hundreds of reasons to marry you. But you have none to marry me. If we make love tonight, perhaps you’ll see a reason to change your mind. I’d rather you did so, sooner than later.”

“I’m not going to change my mind about you, no matter what happens tonight. I’m not marrying your body. I’m marrying your soul.”

She cupped his face between her two palms. “Please make love to me,” she said softly, easing a kiss onto his lips.

Because he knew every trick in the courtesan’s handbook, he found her plea endearing. After drawing in a long breath, he resigned himself to the fact that ordering her out of his bed was beyond a man who had thought of nothing other than holding her in his arms since he’d heard her enter his room. He drew her fast against his chest, not about to let her leave just yet. Since he had every intention of marrying her, even if he impregnated her, no one would be counting the days before delivery. Many a man had anticipated his wedding vows and no man in his right senses would refuse such a request.

Being entirely sane, he kissed her as she needed to be kissed, carefully touching his lips to hers, holding her right up against his body, and sliding one arm around her waist and the other across her shoulders. Moving over her, he tasted every inch of her lovely mouth.

His fight against his base desires lost, he buried his face in the softness of her hair before he succumbed to another kiss from her. He accepted every kiss she offered, while he held her close to his heart. Her soft hair beneath his

palm became silk. Her body grew pliant, and she pressed urgently against him. Somehow he needed slow her down. He expected to hold her in his arms for the rest of his life. He didn't want his first time with her to be an explosive start with a quick finish.

"I'm not so easy to seduce, my lady," he said in a voice that came out husky.

"Oh, I think you are."

Her answer surprised him into laughing softly into her hair. "You could be right." At that moment, he realized that he had never taken a woman with joy and laughter. He'd only ever wanted a woman who could slake his needs. With Mary, he wanted so much more.

His heart full of tenderness, he sat up and then slowly slid her nightgown off her shoulders. Although he was aroused, he was also in love. Enjoying her full cooperation, he managed to tug her nightwear over her head, and finally hold her silken body against his. He knew he had to go slowly with a virgin but that ended his entire knowledge of virgins, having never bedded one. He began by lying beside her.

She moved into his arms where she snuggled closely to him, her head beneath his chin and her hands on his back. His erection pressed hard against her belly, but not for long. She moved him between her legs and circled her arms around his neck, leaving him to take the lead. All his promises to himself to go slowly ran through his head while his body ignored everything but his need. Her fingers began to comb through the hair at his nape. She pressed her mouth against his, relaxing and shifting even closer, letting him angle deeper into the kiss.

Her invitation was clear. He could touch, and he didn't hesitate to do so. With no more than two or three qualms, he slid his mouth down her arching throat to the white flesh below, finding the top of her breast with his mouth. His hand cupped beneath the heavy fullness, and his lips glided gently over her skin. The scent of her filled his senses, wetting his mouth and urging him to taste her.

Tightening his chest in an effort to keep control, he found her nipple, and he rubbed the bristled surface of his jaw across her breast. He heard her gasp and felt her instant puckering on his cheek. Opening his mouth, he breathed hotly over her nipple, misting it to a state of readiness and taking himself to a state he hadn't planned on.

He stopped for a moment and tried to contain his desperate arousal.

While he rested his forehead on her throat, she smoothed her hand over his hair. She felt so soft and warm, that his need for her overwhelmed him. When he finally plunged to her depths, she would sheath him tightly. She would be hot and slick and she would grab at his buttocks, move hard against him until he dripped with sweat in the effort not to come. She would scream for him not to stop, never to stop and ...

He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't afford to think this, not about a young virgin who he would nurture for the rest of his life, whose feelings were important to him. A wellborn lady wouldn't give her body to just anyone, or at least not without regret. He leaned over her and stared into her eyes. "It's up to you what happens next."

Her lips covered his, and her palm covered his erection. Without wasting another moment, he dropped his head and his mouth found her nipple again. As he suckled, he lifted one of her legs over his hip. With his fingers, he teased in her moisture again. She arched her back in pleasure, and he fought to keep control.

He began sweeping movements with his fingers and started to press slowly inside her. She groaned. Her thighs tensed. "Guide me," he murmured. "Tell me what you want."

She gave a high-pitched laugh. "More."

He found her little nub with his fingers and slid back and forth. At first she winced a little but her breaths grew uneven and her knees quivered. She began to make sobbing moans, taking him by surprise. He needed to kiss her to swallow the sound, or so he told himself. Finally, she built to a peak, and stayed there, making unintelligible smothered noises that finally turned into a soft laugh as she finally relaxed. She clutched at his shoulder and turned her body right into his.

He cupped her behind with his hand, breathing hard and burying his mouth in the juncture between her neck and shoulder. Although he didn't speak, his whole body asked a question.

Her eyes closed and she threaded her hand into his soft hair. "I had no idea," she said in a voice that sounded like a soft sigh. "Now, can I have you?"

Lifting himself up onto one elbow, he gazed into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I have never been more sure of anything in my whole life."

He needed no more to clasp her back into his body, and cover her. With a

slight adjustment of his hips, he pushed a little way inside her, pressed a little deeper, drew back and eased forward again. She was still a little tight but he knew she would ease with patience on his part. “Just tell me when you want me to stop.”

“I’m scared, Beldon,” she whispered. “If you keep asking questions, I’ll start thinking too much.”

His lips lowered to surround hers and his fingers eased in and out of her moisture. Again, and with breathtaking ease, his fingers built her to a state of excitement that had her thrashing her head from side to side and clutching at his back. He took control, giving her the opportunity to experience gratuitous pleasure.

Hot tears began to roll down her cheeks. He then took his hand away, and began to enter her, pushing a little deeper inside her. She slowly relaxed her knees, while his cock began to expand her. Her fingers gripped his buttocks. He slid right into her, losing himself in the moment, before he gradually began to speed up. When he began dripping sweat, and his skin stuck to hers, she exploded, again and again and again, her body clenching against his, holding him, doubling his pleasure.

Finally, hot and sweaty, he released, staying inside her until her heartbeat calmed and her grip eased. He heard her laugh. Only then did he ease out of her.

Rolling to the side of the bed, he sat up, and swung his legs over the side, knowing that the water in the washing bowl would have cooled. While he considered ringing for hot water, she leaned over and circled her arms around his shoulders from behind. “I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did.”

He spun around and took her into a fiercely protective hold. His chin pressed so hard into the top of her head that it hurt. “I love you, Mary.”

“I love you, too,” he heard in exchange.

Chapter 15

Mary lay in bed, watching Beldon sleep. Events hadn't gone as planned. He was supposed to notice she wasn't a virgin and be shocked and disgusted, and call off the wedding. He had almost broken her heart when, instead, he had said he loved her. Now, she didn't know what to do next.

She hadn't dared to dream of a life with Beldon, assuming he would break off the proposal and send her back to the country, where she would live for the rest of her life, playing the piano for the village children, in between running the house for her mother.

Last night, she had been braced for a few moments of pain and embarrassment, but instead had been given explosive joy and time to lie in Beldon's comforting embrace. Now, all her plans and thoughts sat in disarray, and she had to make a decision. Should she tell him the truth, or should she keep her previous experience a secret? He hadn't appeared to notice, or if he had, he had kept quiet. Would he leave recriminations for later, or would he also ignore what he must have noticed, that she had no hymen to break?

She rolled over and watched his sleeping face. His remarkable eyelashes rested on his cheeks as he slowly breathed in and out. She reached out a finger to touch, but his hand took hers to beneath his stubbled chin, which he rubbed against her palm. "I expect I need to shave," he said in a low husky voice. His eyes became sleepy slits as he gazed at her.

She breathed out. "I'll leave before your valet arrives."

"Stay. He may as well get used to seeing you in bed with me, not that I need an audience, but he is bound to see the same sight more than a few times over the years."

"When do you plan to marry me?" she asked in a cautious voice, watching his expression change from unfocussed to intent.

"In little over two weeks. In fact, I plan to put the announcement in the papers as soon as we get back to London." He sat up, resting on one elbow, narrowing his gaze at her. "I discovered something last night that I didn't know."

All her fears centered in her chest, her heart racing into a panicked beat.

She swallowed, about to explain, but her words wouldn't come. Not only that, she didn't want to tell him after all. He didn't own her body and since she hadn't married him, he had no more right to her than any other man.

"That I am hopelessly in love with you, my Mary." He snatched her back into his arms. "My marvelous Mary."

The door creaked open. "My Lord ..." His valet, Shuttle, peered in, widened his eyes, and quickly closed the door.

Beldon laughed. "He'll give me half an hour and try again. I shall escort you back to your room. Although I would love to keep you here all day, London awaits the announcement of our wedding."

She hugged him and slipped out bed, but not quickly enough. He followed her and snatched her back into an embrace, kissing her mouth with expert devotion to his task. She finally had to push him away. "Stop. I have to leave."

He sighed, pulled on his breeches, and hurried her to her room with his protective arm around her waist.

Alice, who had already dressed, raised her eyes heavenward when she saw them, but only said, "I have ordered a bowl of hot water for you, my lady."

Mary hesitated, but Alice's reaction decided her that she didn't need to explain to anyone.

She washed and dressed and smiled all the way back to London, sitting on the forward seat close beside the man she loved.

Chapter 16

Two days later, Westerham called on Mary's mother, Lady Thornton. He bowed formally to her and smiled. "Finally your daughter has seen fit to allow us to arrange a date for the wedding. I assume you saw the announcement published in the paper this morning."

Mary's mother nodded. "Two weeks!" she screeched. "A private ceremony to be held in Westerham House. I don't know how I can arrange a wedding in that time. I thought she would be married some time next year. Why can't she wait for a more convenient time? I can't get all the family together in two weeks, let alone her friends. We'll all have to go back to the country house and tell the rector, and hope that he has free time before Christmas."

"As stated in the paper, Mary wants a small private ceremony in my town house. She doesn't want extended family or to be married in the country." Mary had utterly refused to be married by the local rector. He took a deep breath, prepared to go into battle for her.

Her mother stood, considering and frowning, until she finally nodded. "She'll have to come back to Thornton Place a week before the wedding and help me get a trousseau ready."

He didn't want to part with her now that he knew she was his. For a moment he closed his eyes, and considered someone other than himself. Her mother deserved at least the pleasure of arranging a trousseau. He heaved a sigh. Mary would be only a few streets away, and he could still see her every day.

"I'll send her to you as soon as she can pack." He ungraciously hoped Mary would refuse, despite knowing that she really had to be with her family at this time, since she would spend the rest of her life with his.

During the next two weeks, he barely saw her, except on formal occasions, when he would dance with her and she would keep him up to date with the wedding arrangements. Thornton had decided he should hold the ceremony in his town house and stick to the plan of inviting only the closest relatives to the ceremony. Since most of the others had gone back to their country homes, no nose would be put out of joint. Lady Thornton then

teamed up with his mother and took charge of the decorations. Westerham would provide the flowers.

On his wedding day, Westerham arrived with his mother and his brother, one on either side. Mary hadn't yet met his brother but the meeting would have to wait until after the ceremony. Instead of walking down the aisle, Mary stood at the end of the hallway, with Westerham's second cousin, suitably garbed as a vicar.

Westerham, flanked by his closest relatives arrived at her side. His heart thundered with nervousness. Brides had been known to back out at the last minute, and she'd been so hesitant to accept his proposal that even now he wasn't sure of her.

As he walked towards her, she turned and smiled at him. His relief restored his confidence, and within moments he reached her. Finally, he stood beside her, while his cousin read the wedding vows. Although Westerham nodded in the right places, and spoke in the right places, until he heard the words, 'I now pronounce you man and wife,' he stood like a block of wood.

Finally, he could kiss the woman he loved in front of friends and family.

Chapter 17

Christmas had come and passed while Lady Mary and her sinfully handsome husband travelled to France for their honeymoon. Tonight was her first day as the Countess of Westerham in her husband's townhouse in London. His spacious, luxurious bedroom had been lit by candlelight, and shadows flickered on the walls. Safely snuggled in Beldon's arms, Mary smiled up at him.

He ran his hand through her unbound hair, and sighed. "Why do I love you so much?"

"Because I love you." She hugged him tighter.

"Why do you love me?" he asked, clearly angling for compliments.

She drew a deep breath, searching her mind for the impossible answer. "I feel safe with you. I trust you."

"Since I met you, I have done my best to be worthy of you."

"Is worthiness a reason to love someone?"

His face rested on her hair and his breathing halted for a moment. "It's a reason to love you. I wouldn't have changed if I hadn't met you. You gave me back a heart."

She smoothed the skin on his shoulder, concentrating on the thought that she had changed him. In turn, she realized that he had changed her. She now understood that she had someone in her life she could trust with everything, including her heart.

More than likely, she could trust him with her secret too, but since she didn't know anything about his mistresses, and certainly didn't want to know, she realized she had made the right choice in not revealing hers. "You showed me that the most important thing in life, is love. Without love, both of us would have been lost."

He showed his appreciation of her words with a deep kiss, which led to another night of passion.

About Virginia Taylor

Virginia Taylor trained to be an artist before switching over to gain a diploma as a nurse/midwife. She then veered again, and worked as a theatre set painter and designer while following the tortuous path to be published as a writer of contemporary and historical romance novels.

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Yuletide Secrets

by S. Cinders



Prologue

Rakesburg, England
1817

In the small hamlet of Rakesburg, amongst the gorgeous rolling hills, one could find the sprawling family seat of the illustrious Collingsworth family, Starcrest. In that stately manner, which showed no less than thirty-six windows on the front side, resided forty-two servants and one Lady Anne.

An only child, Anne suffered the loss of her mother at an early age. Her father, Lord Rawlings, Earl of Rakesburg, was an absent landlord and a forgetful father. During her formative years, Anne was left to wander the opulent hallways of Starcrest with only herself as a playmate.

It wasn't that Anne felt herself too far above the village children. In truth she would have loved to have had a playmate besides her old nurse, Eliza. Sadly, the Earl hadn't wanted his daughter to mingle with the lower classes, so Anne watched all the play from the sidelines—alone.

“Would you like me to take down your hair, miss?”

Anne glanced up to see Mary, her new maid, peering at her anxiously from the doorway. A part of Anne hated that Eliza's familiar face was not staring back at her. It certainly wasn't Mary's fault that she was expected to fill the shoes of a beloved servant. However, Eliza would have known instinctively that something was wrong. Eliza would have teased her out of her doldrums. It really didn't matter now because Eliza was no longer at Starcrest.

Straightening her shoulders, Anne shook her head faintly. “No, thank you, Mary. I won't be needing you for the rest of the night.”

“Would you like me to turn your bedcovers down?” Mary asked hesitantly.

Anne looked around her newly decorated room as if to see what the maid was speaking about. But the only thing that Anne saw were the sour faces of the village gossips from earlier that afternoon as they spitefully nattered on about her at the milliner's shop.

Mrs. Green, a large woman who had a tendency to spit when talking, was

blurting out, “Olivia, you know as well as I do that Lady Anne puts on airs. Why, look at how she’s retreated to Starcrest like a kicked puppy. For lack of a better phrase, Lady Anne experienced a failure to launch. It’s an embarrassment to the entire county.”

As the two ladies tittered away, Anne had felt her heart hardening against the old biddies. Mrs. Tabitha Green and Mrs. Olivia Tolhurst were merely bullies in bonnets, Eliza would say. Instead of entering the shop, as Anne had intended, she had promptly returned to her carriage.

After all, Anne had thought bitterly, it’s common knowledge amongst the crème de la crème of London that young ladies of a certain ilk must be lovely and agreeable in all things. One never addressed the unsavory things that happened all around them. One had to pretend such things didn’t exist.

Once home, Anne had shut herself inside of her room, refusing dinner. The two women’s words mingled with all of the others over the years until it had brought Anne to the reflective state she now sat in.

Anne stewed over the fact that there were many suitors who argued as to her agreeability. More than one gentleman had pointed out the importance of a lady’s submission in all things to the far superior male race.

Damned by her own gender as too high in the instep, and damned by her suitors as a bluestocking, Anne was tired of being measured by others and coming up short. During her splash amongst the Ton, Anne seemed to do everything wrong. It was whispered that if she didn’t curb her wild ways that she would be branded as an ape leader, a spinster, and quite possibly even a vulgar woman.

Anne, being a rather intelligent creature, failed to see the value behind this logic. She knew what inappropriate behavior consisted of, and she hadn’t done anything wrong. The only thing Anne had been guilty of was not bending to the will of others. Anne longed for the days when she only had to answer to Eliza. Her old nurse had never tried to change who Anne was.

Mary cleared her throat, drawing Anne’s attention back. “I have added another log to the fire. Are you certain you don’t want anything from the kitchen?”

The thought of eating turned Anne’s stomach. Shaking her head, she replied, “No, thank you, Mary. Get some rest.”

Anne could see the hesitation on her maid’s face. But true to form, Mary nodded and left Anne alone in her bedchamber. Mary was a new maid, having only served Anne for a short while. Her previous nurse, Eliza, had

been by her charge's side ever since Anne had made her entrance into this world.

Heat stung Anne's nose as she thought about Eliza's passing during the previous year. It had been difficult enough facing the Ton after five failed seasons. Her father had been furious with her inability to choose one of the gentlemen that had arduously pursued her. But Anne hadn't felt a single connection with any of them. She had tried, she honestly had.

In Anne's first season she was marked as fast when she raced Lord Farnsworth in Hyde Park and won. Her father had been livid. In her second season, Anne had fallen into a heated argument with Mr. Pomphrey about the true reason behind Lady Morgan's sudden departure from London the previous year. It all seemed so stupid now, but at the time she had been incensed at the blatant lies that Mr. Pomphrey had been spouting about her friend.

Her father had called her into the parlor and said in strict tones that she was being far too free with her tongue. He went over a litany of sins, many of which Anne hadn't even been aware of committing. Lord Rawlings told her under no terms should she ever give her opinion. Nor should she discuss politics over breakfast, ask a man to dance, or correct a man, no matter how wrong that she might feel he may be.

When Anne was finally finished receiving that stern dressing down, she was fairly seething with anger. During her first season Anne turned down no less than five eligible offers for her hand in marriage. Her father tightened his screws, trying to get Anne to bend to his will.

Perhaps if he had actually taken the time to get to know his daughter, Lord Rawlings would have known what a mistake that had been banding about town the exorbitant sum he'd set aside as her dowry. The tabbies of the Ton were in awe that the lady had managed to bring five suitors up to task with her bold ways. The fact that these gentlemen were mostly impoverished fortune hunters didn't signify.

They were horrified the second year when Anne promptly turned down three additional suitors. One gentleman even reported that she had been known to drop such vulgar terms as "hornswoggle," "perdition," and even a "balderdash" a time or two.

Year after year, Anne shunned the eligible bachelors of the Ton. After each suitor was turned away, Anne's relationship with her father grew increasingly brittle until it reached its breaking point.

That's when Anne received word that her precious Eliza had fallen ill. Anne dropped everything and raced back to the countryside. She arrived in Rakesburg in the middle of the night; once the carriage had stopped at Starcrest, Anne raced straight to Eliza's side. She had two days with her beloved nurse before Eliza returned to God and Anne was left alone in the world.

In the days that followed, Anne refused her father's summons back to London. While she had been working on thwarting her father, Eliza had been slipping away from her. Anne vowed to never fall into that trap again. When the next season came along, Anne wasn't a part of it.

Anne shook her head, trying to dispel the memories. With unsteady hands, she reached up and began to take the pins out of her hair. Long golden strands that were neither curly nor straight began to fall down her back. Taking her mother's silver brush, Anne began to comb through her thick hair.

Pleased with her reflection, Anne shook her head at the absurdity of the women in the village. All Mrs. Green and Mrs. Tolhurst could see was her age of six-and-twenty. They considered her firmly on the shelf. Perhaps marriage and babies weren't for Anne. As much as she had always wished for a family, she wasn't about to tie herself to someone just to achieve that goal.

If she had heard it once, she'd heard it a thousand times. The matrons said that such a beauty shouldn't have been wasted in the country. They said that Lord Rawlings should have sent her away to a finishing school. Others insisted that a proper governess would have squelched out the bold tendencies that so shocked one and all.

However, most people got it wrong. For all her faults, Anne was as kind as she was beautiful. Although it's said that beauty can overcome many obstacles, it clearly had met its match in the eminently stubborn Anne.

Anne supposed that she had figured her father had washed his hands of her. Perhaps that is why she had been so surprised when she had received his latest missive. Picking up the parchment, she began to read.

My Daughter,

I have arranged for you to visit your godmother, Lady Genevieve. She is getting on in years and has asked if you might be available to come and stay. I know you will be a comfort to her.

I don't mean this as a suggestion, Anne. The servants will deliver you to

your godmother and there you will stay for at least a fortnight. Don't think of this as a punishment. Think of this as an opportunity.

I know you think I am an unfeeling sort of father, and I suppose in some ways I am. But I loved your mother, and I only wanted you to have the kind of love that we once shared. Since you have made it clear that you have no intention of marrying. I have decided to stop pressuring you toward marriage.

Lady Genevieve is a long-time spinster who lives a full and happy life. She is precisely the sort of woman that I always wished you would become.

Don't piker up. I know you will see this as an affront, but that isn't my intention. Anne, whether or not you believe it, I only wish to see you happy.

Yours in health,

Father

Considering that Anne had only received a half-dozen missives from her father in the last ten years, she understood the importance of this one. Tapping the parchment absentmindedly, Anne tried to remember what she could of Lady Genevieve. The woman had been bent with age when Anne was a child. But if Anne was correct, Lady Gen was also spicy and fiery, with a twinkling eye and a sharp tongue.

Whatever could her father be up to? For the first time in ages, Anne's interest was sparked. In a moment of impulse, Anne resolved to go to Lady Gen's. It was high time she stopped moping over her dear Eliza and had an adventure.

Calling for Mary, Anne instructed the trembling maid to begin packing her things. They were headed to Brighton.

Chapter 1

Brighton, England
Christmas, 1820

Anne was late—again. This in and of itself was not an unusual occurrence. Her godmother, Lady Genevieve, had teased her about it so many times that Anne had vowed to curb herself of the ugly habit. Having just left Lady Genevieve's carriage at noon, precisely one hour earlier, outside of the Brighton Pavilion, Anne had promised Lady Gen that she would return promptly at one.

However, once inside the lending library, Anne had been swept away in the pages of exotic locales and dangerous adventures. When she happened to glance up and see the time, Anne knew she would need to make a run for it.

Her maid, Mary, had grown quite used to Lady Anne's shenanigans and didn't even attempt to keep up with the sprightly young woman when she dashed away. Anne felt the stinging cold on her cheeks and knew that the breeze was yanking the pins out of her hair. However, none of that mattered when she had her goal in sight. Anne didn't want to give Lady Genevieve any further reason to her tease about her lack of timeliness.

Quickly glancing back-and-forth before darting out into the busy street, Anne made a final push to get to her destination. A rare smile peeked out upon Anne's face. The older woman would be quite surprised to see her operating in a timely fashion for once. Ignoring the slushy puddles and slick patches of ice, Anne leapt over the last curb just as a high-perched curricule came round the corner at breakneck speed.

A small body crashed into Anne, sending her hurtling. They both went down with a thud. Snow and ice crunched under her body as her head connected with the cobblestones on the street.

Shaken to the core and having the stuffing taken out of her, Anne took a moment to catch her breath. For the briefest of moments Anne fought the blackness that threatened to overtake her. Bile rose in her throat as her stomach threatened to revolt. Anne refused to pass out; as the blackness tried to descend, she fought it heartily.

If there was anything to be said about Anne, it would not be that she put on missish airs. However, the lack of air in her lungs was a trifle disconcerting. The person who knocked her down quickly scrambled off her. Anne turned her head to see a boy staring back at her.

His pallor was entirely white when he yelled over her shoulder. “Dear heaven above, I have killed her. Brant! Get over here!”

The anguish was so raw that Anne wanted at once to assure him that she would indeed recover—when the world stopped spinning, of course. She opened her mouth to speak when another young man, an exact replica of the first down to the shock of black hair and dark gray eyes, came into view.

He frowned a little. “Oh, Henry, she is not dead, you ninnyhammer, only knocked up. Give her a moment to collect herself. Uncle Ian is going to name an estate after you, Twin. What a heroic rescue!”

If at all possible, the one called Henry, paled further. “We don’t have to tell him, Brant.”

Brant shook his head. “It won’t work, Henry. Half the city will know about it in less than half an hour. Did you have to save her right in front of the Royal Pavilion? Blast, it’s starting to snow.”

Anne would have been amused by the pair if she felt better. As it was, she stared at the twins from her sprawled position on the ground. “Well, heroes of mine, I suppose I ought to thank you. Might one of you give me a hand up?”

The twins swung their gazes back to her before jumping into action.

“Right, sorry, miss. I had started to think about my Uncle Ian and quite forgot that we had left you down there.”

Henry scowled when his brother cuffed him on the back of the head.

Brant shook his head. “I am terribly sorry for my brother’s lack of manners, ma’am.”

“Oi! You didn’t do anything to help her up either. I saved her!” Henry groused.

Brant shook his head at his twin and extended an arm down to Anne. “How terrible to be knocked off your feet. Are you feeling just wretched? Please allow me to help you. My name is Mr. Brant Stanford, and this is my brother, Henry Stanford.”

Anne allowed the boy to help her stand. Besides a rather incessant ache in her hip and side and a pounding headache, she was remarkably unhurt. If only her head would stop pounding, she could make sense of the situation.

“Thank you, Mr. Stanford and Mr. Stanford. I am Lady Anne

Collingsworth.”

“Lady Anne?” Henry looked positively forlorn. “Do you suppose that we could just keep this little incident to ourselves?”

Anne’s lips almost betrayed her, but she waited until she could speak in a steady tone.

“Well, Mr. Stanford, you did save my life. That driver was speeding along at an unbearably fast clip, especially with pedestrians present. Are you being bashful, or is something else afoot?”

The twins looked around and saw that there was a crowd forming around the trio.

Anne laid a hand on Henry’s arm. “I won’t tell anyone if you do not wish it. But what you did just then, Henry you saved me. I must thank you.”

Henry’s cheeks turned the brightest shade of pink. “You’re welcome, miss. It wasn’t anything, I assure you. It’s only that Uncle Ian will have my head for disobeying him. I’m not supposed to be anywhere near here. I suppose the chances of you meeting him are small, though. Say, are you feeling quite the thing?”

Anne nodded and immediately felt the worse for it. The boys, seeing the color fade from her cheeks, immediately became nervous.

“Doesn’t look well, does she, Twin?” Brant observed.

Anne would have laughed if she felt better. “Gentlemen, let this be a lesson to you for when you’re older. Never tell a woman that she doesn’t look well. She’s likely to retaliate.”

Brant shook his head in disgust. “We don’t talk to many ladies if we can help it, miss. Our mother said that someday we will change our minds, but the chances aren’t likely of that happening.”

“What about Millie?” Henry exclaimed. “She’s not that bad.”

Brant shrugged. “I suppose we have to include Millie, but she’s not really a lady, she is a cousin. Come on now, let’s see if we can get you off the street.”

Brant moved to Anne’s side.

Anne took his arm, hating when the world started tipping this way and that.

“We need to find Uncle Ian,” Brant instructed Henry.

“He’s going to be upset that we didn’t stay at the inn like we were supposed to. What’s he going to think about our adventures this morning?”

A whiskey-smooth male voice answered, one much different from the

youthful exuberance that Anne had come to associate with the twins. “That is a fine question indeed. What is Uncle Ian to think?”

Lady Anne and the twins turned their heads.

The twins' looks were a mixture of dread and relief. Anne supposed that they must have some faith in the man if Brant had thought to go to him in a time of need. She peered up at the individual. The arresting sight that met her gaze had her floundering for a moment. He had much the same coloring of the boys. Only this was no youth.

Tall and lean, with steel-gray eyes and a square jaw, the boy's uncle cut an imposing figure. He was rigged out with the finest of linens. His pants were cut in the severe style, flattering a shapely calf and long muscular thigh. There was no padding or flummery to his costume, his colors were muted, and the only adornments he wore were a signet ring and an ox pin in his cravat.

“Have these two whelps been harassing you, Madam?”

Anne loved the timbre of his voice. It was dark and decadent. It took her only a moment to realize he was speaking to her and she was gaping at him like a ninnyhammer.

“Oh, not at all.” She paused trying to piece together exactly what had happened. “These gentlemen have been most helpful, and well, um...”

“I see,” he interrupted, noting her pale complexion and the slight line of blood from the side of her cheek.

To Anne's view, there was not a fleck of emotion in his handsome visage to confirm whether or not the handsome gentleman understood her predicament or not. Anne didn't wish for the boys to be in hot water on her account. Bristling a little she said, “Truly, all is well as you can see. I um, well, thank you Henry for saving me. I had best be on my way.”

With the first step, pain radiated from her hip. It wasn't so much that she couldn't walk, it was only that the discomfort and lack of ease of the business showed on her face.

The dark gentleman frowned. It was the first show of real emotion that Anne had seen from the man. He moved a step closer saying, “If you would wait just one moment, please?”

At her look of annoyance, his lip twitched. He continued saying, “I am very much assured that all is well, but what I would really like to know is the truth. I can see that you are hurt, Madame. Out with it, halflings, how is it that I am finding you in the streets of Brighton when you are supposed to be

safely ensconced in the hotel?”

Henry swallowed. “Is it too late for you to play dead, Lady Anne? I may wish to join you.”

Anne turned to him in surprise. “But Henry, you saved me? Surely that is something worth celebrating.”

Their uncle raised a brow in interest.

“Blast,” Brant muttered under his breath. “Sorry, Uncle Ian. We were tired of Millie mothering us to death. She’s only two years older than we are. But she is constantly telling us what to do. The very nerve! Naturally, we left the inn to look for an adventure and saw a carriage about to plow through Lady Anne. Henry shoved her out of the way and saved her.”

Anne winced again as she tried to take another step.

The older gentleman shook his head as if to clear it, then boldly took her arm. “I beg your pardon. I know this is highly unorthodox. But I must insist on seeing you home. If I might present myself? My name is Mr. Ian Stanford, and these two reprobates are my nephews, Brant and Henry.”

Anne nodded in greeting before replying, “Lady Anne Collingsworth. I was just about to meet my godmother when your nephew saved me. I must be terribly late by now. If you could just see me inside the pavilion?”

“Of course,” Stanford answered at once.

Gently taking her arm, Stanford helped Lady Anne up a few steps. But it seemed that each movement pained her terribly. There were faint white lines around her mouth and her coloring was poor.

He was just about to abandon this foolish nonsense when he heard a familiar voice.

“Ian Stanford, what are you doing with my goddaughter?”

The four of them whipped their heads around to see an elderly woman, bundled to the hilt, being escorted down the stairs by two large footmen.

Anne felt her cheeks heat when she realized that the handsome stranger was standing a trifle close and she could smell his cologne. She hadn’t the foggiest idea of what scent he wore. But the deep spicy notes were heavenly, and she knew it wasn’t a scent she was likely to forget. He was much larger than she was, and his arm was heavily muscled.

Lady Genevieve’s wrinkled face was tight with concern when she asked, “My dear, are you alright?”

Before Anne could speak, Henry launched into a detailed explanation as to what had happened. Anne wasn’t sure the validity of his story. The curricula

had been upgraded to a barouche pulled by four matched bays, and she hadn't remembered the tiger jumping from the back of the vehicle to fight Henry.

However, as the world was getting a bit topsy-turvy, she knew she wasn't in a position to argue.

"How fortunate that you were all here to save my dear Anne," Lady Genevieve exclaimed. "Let's get out of this weather. Where is Amelia?"

"She's at the inn in the square," Stanford said angrily. "Where these two should have been. However, none of that matters now. Lady Anne should be seen by a physician immediately."

Effortlessly, Stanford contrived to gather the twins, Lady Genevieve, and Anne into the coach; soon they were headed back toward Lady Genevieve's lovely townhome.

Chapter 2

“Do you want to explain why Lord Rawlings’ wayward daughter is posing as your lady’s companion of all things?” Stanford stood with his back to the fire in Lady Gen’s boudoir, eyeing her with a critical air. “Are you ill?”

Lady Genevieve shook her blond curls, a wig that she wore most favorably. “Dearest, it is nothing of the kind. She’s not my companion, merely a friend who is staying on and helping out a little. I don’t pay the girl. Don’t be stupid. Please, come and sit beside me so that we might be comfortable, and I shall tell you the whole of it.”

Stanford assessed her, still quite lovely in all of her years. Lady Gen was a good woman. She also tended to get involved in matchmaking schemes, and of this he was quite wary. Ian had no wish to fall into the parson’s trap. If Lady Anne and Lady Gen had worked up some sort of plan involving him, Ian would soon make short work of it.

Briefly he remembered her creamy skin and pale complexion. Lady Anne was truly lovely. However, mistakes in his past had ruined Ian forever for love and marriage.

“I see. Am I to suppose that Lady Anne’s presence here had nothing to do with your summoning me?” Stanford asked as he crossed the room and took a seat beside her. When Lady Gen’s cheeks pinked, he added, “I will have the truth of it. No nonsense, if you please, I have enough of that to deal with from the twins.”

Lady Genevieve’s eyes danced as they always did when Henry and Brant were mentioned. “Is it true that they tried to smuggle a chicken into the nursery?”

Stanford looked taken aback. “Goodness no! Wherever did you hear that?”

“I have my sources,” Lady Gen teased.

Ian harrumphed. “Likely Lillian wrote to you. She’s a damned fine mother. I still am amazed that Ryan managed to make her his wife. The woman is a saint to put up with my brother Ryan and the twins. She’s too good for all of the male domination in her family.”

Lady Gen laughed. “I suppose she knew what she was getting into

marrying a man with so many brothers. Tell me, how is the family?"

While Ian filled Lady Gen in on his brother's lives, he marveled at how comfortable it was to be speaking with the older woman. She had a way of putting everyone at ease.

Lady Gen continued, "Now, I didn't expect the twins to be with you. What did they do this time?"

Stanford sighed, a hint of smile entering his eyes. "Nothing so dramatic as chicken smuggling, I assure you. It was actually Millie that asked if they could come along. I think she's lonely."

Lady Genevieve arched her brow. "Amelia? Is everything well with her?"

Stanford rolled his cane. "She's in good health, at least as much as a thirteen-year-old girl can be. I own that I don't understand the female mind half as well as I once thought I did."

He first learned about his daughter while living in America. His eldest brother had travelled across the pond with his wife Juliana to inform him that he had a daughter. Stanford had run the gamut of emotions, from anger to sorrow to eventual acceptance. By the time he was able to get back to England, his daughter Amelia was nearly six years old.

It took quite a bit of time for father and daughter to become accustomed to one another. But somehow, they had managed to muddle through. He thought things were going well, but lately she had seemed distant.

"She's becoming a young lady," Lady Gen surmised. "That's not easy on a girl. I suppose that she has a good maid or governess?"

Stanford nodded. "Charlotte has been with her since the first moment we met. She is far more than a governess; she is a friend and confidant. But I fear for Millie. It's a cruel world out there, and I know that she's learning more and more that very thing."

Lady Gen reached out a gloved hand and placed it on his. "Well, Ian, I suppose that it's for the best that you did answer my summons then. Perhaps some time in Anne's presence will be good for the girl."

Stanford shook his head. "We didn't intend to make a long visit. It's the holidays, and I need to get the twins back to their parents in London."

"It's the third of December," Lady Gen said archly. "You don't need to leave right away. After all, you don't even know why I asked you here, and already you are raring to leave."

"I have the strongest suspicion that your desire to have me here has everything to do with the lovely young woman that is even now being

observed by the physician. Lady Gen if this is one of your matchmaking schemes...”

Lady Gen dramatically clasp her hands together. “You wound me! I would never be so cavalier with your heart. Now dearest, I am not going to argue with you. I won’t lie and say that I hadn’t hoped you wouldn’t take one look at Lady Anne and fall passionately in love.”

Ian broke in, “See here, I won’t have you getting that young lady’s hopes up.”

A scowl crossed the older woman’s face. “Let me finish! I had harbored secret hopes, but that wasn’t my intent. I have been approached by some investors, and I needed your advice.”

It wasn’t a secret that Ian Stanford was the devil’s own at investments. Shrewd and cunning, it seemed that everything he touched turned a profit. Lady Gen launched into business mode and the two of them happily spent the next hour discussing different propositions. When it became clear that he would need to stay on and meet these investors, Stanford grudgingly promised to extend his visit a few days.

As dusk began to settle Lady Gen spoke up, “We should see what’s taking the physician so long. I am worried about Anne. She took a nasty fall.
“

Stanford immediately stood and went to the door. “I will find out, madam, don’t fret yourself. I will find out for you.”

“Thank you, Ian. I shall feel so much better when you have Millie here and I can see her for myself. You know that Brighton is lovely at Christmastime.”

Stanford looked into her pleading eyes and cursed softly under his breath. “A few days only. I will fetch Millie from the inn after I have spoken to the physician. I’m sure the twins have raided your kitchen long before now. But you need some sustenance. I will arrange for a light dinner to be brought up to you as well.”

Lady Gen beamed at him. “That will be delightful! I couldn’t be happier.”

As Stanford walked away from the drawing room, he couldn’t help but wonder if he hadn’t been very carefully manipulated into the older woman’s hands. A bark of laughter escaped his lips. She was one incredible woman.

Chapter 3

Upon hearing that Lady Anne would make a full recovery, the impromptu house party settled in for the evening with its new occupants. Lady Gen smiled to herself as she heard the twins racing along the hallways long after they should have been in bed. They would give Ian a run for his money, and Lady Gen was almost sure that was what he needed to shake himself out of his complacency.

It was tragic what had happened to Amelia's mother. Vivian was a lovely girl who died too soon. Lady Gen was still a little miffed that the chit hadn't contacted Ian before the child was born. Amelia, for all of her family's wealth and privilege, would always be seen as a bastard.

Ian hadn't cared much about society, but he cared deeply about protecting his daughter. Lady Gen knew that Ian didn't believe that he deserved to find love and happiness. The mistakes of the past didn't have to rule the decisions of the future unless he let them.

Shaking her head, Lady Gen focused on helping the poor dears. It was obvious to her that Anne and Ian were perfect for each other. She couldn't have contrived a better meeting. However, it was a shame that Anne had been so knocked around. No, it was up to her to make these children see sense.

Lady Gen had always loved children and felt it was a shame that she hadn't any of her own. However, over the years Lady Gen had found it far easier to borrow some of her friends' offspring to mother whenever she had a hankering. That way she could return them whenever she was finished.

But it wasn't until she had begun matchmaking with Henrietta and Lord Warner that Lady Gen truly found her calling. It was no secret that she loved a good love story. The secret was that Ian didn't realize he had the starring role, and hopefully he wouldn't find out until it was too late, and he was already desperately in love.

Smiling to herself, Lady Gen finished off the rest of her tea and gave her maid instructions to prepare for bed.



* * *

It was a similar scene in the gold guest room, where Stanford mused about Lady Gen's investments as he sat by the fire in a high-backed chair. His blood raced in his veins at the prospect for striking a good bargain for the older woman. He loved business and commerce, much to the aristocracy's shame.

It was not good Ton to be involved in anything even remotely smelling of trade. Ian didn't give a damn what was considered good Ton. But he had no wish to embarrass his family. He also knew that it was important to walk a thin line for his daughter's sake. She already had more stacked against her than most young ladies of her station.

A small knock had Ian's head popping up to see his daughter standing at the door.

"Amelia are you well?" He asked.

The lovely girl was on the cusp of becoming a woman. In some ways this terrified Ian almost as much as the small five-year-old had all of those years ago. She looked so much like her mother. Her blonde locks were so pale that they resembled the yellow roses that grew outside of his eldest brother's ducal estate, Chatterling.

"Indeed father, I am most well. I have come to hear the story about the mysterious lady that Henry saved. It would seem that the twins are quite out of charity with you."

Ian fought back a smile. "I can only imagine what they might have told you. What is the offense?"

Amelia went over to a chair where her father was sitting and perched on the arm. "Well, now that Henry is a hero, he can't be expected to go to bed early like a baby. By putting them in the nursery you have gone and ruined his life completely."

"His entire life?" Ian asked dryly. "That takes a fair bit of talent, even for me."

Amelia grinned. "Did you really tell the twins that they couldn't return to Eton next term?"

Ian looked taken aback. “Dear heavens, no! Even if I wanted to tease them, it wouldn’t be my place. I am more than certain your Uncle and Aunt will be sending those twits back as soon as the school will have them. Why would they torture themselves that way?”

Amelia laughed as she watched her father pick up his quizzing glass and adjust his perfectly formed cravat. She had watched him do such things her entire life. There was something terribly comforting in the familiar gestures.

“I had a feeling it wasn’t as bad as they professed,” she confided. “Did you threaten to feed them gruel?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Sadly, I didn’t come up with it. I told them that they couldn’t have dessert if they weren’t going to follow directions. It’s an unfamiliar city. They shouldn’t have gone out exploring on their own.”

Amelia nodded. “I understand. I would imagine that Uncle Ryan and Aunt Lillian would be rather put out if we were to lose them.”

Ian shook his head. “Sometimes you are far too much like your old man for your own good.”

Amelia shuddered playfully. “Please do not tell me that I look like a grown man. There is only so much abuse I can take.”

Ian’s lips twitched. “You know very well that you don’t have my coloring. You are the spitting image of your mother, you know that.”

Amelia nodded, but the playfulness had left her.

Ian never discouraged his daughter from speaking about Vivian, who had died when Amelia was incredibly young.

Leaning over, Ian kissed her temple and asked, “Are you troubled?”

She shook her head. “No, Papa, all is well. I just miss her sometimes. I can’t explain it. Sometimes I can’t remember her at all, and other times I wonder if what I do remember is based more off of what others have told me. How can I wish for someone I barely knew? I don’t mean to sound melancholy. I wish I remembered her better.”

Ian nodded, not knowing what to say.

He had plenty of misgivings of his own. Ian had wished that Vivian had told him about the child. For a long time, he had harbored anger against a dead woman for cheating him out of the first years of Amelia’s life. It was unreasonable, he knew that. But he couldn’t help how he felt.

Because Vivian had kept Amelia a secret, she was born a bastard. This was yet another grievance to lay at the dead woman’s door. Ian knew he needed to let these things go. But they still festered under the skin like

wounds that wouldn't heal.

"Papa?" Amelia questioned. "You look upset."

His handsome face broke into a crooked smile. "Never fear, I am well. Just thinking up punishments for the twins."

She laughed. "Well, what can you tell me about the mysterious Lady Anne?"

Ian paused for a moment as he thought about the lovely young woman. It wouldn't do to show too much attention toward the girl. The last thing he wanted to do was raise the hopes of his daughter or of the lady in question. He decided that the bare minimum would have to do.

"Lady Anne is the only child of the Earl of Rawlings. She has been living a quiet life here with Lady Genevieve for the last few years. I honestly don't know much else. I met her after Henry had knocked her down and she seemed muddled."

Millie's face fell. "Oh, that's it?"

Ian knew by her expression that he had made the right decision. The sooner he could leave Brighton, the better.

Chapter 4

Anne awoke feeling much more the thing. Despite the doctor's recommendations, Anne saw no reason to lounge away the day in bed. Besides a rather fantastic bruise on her hip and side, she was not so very banged up after all, she reasoned.

It was true that she did feel a twinge of discomfort when she tried to draw in a long breath. But that was easily solved. All she needed to do was avoid that practice and it wouldn't be an issue.

With determination to push past all of the unpleasantness of the previous day, Anne chided her maid into allowing her to dress for the day.

"Mary, I am fine. Just a bit shaken. It's nonsense to be holed up in bed when Lady Gen has an entire house full of guests. I must help her. Now, get me one of my looser day dresses."

In the end Anne decided to forgo her corset. It was scandalous in the extreme, but Anne had assured Mary that she would wear her shawl around her shoulders, and nobody would be the wiser.

Once dressed, Anne started off in hopes of finding someone to entertain her. Imagine her surprise upon entering the library to see a lovely young woman reading near the fire.

"I do beg your pardon," Anne said contritely, "I didn't mean to disturb you. I will leave you to your book."

Bright, curious eyes met her gaze. They were filled with intelligence as they assessed the other woman.

"Please, don't leave on my account. My name is Amelia Stanford, but everyone calls me Millie. I had hoped to meet the woman that my cousins so bravely rescued."

Anne smiled as she took in the young woman. She looked to be just older than the twins and dressed in the first stare of fashion. It was obvious that whoever her modiste was, they knew a thing or two about French fashion. Her hair was a lovely pale blonde, and she had the sweetest of dimples in her cheeks.

"And you must call me Anne. As for your cousins, well, they were quite brave," Anne said with a twinkle in her eye. She approached the child and sat

across from her. Anne didn't have a lot of experience with children, but she liked the open honesty in Millie's eyes.

Millie laughed. "Brave? I suppose they are. It's more likely they were doing something terribly stupid and they just happened to save you. But I am so extremely glad that they did. Papa was terribly upset with them."

"Papa?" Anne blurted out before she quickly schooled her features. She told herself that the pang of disappointment that resonated within her had nothing to do with the fact that the handsome uncle was likely married.

Millie looked at her quizzically. "My papa was on his way to meet Lady Gen. It was actually a bit serendipitous that they happened to save you right where both you and Papa were going to meet Lady Gen."

Anne wasn't so sure what was so serendipitous about the meeting, but she smiled and nodded anyway. It was unnerving how much the girl was like her father, especially since they didn't share many physical features.

"You must be the spitting image of your mother," Anne said kindly.

Millie shrugged. "That's what they tell me. My mother died when I was a child. I don't remember very much about her."

Immediately Anne's persona changed. Her body naturally swayed toward the younger girl and her face softened.

"I lost my mother when I was very young as well."

"Do you remember her?" Millie asked.

Anne's brows came together as she thought, not wanting to give a glib answer. "I don't remember very much. I know that her hair was darker than mine, and she liked to sing. I was lucky that my nurse stayed on with us. Eliza tried hard to keep my mother's memory alive."

Millie nodded, and for some reason Anne felt that this young girl knew what she was trying to say.

"What about your father?"

Anne shrugged. "I have fewer childhood memories of my father than I do my mother. Their marriage was arranged, and my father preferred town when my mother preferred a quieter life. It was as if I lost them both when she passed, because he didn't come to visit anymore."

Anne trailed off, not realizing she had shared more than she had intended to. Pasting on a bright smile, Anne said, "What brings you both to Brighton?"

Millie shrugged. "I don't know. My father doesn't discuss things with me. I find it rather annoying."

Anne laughed; she couldn't help herself. When Millie looked up at her in

surprise, Anne waved her hand dismissively. “You sounded so very much like me just then. I have always hated when I have been left out of the conversation. I think you and I will get on well.”

Millie grinned at Anne. “I should like that very much.”

Anne gave a firm nod. “Perfect. Well, I need to find Lady Genevieve. I promised that we would go over her plans for the Christmas holiday.”

Millie looked on thoughtfully. “Do you always spend your holidays in Brighton?”

Anne nodded. “I have since I’ve come to stay with Lady Gen. I know that it’s rather thin of company. But sometimes I find it better when there aren’t hordes of people milling about. In the summertime Brighton is teeming with society. It’s nice for the locals to have it for themselves for a while. Don’t you think?”

Millie seemed to be watching Anne rather closely. Anne wasn’t sure if she was trying to decompose her or not, but either way it seemed to be working.

“Is something amiss?” Anne asked.

“Hmm?”

“Have I left a bit of breakfast on my cheek?” Anne asked again.

Millie shook her head, a smile forming on her face. “You are rather lovely, Lady Anne.”

Anne felt her cheeks flush and immediately chastised herself. This was simply a girl, one who didn’t look older than three-and-ten. Anne couldn’t help but wonder how it was possible that a child not yet out of the schoolroom could be so confident in her mannerisms.

“Please, call me Anne. And thank you, Millie. I can very easily repay the compliment.”

“Have you been here long, with Lady Gen?”

Anne straightened her back. “Nearly three years now. Lady Genevieve is an exceedingly kind individual. I am most sincerely blessed to reside in her household.”

“But don’t you find Brighton rather,” Amelia paused, searching for the right word. “Dull?”

Anne felt a slight irritation at the question. “No, I rather prefer Brighton to the hustle and bustle of London.”

Rather than be offended, Millie’s smile deepened. “I do as well. There is nothing quite so irritating that being forced to attend an elaborate party.”

“Do you often find yourself in such situations?”

Amelia shrugged. The movement was far more like the young girl she actually was, and not the cynical interviewer that she previously channeled.

“My uncle is the Duke of Bilkshire. His duchess also happens to be the sister of the Marquess of Lancaster. When my mother died, the duchess took me to live with the Marquess and his family while she and my uncle sailed for America to find Papa. It was another year before Papa was able to return from the Americas to take charge of me. They are all very fond of parties, the more elaborate the better.”

Anne felt overwhelmed at all of the information that Amelia freely shared. There was a level of disassociation from it all that seemed incongruent with the sensitivity of the subject. Something wasn't right about the affair.

“Goodness, Amelia, you mustn't bother Lady Anne.”

Anne's cheeks pinked again as she turned to see the man himself standing in the doorway. Ian Stanford was tall by London's standards and while he was dressed to perfection, there was something raw, almost animalistic to his physique.

She wanted to touch him. To see if his arm was really as strong and firm as she remembered. But that was terribly inappropriate, especially in front of his young daughter.

There was nothing of the soft dandy that London favored. Ian Stanford was all man, large and muscular. His jaw was too square and instead of close shaved, Anne could see the faintest trace of stubble on the man's cheeks.

He should have appeared disheveled to her. Instead he made strange things happen inside of her. There was something appealing and dangerous that made her want to touch him and run away at the same time.

Likely he was angry that she was speaking to his daughter without his permission.

“I beg your pardon,” Anne said once again, fearing that she was starting to sound like a parrot. “I must go and see Lady Genevieve. Millie, it was lovely to chat with you. Mr. Stanford, good morning to you.”

She was very nearly to the door when he spoke to her. His voice was low and deep. She imagined it to be like warm honey coating her insides in a gooey mess of nerves.

“Are you well after yesterday's incident?” He asked in a way of his that demanded an answer, whether she wished to give it or not.

Then to her utter shock, he placed a hand on her arm. It didn't matter that the man wore gloves. His touch seemed to sear her even though the fine calfskin.

"Perfectly fine," she blurted out. Praying that he couldn't see the rapid pulse beating at her neck. "I am quite well, thank you for inquiring."

His hand flexed on her arm, almost as if he was trying to decide if he was willing to let her go. Finally, he released her without a word.

Anne could still feel the strength of his presence even though he was no longer by her side. Mr. Stanford was certainly an enigma to her. All of those years ago, Anne had done everything in her power to avoid the gentlemen vying for her hand. They had made her feel a myriad of emotions.

Some were tiresome in the extreme, never once taking into consideration that she might not want to have an in-depth discourse about their hunters. Others tried to fawn over her looks making Anne believe that they only saw a fashion plate and not the woman underneath. The worst sort of all would make her feel uncomfortable, as if they were undressing her with their eyes. Every touch, every word, was coated in unwanted innuendo.

Mr. Stanford was tall, opposing, stood for no nonsense, and wasn't handsome in the classical way that the dandies favored. He was too big, too muscular, too everything! And yet Anne was drawn to him.

Covering her arm where his hand had once resided, she found herself uncertain as to why she was so attracted to the man. If she was being honest with herself, she would have to say that there was something intrinsically about him that intrigued her. Perhaps it was the way he seemed to watch everything in his wake. Or the aloof way he held himself back. Anne couldn't help but wonder how much more there was to Mr. Ian Stanford.

There was also the story of how he and his daughter came to be acquainted. Anne remembered truly little about the scandal. It obviously had been hushed up. From what she recalled, it didn't by half resemble what Amelia had described.

"Anne, how are you feeling this morning my dear?"

Anne jumped at Lady Genevieve's voice. With a sheepish grin, she replied, "Feeling much better. I am ever so sorry for worrying you."

Lady Genevieve brows pulled together with concern even as she gave her a soft smile. "Nonsense, child. It must have been quite the fright for you. Come into my sitting room, we have much to plan for the approaching Yuletide."

Anne helped her godmother into the frilly feminine room that served as both a study and sitting room for the grand lady. Anne had often wondered what the story was behind the older woman's choice to remain a spinster. Anne wanted to believe that Lady Genevieve had chosen her fate and wasn't left behind on what many referred to as "the shelf."

"Dearest," Lady Genevieve began, "take a letter for me?"

Anne nodded her assent and pulled out the writing paper and quill after removing her gloves. "Certainly, please begin when you are ready."

The morning went on in a similar fashion. It was much like any other day for the pair. But unlike days gone by, Anne found her mind wandering several times. In fact, she was mortified to have had to ask Lady Genevieve to repeat herself twice. It was a blessing in itself when the older woman asked her to take the new menus to the kitchen.

Saying a silent prayer that she would stop thinking about Ian Stanford, Anne stepped into the hallway and collided with the very person she had been so intent with forgetting.

Large hands automatically came up to steady her.

Her hands splayed across his broad chest. The menus were hopelessly crushed between them.

Her heart began to hammer in her chest when Mr. Stanford didn't automatically release her. She knew she should do something, but her brain had stopped sending signals to the rest of her body. That could be the only excuse for why she stood there, scandalously being held by a man that she didn't know.

His gaze was intent as he raked it over her features. Unlike the lechers from her past, Mr. Stanford's hot gaze didn't repulse her. Indeed, it was quite the opposite. Her breath came out in tiny puffs and she tightened her fists into his waistcoat without even realizing it.

His pupils widened for the briefest of moments and she felt the electrical charge that surged between them.

"Oi, Uncle Ian? Where are you?"

One of the twins cried out from below stairs.

The two jumped apart as if they had been burned by a fire.

There was a mumbling of apologies on her part while Mr. Stanford stayed completely still. Anne didn't bother to wait for a response before she fairly ran down the hallway towards the backstairs. Her cheeks were ablaze, and her heart felt like it might like to take a stroll outside of her chest.

What in the blazes had just happened?

This feeling, whatever it was inside of her, was making Anne crazy.

“Well, hello there, Lady Anne.”

Anne’s eyes flipped up to see Mrs. Fitzgerald, Lady’s Genevieve’s housekeeper, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

“Dearie, are you alright?”

Anne immediately straightened and pasted on a fake smile. “Indeed, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I am right as rain. I have brought the menus from Lady Genevieve. It would seem that she wanted to add some of her guests’ favorite items.”

Mrs. Fitzgerald was another newer member of Lady Genevieve’s household. The woman was excellent at running a household. However, she is also excellent at spreading the gossip below stairs. Without missing a beat, Mrs. Fitzgerald leaned in close. “I’ve heard he brought his illegitimate daughter to Lady Genevieve’s home. It’s a crying shame it is. What is the world coming to? I never thought I would see the day when a bloke’s by-blow would be tossed in front of the decent quality folks of society. A crying shame, indeed.”

Anne cut the woman off before she could say another word. It was one thing to talk about which maid’s room the new footman had slipped out of. But to disparage Lady Genevieve’s guest? That was too far.

“Madam, you will not speak of Lady Genevieve’s guests in such a manner. It is unfitting of a member of Lady Genevieve’s household, as well as unkind in the extreme.”

Mrs. Fitzgerald stiffened. “I beg your pardon.”

Anne’s eyes glittered dangerously, and Mrs. Fitzgerald took a hesitant step backward.

But in an attempt to state her point, Mrs. Fitzgerald lifted her nose in the air and said, “People of quality don’t allow bastards to sit at their tables.”

Anne fought the urge to hit the woman. The bigotry was fairly choking her. Instead she said through clenched teeth. “I would suggest that you allow Lady Genevieve to decide who she associates with. Some find those that slander the innocent far more disgusting than an accident of birth. Good day.”

She turned and left Mrs. Fitzgerald staring after her with a shocked expression. What Anne failed to see was Amelia who had crept up behind her and slipped into the butler’s pantry. Hearing every word, Amelia was used to those that disparage her humble beginnings. What was unusual was hearing a

stranger defend her so vehemently. A smile crept onto the girl's face.
It seemed that there was more to Lady Anne than met the eye.

Chapter 5

Later than evening Millie pretended to read the leather-bound book she had snatched off the table as she secretly watched Lady Anne and her father interact in what could be described as blatant non-interaction.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that the two were attracted to one another. Although she made it a point to never raise her gaze to meet his, Lady Anne's head would turn to angle itself in the direction of her father's voice when he spoke in his muted tones.

Millie observed the way that Anne's hands would still from her knitting and her body would tense as if the weight of the world rested upon whatever her father was about to say.

Papa wasn't any better. If anything, his attentions were barely concealed. His eyes were constantly on Lady Anne's pale coiffure. His body turned in her direction and his lips pulled into a disapproving line. Papa liked the woman, but he didn't trust her.

It was true, Lady Anne was exceptionally beautiful. However, Amelia couldn't see why that would signify. Her papa had been around beautiful women before. However, he had never acted like this.

There had been women in the past that had tried to use Millie to get to her father. Ian had been noticeably clear that he had no wish to marry. Millie had nearly given up on the prospect of ever having a stepmother.

Perhaps she had given up too soon? The current situation certainly called for further investigation. Millie knew that her father wasn't a fool. His American upbringing had caused him to be leery of his British counterparts. More often than not they considered Ian inferior, despite the fact that his brother was the Duke of Bilkshore. Many felt as if the title should have been absorbed by the crown rather than fall into the hands of an American.

Straddling two worlds, Millie was acquainted with not fitting in. Born a bastard, Millie knew that she would never walk in the same circles that the rest of her family did. There wasn't to be a titled gentleman that would sweep her off her feet.

Shaking her head to clear it of such thoughts, Millie once again began to observe Anne. She wondered what secrets Lady Anne might have. Everyone

had secrets; that was one thing Millie had learned at an early age.

There was a loneliness in Lady Anne's eyes when she didn't know anyone was watching.

"Have you finished reading, my dear?"

Millie flushed and turned to Lady Gen, who had settled herself beside her without her knowing.

"I have," Millie said quickly.

"And are you enjoying your book?" Lady Genevieve asked.

Millie nodded, curls bouncing. "It's very informative."

Lady Genevieve's eyes widened. "I never knew you to be interested in housekeeping."

Millie felt her cheeks heat. If there was one thing she wasn't good at, it was telling stories. But she felt she had to keep up the lie.

"Oh yes, it's one of my favorite subjects," Millie prattled on. But she broke off when Lady Genevieve leaned over and snatched the book from her fingertips. Then with a wink, she turned the book right-side around and handed it back to Amelia.

"Dearest, you will do far better reading it this way. Now, do you want to tell me what you are really doing?"

Millie snapped the book closed. "Nothing at all."

"Spying on your father and Anne is nothing? Well, I had hoped you might have some decent information to share with me." Lady Genevieve's eyes twinkled as she leaned over to whisper, "They are rather obvious about it, aren't they?"

Millie felt her mouth begin to quirk into a smile. "It's better than a play."

Lady Genevieve smiled at Millie, saying, "Indeed, it is. What is interesting to me is that neither one is willing to give the other one a chance."

Millie assessed the elderly lady. While she had always been fond of Lady Genevieve, she didn't know her terribly well. That being said, the woman had been kind, honest, and didn't treat Millie like a child. There were far too many adults that didn't see her as an intelligent human being. The circumstances of her birth, her gender, and her father's nationality didn't help matters.

It was nice to see that Lady Genevieve didn't seem to see the barriers. She only saw Millie for who she was.

"I think Papa is intrigued by Lady Anne, but he won't do anything about it. Papa hasn't allowed himself to become close with any female as far as I

can remember. Oh, I know about the demimonde, I am not speaking of those types of liaisons. But I do mean a lady of quality.”

Lady Genevieve’s eyes widened. “What do you know of the demimonde?”

Millie shrugged. “Papa sent me to a finishing school last year. When he learned that the headmistress was telling me that my future would likely be played out in the demimonde, he immediately took me away. I think that Papa wasn’t aware of how others see me.”

Lady Genevieve reached out to cover Millie’s gloved hand with her own. “I think it is far more likely that your father doesn’t want to admit that you are aware of how others see you. Amelia, we cannot change the circumstances of your birth. Nor can we change the prejudices of those that will never see you as their equal. It’s a harsh world that we live in.”

Millie shrugged. “I am far more blessed than many others. My father has settled a generous sum upon me if I don't marry.”

Lady Genevieve’s smile slipped a little. “I shouldn’t want that for you, my dear.”

Millie frowned. “But you never married.”

“I have often wondered if it was the best choice,” Lady Genevieve answered candidly. “I had thought myself to be independent and strong. I was far more concerned with being right than I was with being happy. Don’t pull that sad face, dear girl. I have been very content with the lot given me. But know this, if you get a chance at love, don’t throw it away because of your pride.”

Millie hardly knew what to think. Had that happened to Lady Genevieve? Had she loved someone and then had them taken away from her? It caused a tightening in Millie’s chest that wasn’t comfortable.

Had this happened to her papa? She knew that her mother hadn’t been the great love of her father’s life. Would her father end up like Lady Genevieve? Alone?

“What thoughts have brought on such a frown?” Lady Genevieve prodded.

Millie motioned with her hand across the room at where her father was playing a game with the twins and Lady Anne was knitting near the fire. For all intents and purposes, the scene appeared very domestic.

“May I ask you a question?” Millie countered.

Lady Genevieve blinked. “Why, certainly.”

“It’s about Lady Anne. How much do you know about her?”

Millie watched while Lady Genevieve looked taken aback.

“It’s important,” Millie pressed.

Lady Genevieve’s brow furrowed. At last she uttered one word, “Why?”

Amelia blew out a breath and leaned in. Then she explained to Lady Genevieve everything she had heard with Lady Anne and the housekeeper. Finishing up she said, “I like her. I think Papa likes her. But she has secrets, you can see them in her eyes.”

Lady Genevieve was clearly shaken with what the child had informed her about Mrs. Fitzgerald. Her heart was full of remorse and anger that this young lady had already faced so many hateful things in her young life—especially in her household. She would handle Mrs. Fitzgerald later.

But for now, Lady Gen’s heart was warmed by the defense that Anne had shown for Amelia. Deciding the truth was the best option. Lady Genevieve confided, “I have known Anne for several years. She has led a lonely life. I am her godmother and asked that her father send her to me years ago. For some reason he didn’t take me up on the offer until three years ago. They have been three of the best years of my life. I know she has a good heart. I also think she could be good for your father. But I have a feeling they both will need a little nudge in the right direction.”

Millie’s lips began to curve up. “It would seem that we are entering the matchmaking services. Shall we declare a partnership?”

Lady Genevieve nodded. “Indeed, we shall.”

Chapter 6

Ian nodded absentmindedly to the maid who had brought a fresh pot of tea into the library. Having discovered one of his favorite authors among the shelves, he had quite lost himself in the story.

It wasn't until the scent of lavender and vanilla wafted into his presence that he immediately stiffened. He knew before looking up from the pages that it had to be that woman. Ian wasn't sure what was driving his undeniable attraction to Lady Anne.

It wasn't any secret that she was lovely to look upon. The primitive part of him clearly believed that she ought to be on the arm of a man—his arm. The last thing she should be doing was wallowing away, in Brighton of all places.

However, that wasn't meant to be. Ian hated the fact that he had to remind himself of this fact several times a day since meeting her.

Lady Anne was the type of woman that stirred a man's attention, despite Ian's great desire to suppress it. However, being the gentleman that he was, Ian automatically rose at the lady's presence.

“Lady Anne, what a lovely surprise. How may I help you?”

Ian hadn't realized he had been taking a slow leisurely glance up her form until he met her bright cheeks and flashing eyes. The lady had more spirit than he thought. *How interesting.*

Anne cleared her throat. “I beg your pardon, Sir. Lady Genevieve asked that I speak to you without delay concerning an outing for the children. She thought that perhaps the twins might enjoy skating at the Royal Pavilion. Millie as well if she is so inclined.”

Ian schooled his features. It had been far too long since he had strapped on a pair of skates. However, somehow the outing seemed rather intriguing to him. “Are you proposing to attend, Lady Anne?”

A rosy flush stained her cheeks as she replied, “Oh, no, Sir. I wouldn't be so forward as to invite myself along.”

Ian shook his head. “Not at all, in fact, I insist. The three children would be quite a handful on my own. I don't suppose you know how to skate?”

The excitement that entered her face caused her lovely complexion to

positively radiate. Ian nearly stumbled on the end of his sentence when he looked into her beautiful face. It was like a kick to the stomach, and he wasn't sure that he liked it. Dear heavens, he wanted to kiss her. Indeed, he took a step forward before catching himself and grinning ruefully. It seemed that she didn't notice his intent. Ian breathed a sigh of relief.

He wasn't there to make love to Lady Anne. She wasn't someone to trifle with. He had to remember that it wouldn't do to involve himself. Ian had learned his lesson in love. The pain of Vivian's death weighed heavily on him. He didn't deserve happiness after abandoning the one woman that had ever loved him.

If Vivian hadn't reached out to his sister-in-law before her passing, Ian might never have known about his daughter. It shamed him to this day that he had left a woman pregnant and alone, even if he hadn't known of her state. He should have done something.

He tamped down any of the warmer feelings that had threatened to emerge. "Yes, well, that sounds like an excellent idea. When shall we take the children?"

"Is tomorrow afternoon suitable? I can send a footman out to procure skates for everyone."

Ian nodded. "That's splendid."

Lady Anne nodded and turned to leave. Before she had gotten extremely far, Ian found himself speaking again. "Lady Anne, have you always dwelled in Rakesburg?"

Ian watched as the innocent excitement slid from her lovely features. A hard mask came in its place. "I lived at Starcrest until my coming out. During the season I lived in London with my father until I had finally had enough of society and all of its charms. Three years ago, Lady Genevieve invited me to stay with her and as you can see, I have been here ever since. Now please excuse me, Sir. I have much to attend to."

Ian nodded, allowing her to escape. It was strange how quickly she had shut down. There was something there, he knew it. Ian just wasn't sure what it could be.

"Papa?"

He looked up again to see Amelia standing in front of him. Once again rising to his feet, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "What is it, darling daughter of mine?"

She grinned impishly and Ian thanked God and everyone else that had

been instrumental in bringing him back to his daughter. She was the best thing that had ever happened in his life. Even the idea that he might never have known her still slayed him.

“Can I ask you something?” Amelia asked as she fidgeted with the ruffle on her dress.

“Of course,” Ian said at once. “Please, sit with me.”

Amelia sank into the soft cushions of the settee and turned to her father.

Ian could see that whatever was weighing on his daughter’s mind had been troubling her. “You can tell me, you know. I don’t want you to ever be afraid of speaking with me.”

Amelia flashed him a crooked smile, one that nearly broke his heart. Ian reached over and took her hand in his own.

“It’s about my mother,” Amelia said at last.

Ian had always been incredibly open with Amelia about his relationship with Vivian. However, it wasn’t in his nature to speak about personal things.

“Go on then. What is it you wish to know about Vivian?” Ian prompted.

“You said that you met her at Uncle Oliver’s estate.”

“Yes, at Chatterling, the ducal seat. She was visiting with her sister, your Aunt Lucy.”

Amelia blew out a breath. “I know you will likely find this question intrusive.”

“I am likely to expire from curiosity. Get on with it, child. What do you want to know?”

She cleared her throat and looked him dead in the eye. “Did you love her?”

Ian felt as if he had taken a facer. While he had been clear on the details of how he met her mother, they had never discussed emotions. They were in England, after all; wasn’t it known that emotions weren’t on the table for discussion? The little voice inside of his mind reminded Ian that he was American and that it was silly to be having this little argument with himself.

As he looked at his daughter, who clearly was nervous and wondering if she had overstepped, Ian knew that he couldn’t lie or fob her off. She was getting older and would soon be courting a young man of her own.

“Amelia, your mother was a very special woman,” he began tentatively.

“But you didn’t love her?” Amelia finished before he could go on.

Ian sighed. “I want to tell you that I did. Honestly, I didn’t know her long enough to know if I was in love or not.”

Ian knew that was an excuse. If he knew her long enough to leave her with child, surely, he knew her long enough to know if it was love.

“Tell me about her?” Amelia asked.

It was a conversation that they had repeated numerous times over the years. Ian knew that she was just trying to get them on even soil once again, and he silently thanked her for it.

“Vivian was incredibly beautiful. I see much of her when I look at you. She was bright and intelligent. She was highly allergic to horses. She would break out in these horrible red hives.”

Amelia made a face. “I am certainly glad I didn’t inherit that.”

Ian laughed. “Considering the horse farms that I own. It would indeed be unfortunate if you were allergic. But we would make do. I love you, Millie. I hope you know that.”

Amelia nodded and then impulsively moved closer to her father. He wrapped his arms around her for a hug before kissing her temple.

“Better?” He asked quietly.

She nodded before moving away and changing the subject. “I am excited to go ice skating tomorrow.”

Ian narrowed his eyes. “Wait a minute. I smell a rat. Was it you that put Lady Genevieve up to the suggestion?”

Amelia laughed. Eyes dancing, she replied, “Whatever are you talking about?”

“I hope you know that I could likely break a hip at my age,” Ian grumbled.

“You aren’t in your dotage quite yet, Papa. All will be well.”

Chapter 7

Stanford's muscular form was decidedly well-featured in his current lounging position as he fastened the ice skates to his boots. He was bundled up for their snow outing, making his broad shoulders appear massive.

Anne already knew that they did not need a hint of padding. It didn't matter what setting she found him in. For the man was always well turned out. It was rather disconcerting for her, a hardened spinster who had no interest in a man. After all, there had been plenty of occasions for romance in her youth and she hadn't been the slightest bit interested.

However, it didn't hurt to look. Did it?

In some ways Anne felt as if the young debutante was someone completely different from who she had now become. The ideals and passions of youth still existed within her, but Anne had learned tolerance and forbearing since those early days.

Letters from her father had slowly trickled in over the last three years. Anne had once thought him something of an ogre. Now she could see that perhaps he too was doing the best he could with the knowledge he had.

However, watching Ian with Millie, Anne wondered what her life might have been like had her father chosen to keep her by his side instead of leaving her alone in the country. Eliza once said that you can't live on what could have been.

In truth, she had thought to never want a family of her own. Having grown up without siblings, Anne hadn't ever seen the appeal of raising a brood. But spending time with Amelia and the twins had been enlightening. She enjoyed their youthful enthusiasm. Anne found herself grateful that Lady Genevieve invited Mr. Stanford to stay for a longer visit.

Having his skates fixed on, Ian moved to stand. "Are you going back out on the ice?" He asked, meeting her gaze.

Her eyes were locked on his strong features. Anne didn't know why that should cause her stomach to flip. The man was far too handsome for his own good. His body was that of an athlete. She enjoyed the way that he moved, lithe and a bit predatory.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the slightest desire to race with those scoundrels. I have just been soundly beaten by the twins in four out of the five races. Now I am battered and bruised, besides feeling the cold in places that should never be mentioned,” Anne said cheeks heating despite the cold.

He raised a brow. “That’s an interesting way to phrase things.”

Anne shook her head. “Sometimes my tongue runs away with me.”

Before she could say any more, Millie came into view. Giggling a bit madly, she bent to scoop up a ball of snow into her gloves.

“You have to have a death wish,” Ian warned his daughter.

Henry, seeing Millie’s plan, stopped to do the same. Before Ian could react, Millie had thrown her snowball right at his chest. As it splattered upon impact, to Anne’s delight, the children whooped with joy and began to gather snowballs for themselves.

“It would appear that we are under attack,” Ian called out to Lady Anne.

Her heart warmed at his inclusion of her. “What shall we do?” she asked.

Ian shrugged, his lips twitching, before bending down to gather snow into his gloves. The children squealed and redoubled their efforts. Soon the space was filled with snowballs being volleyed back and forth. Laughter filled the air, and to Anne’s surprise, she laughed just as much as the children.

Her nose was cold and her finger slightly numb from the snow. But all in all, this was without a doubt her favorite ice-skating trip to date.

Ian raced around, wobbling on his skates, as he tried to get Amelia back for dumping snow down the back of his cloak. It was one beautiful catastrophe after another.

On his next pass, he clipped Anne, causing her feet to go out from under her body. Without thinking, Ian yanked her into his chest, not wanting her to hit her head again. Instead, he took both of their weight and went down hard. With a thud, Anne landed sprawled across the large man.

With her skirts in disarray and her face frozen in complete horror, Anne tried to scramble off him. But Ian must have had other plans because his arms didn’t automatically release her. Heat flared inside of her. Why did it feel so terribly good to be laying on top of this man?

“Are you hurt?” Henry called out.

Again, Anne tried to push herself off of Ian. But Ian shocked her by tilting his head back into the snow and letting out a bark of laughter. She watched his throat and felt the strongest urge to place a tender kiss at the base. It was almost as if that skin was begging for her touch. Usually it was

covered with his cravat. But tilted just so, she could see the firm column of his neck.

“Are you alright, Uncle Ian?” Brant called out. Then there was a muffled curse and Brant whispered, “What? She’s laying on top of him. Chances are he’s the one with the injury this time.”

Anne couldn't help herself. The absurdity of the situation struck her, and she too began to laugh. Even as she eventually scrambled off of him, Anne couldn't help the brilliant smile that crossed her face.

Several skaters had begun to take notice of the fall and had gathered around the group. Instead of growling at them, Ian stood and bowed as if he had just performed a great play. Anne joined him in a curtsy of her own, and soon the onlookers dispersed.

“Truly, are you alright?” Ian asked in a faint voice next to her ear.

Anne nodded. Her eyes twinkling as she answered, “You were a rather safe place to fall.”

It wasn't until later that she realized the truthfulness of those words. If she allowed herself, Anne could very well fall into Ian Stanford and never find her way back out again.

Neither of them noticed that Millie was watching the pair of adults intently. What they didn't see was the hesitant smile forming on the child's lips as she congratulated herself for what she considered a job well done. Perhaps this matchmaking business wouldn't be so hard after all.

Chapter 8

Ian heard laughter coming from Lady Anne's bedchamber and knew that his nephews had spent many of the afternoons of the past week entertaining her with cards and games. Anne had suffered a bit of a chill from their ice-skating adventure.

Instead of heading back to London, as he had originally intended after a few days, Ian had written to his brother Ryan and delayed their return for another week. It was getting much closer to Christmas and Ian knew he needed to get the children home.

But the thought of leaving Brighton without ever getting to know Lady Anne better seemed like a fate worse than death.

Another gust of laughter met his ears. By the sound of their merrymaking, it could very well have been a party they were attending and not someone's sick bed.

Tightening his lips, Stanford rapped lightly on the door.

"By Jove, Uncle Ian," Henry answered the door. His face was flushed and his cravat somewhat askew. The handsome lad did not move aside and bade him welcome, he simply stared. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"I have come to inquire after Lady Anne's health," Ian said stiffly, suddenly wishing he had never thought to knock on the door.

Henry grinned. "Oh, Anne is feeling much more the thing!"

As he tried closing the door, Ian stuck his large boot into the doorway. What was it that Henry didn't want him to see?

"Did you need anything else, Uncle Ian?" Henry asked innocently.

Ian answered through gritted teeth, "I should like to speak with her."

Anne's amused voice came from somewhere inside of the room. "Henry, dearest, move away from the door and let your uncle enter, please."

Stanford felt a familiar tug of lust when he heard her lyrical voice. But he steeled himself against any tender feelings that he may have been harboring. He was only there to check on the status of her cold. It was purely a courtesy call—nothing more.

Henry moved back, and Ian entered to see a wide-eyed Millie and Brant playing checkers on a small table near the fire. He glanced at the bed, but it

was empty. Looking about, he found his quarry watching him with twinkling eyes and a soft smile on her lips.

Once again, Ian was stuck by the fact that Lady Anne was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. The cut of her clothing was of the highest order. Ian hated that he had noticed such things. The deep green of her gown was the perfect foil for her creamy skin and golden hair.

Ian had even stooped to trying to get information about Lady Anne out of Lady Gen. But Lady Gen would have none of it. She had even gone so far as to say that if he wanted to get to know Lady Anne, he could damn well do it himself.

Well, it showed how much she knew. Ian was only interested on a surface level. He had no desire to know Lady Anne more intimately; the very idea was ludicrous.

And yet there she sat, with her chocolate-brown eyes dancing in delight at something his nephew had said. For the life of him, Ian could not tear himself away from the scene.

“Uncle Ian,” Brant called out. “How long are we to stay in Brighton?”

Ian shook his head to clear it. “Tired of kicking your heels here, are you?”

Henry turned in dismay. “Nothing of the sort, Uncle. Do not make us leave. We are having a grand time. It is only that we wondered if we might stay for the Christmas holiday? Anne said that she might be feeling well enough to attend a few events at the Royal Pavilion, and Millie said she’s never been to a town festival before.”

“Please say we might go,” Brant added.

“What about your parents?” Ian tried to reason. “They are expecting us back in London.”

The twins shrugged. “We won’t stay much past Christmas Day. We can be in London to celebrate the new year,” Millie suggested.

Ian’s eyes met Anne’s. She could see the indecision in them and couldn’t help the flush that stained her cheeks. “Boys, your uncle is a remarkably busy man. You cannot expect him to put his life on hold for the next month merely for a festival held in Brighton. Just think of how devastated your parents would be to miss you at Christmas. No, we can’t go and spoil everyone’s plans.”

The twins looked duly chastened.

But Millie was still biting her lip as if considering things.

Anne continued, “I apologize, milord, I didn’t mean to rile them up.”

Ian felt like a cad. Surely Anne didn't think that he was so ham-fisted that he couldn't attend a Christmas celebration with his daughter and nephews? It wouldn't take too much time to write Ryan and Lillian about staying on a little bit longer. If he explained that the investments he was working on were taking up more time, surely they wouldn't bat an eye—would they?

“Nonsense, Lady Anne,” he replied gruffly. “I should like nothing better than to extend our stay and attend the Christmas Festival at the Royal Pavilion. It sounds as if it will be a momentous occasion.”

Anne beamed at him. “Oh indeed! It's one of my favorite parts of the holiday season. There are carolers and acrobats as well as hot chocolate and steamy pasties. And on Christmas Eve there is a grand dinner followed by a Christmas Ball. It's simply wonderful!”

Ian was caught by her description and the rapture on her face. What he wouldn't do to have her look like that at him. Suddenly he wanted that badly, far more than anything else. She was radiant in her enthusiasm. Would she be like that after he kissed her? What would she be like after a night spent in his bed?

“Papa? You look odd. Are you feeling well?”

Millie's question was better than a pitcher of freezing water.

Ian straightened. “I am fine. I will begin to draft that letter at once.”

“Capital!” Henry shouted.

“You're bang up to the nines!” Brant added.

“Thank you, Papa! This shall be the best Christmas ever, just you wait and see!” Millie ran over to her father and threw her arms around his waist.

Stanford crouched down to meet her eye. “I suppose it will be that and more. But just know, little miss. We can't stay here forever. At some point we do have to return to our normal lives.”

Millie nodded. “Of course. I shall be happy to go wherever you say. I won't complain one single moment.”

Ian laughed. “Well, we aren't expecting miracles.”

Millie shook her head. “You are funning me. But I am in too good of a mood to rise to the bait. I can't wait to go to the festivities. Perhaps Lady Gen can advise me on what to wear.”

As she raced out the door the twins rolled their eyes. “What does it matter what she wears just so long as she's clothed?” Henry asked.

Brant shrugged. “Women. They don't make a lick of sense.”

The twins followed Millie out, leaving Ian and Anne alone.

As the boys noisily left the room, Ian watched as Anne lifted her hands to her head and gently rubbed her temples in small circular patterns.

“If you will allow me?” He walked up impossibly close to her and gently removed her hands and then slowly began massaging her head.

A soft moan escaped her lips. “That feels like heaven.”

She closed her eyes and sank against him as he worked the tired muscles of her head, neck, and shoulders. Her lips parted softly on a gasp, and little whimpers of delight escaped them.

“You are a miracle worker,” she breathed, not opening her eyes.

Ian had known the most experienced of courtesans, but none had brought him to such swift arousal as Lady Anne had.

Her bated breath and heaving breasts were enough to delight any man, but the way she spoke to him was as if he were licking between her thighs. His cock was harder than a rock. Was she doing this on purpose?

And then he noticed that her breathing had evened out.

Good Lord, the chit had fallen asleep on him!

He had an erection the size of Big Ben in his falls—he couldn’t leave the room. What if the twins came back? Or worse, his daughter?

Her breasts were full and lush in her day dress. Ian wanted to push the ruffles a little further to see the color of her nipples.

A soft sleepy sigh came from the lady in question, and his cock demanded attention.

Rubbing it once on the outside of his falls, Ian’s gaze swept to Anne only to find that her eyes were now open. He choked on his words, not knowing what he should say.

Did he pretend he hadn’t just cupped his cock in front of her? Did he blithely brush it off or make a witty joke about it? Instead he grunted out in a deep voice, “Please say something.”

Anne swallowed, the delicate action causing her throat to constrict, but there were no words. It was indelicate to stare at a man’s crotch. But now that he had brought her attention to the area she couldn’t look away.

Was it always so large and imposing? A part of Anne really wanted to see what it looked like in the light of day. However, she hadn’t lost her senses to the point of completely throwing away propriety.

“Is it painful?” she asked absentmindedly.

Ian let out a bark of laughter. “A bit at the moment, but it will pass. I do apologize.”

At his apology, Anne's gaze met his. "Why? You didn't do anything wrong. I grew up in the country, Mr. Stanford. I am somewhat familiar with a male's desire."

Ian laughed again, running a finger under his neckcloth. Was it him, or had the room become several degrees warmer?

"I can assure you, Lady Anne. Anything you see on the farm isn't quite the same as what happens between a man and a woman."

Damn it all, Ian thought, why had he said that aloud? It was clear from the surprise on Lady Anne's face that she hadn't put the two together until he opened his mouth.

Questions seemed to enter those innocent eyes, and Ian wished he were anywhere but standing in the beautiful woman's bedchamber.

"Where in the devil is your maid?" Ian asked.

Anne shrugged. "Mary is off running errands or something. Mr. Stanford..."

"Lady Anne," he began.

"Anne," she stopped him. "If we are to be on this familiar of terms, please call me Anne."

He looked taken aback. "Of course. My friends call me Stanford."

She shook her head, the furious blush reigniting. "Stanford is fine."

"My given name is Ian," his husky voice caused tingles to race across her skin.

"Ian," she repeated softly, trying it out.

She couldn't have known that speaking his name aloud would have on him. Desire flared in his eyes, and he fought the urge to take her into his arms.

"Please don't apologize. We shall put this behind us and vow to be friends. Is that alright with you?"

"We shall be friends," he conceded.

She smiled faintly, and he noticed that indeed she did look very tired. "You are exhausted, I should never have kept you. I am sorry, Anne"

Her face turned to his, eyes smiling. "Anne, please."

He softened. "Anne. I will leave you so that you may rest. I am certain that my nephews and daughter will be plaguing you again soon enough."

A small gurgle of laughter escaped her. "They are fun children. I enjoy their company."

He gave a rueful glance. "I am glad they are serving some decent

purpose, young devils that they are.”

Anne’s eyes danced. “Are they always such a handful together?”

His eyes clouded over.

Immediately Anne felt she had made a mistake. “How impertinent of me. I am terribly sorry. Please forget I ever pried into your personal affairs, Mr. Stanford.”

He looked over at Anne to see her downturned head and frowned. “Stanford if you must, but if we are alone, please call me Ian.”

Her eyes flashed to his searchingly. “I didn’t mean to misstep.”

Ian smiled faintly, “A curious question between friends is hardly a misstep when you consider the faults that I have made this afternoon. Your graciousness and forgiveness have been exonerating. Please, do not worry about it. It’s not a secret how my daughter came to be in my care. I fear at times she grows lonely with just the two of us. When Lady Gen summoned me to Brighton, Millie pleaded that I take her cousins with her.”

“She is very lucky to have them,” Anne added. “Many times, throughout the years I would have given anything for a playmate.”

Ian cocked a brow. “What about the other families in the village?”

Anne shook her head. “My father was quite insistent that I only play with children of my own class. What he failed to remember is that there weren’t other families of such a high station in Rakesburg. It wasn’t as if he was around to even know how lonely I had become. When I was summoned for my first season, I half feared I wouldn’t recognize him, it had been so long.”

Ian was shocked. “But why?”

Anne glanced away. “For years I thought it was something I said or did. I wrote countless letters to him, begging that he send for me. But he never did.”

“He was a fool,” Ian broke in.

Anne looked over at him and Ian felt her stare all the way to the tips of his toes. He hated the sadness that lurked behind her eyes. He would have given all the horses in his farms just to see her smile again.

“I think he sees that now,” Anne replied. “He’s been trying to rekindle our relationship.”

“But it’s a little too late?” Ian added.

Anne shrugged. “I am not so foolish as to throw away that bond. But if I am honest, it’s much harder to let go of all of those years of feeling neglected. Nothing is ever as black-and-white as it should be, is it?”

Ian thought about the anger and resentment he had toward Vivian. While their situations were different, Ian did understand what Anne was saying. She still had a chance to make things better. Ian never would be able to fix things with Vivian.

“You are wiser than you know,” Ian said finally. “It’s hard to forgive, that much is true. But while you still have the chance, you are trying, and that is what is commendable.”

“I should be able to let things go,” she added with a depreciating laugh.

Ian found himself telling Anne about the betrayal he felt after Vivian had robbed him of the first years in Amelia’s life. “I know that she felt remorse for how she handled things. But if Vivian hadn’t have gotten sick, I may never have known about Millie. The thought sickens me. How could she keep that knowledge away from me? I have struggled with this for years now, and still strive to find forgiveness in my heart.”

“And yet you won’t forgive yourself?” Anne asked hesitantly.

Ian looked taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“You said that you abandoned Vivian after your liaison. You didn’t even stop to think that she might be with child. You still carry that guilt around for placing Vivian in that situation, no matter that she too was a willing participant and you asked her to write if there was a child. I am just suggesting that perhaps when you get around to forgiving her, you might want to try and forgive yourself. It sounds as if you both handled things poorly.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Ian snapped, suddenly sorry that he had allowed their conversation to become so intimate. “And what of you?”

“What of me?” Anne asked.

“You blame your father for not answering you for all of those years. But when he had you in London, you did everything you could to flout his judgement. You threw away match after match simply because he approved. How much responsibility do you share for your broken relationship?”

Anne’s temper was piqued. How dare he even presume to know her back then? She wanted to tear into him, and at one point would have without question.

But she wasn’t the impetuous young girl that she once was. Through clenched teeth, she bid him good day and allowed him to leave her.

Chapter 9

“Have Papa and Anne quarreled?” Millie asked Lady Gen in a hushed whisper the following afternoon. “They haven’t said two words to each other all day.”

Lady Gen leaned in closer to the young girl. “Something is definitely afoot. The twins haven’t been able to tease a smile out of Anne, and that’s not like her. I know she’s feeling better. Perhaps we need to present an outing. Anne loves the lending library.”

Millie’s eyes sparkled. “That shall be just the thing. Good thinking, Lady Gen.”

The outing was introduced and at first Anne tried to cry off. But once she saw that Millie’s heart was set on it, Anne relented and agreed to go and change.

The twins opted to stay behind and at the last minute, Lady Gen feigned a headache. So Millie, Anne, and Ian set out together.

The conversation in the carriage ride was rather stilted. Millie wondered if perhaps this had been a terrible idea after all. However, quite unknowingly she stumbled upon one of Anne’s favorite topics, and from then on, they spoke animatedly about which gown Anne would be wearing to the Christmas Eve ball.

“I truly wish that I could go,” Millie said wistfully. “I love dancing.”

Ian gave her a look. “I wasn’t aware that you had taken dancing lessons.”

Millie answered, “At boarding school. I more often than not had to play the boy part. But it was still most fun. Do you like dancing, Anne?”

Anne grinned at Millie. “Indeed, it’s almost like you are flying. I love the magic of a ball.”

Millie cocked her head to the side. “I thought you didn’t like being in society.”

Anne glanced from Millie to her father and then back again. “There were plenty of things that I didn’t care for. Balls, however, weren’t one of them. I should love to dance every day of my life if I could. Granted, it’s not quite as fun on my own. But I shouldn’t let that stop me.”

Ian was struck with the strongest impression to tell her that he would

dance with her every day if she would let him. He had been a fool to snap at her the previous day. What did he really know about her failed seasons? The truth was that Anne had been right. Ian hadn't wanted to forgive himself. He still didn't. For some reason, he had in his head that if he had to be punished.

"I would imagine that you are a lovely dancer," Millie said happily.

Anne blushed. "I suppose I am tolerable. I haven't had any complaints thus far."

Ian felt a sting of jealousy. He wanted to know what it was like to dance with Anne. He wanted to know so many more things about her. Suddenly it seemed that the time they had left was running out.

Jumping into the conversation they spoke of favorite books, plays they wished to see, and even family members that amused them. Anne knew Ian's older brother the Duke of Bilkshore from her time in London.

Ian entertained Millie and Anne on stories from his childhood growing up with so many brothers. They each picked a new book at the lending library and soon they were on their way back to Lady Gen's home. Millie had snuggled up against her father's waistcoat and fallen asleep.

"Sometimes when I look at her like this, I forget that she's on the cusp of becoming a woman. I just want to keep her like this forever," Ian said wistfully.

Anne smiled at him, a true smile that had his heart singing.

"I am sorry for what I said yesterday," Ian blurted out. "I had no right to comment on your relationship with your father."

Anne looked taken aback. "Thank you for that. But I fear there is some truthfulness to what you said to me. I think that's why it stung so much. I am sorry for being such a sad sack and moping about it. We had just vowed to be friends and then I went and turned on you. Not particularly friendly, was I?"

"You're perfect," Ian said huskily.

Anne blinked up at him. "I am?"

"So very much so," he whispered and then gently placed his lips against her forehead. "Friends again?"

Anne felt a pang of disappointment at his insistence they be friends, but then she quickly squashed it away. Pasting on a grin she said, "The very best of friends."

It wasn't to be spoken aloud that her body insisted that sometimes friends kissed each other, and on the lips no less. It was far too brash and forward of her. But once the image was in her mind, nothing could take it away again.

Anne was completely awash with conflicting emotions, as she had never in her lifetime had such an incredible afternoon. That night when sleep finally took her, dreams of the most illicit nature descended upon her.

Ian haunted her dreams. His laughing eyes, his soft lips, his muscular things. The way he held her and kissed her had her body, weak with desire.

By the time Anne woke, she was cranky and hot. A sticky wetness resided between her thighs along with an ache that she did not understand. Grabbing the cloth to clean herself, she rubbed carefully and a wealth of feeling nearly had her swooning. Anne felt more irritable and tired than she had before. Anne quickly cleaned and readied herself for the day. All she knew was that these were feelings that she had never experienced before. And that it all started, and she much likely believed ended, with Ian.

Chapter 10

“Anne, dear one, is anything amiss?” Lady Genevieve eyed her young guest, trying to figure out what had changed in the past few days.

It was true that her injury from a fortnight before had been grievous and Lady Genevieve was certain that it had taken its toll. However, Anne was simply not the same young lady that she had been before Ian and the children arrived.

Anne looked up from her private thoughts guiltily. “Oh, there is nothing of the sort. I promise you. I am fit as a fiddle.”

Lady Genevieve could see the lines of worry between her young friend’s brows. “Are the twins making a nuisance of themselves?” she asked carefully.

Anne shook her head quickly. “No. Henry and Brant have been a breath of fresh air. Not only do they help to keep me entertained, but they have taught me a wealth of knowledge about pirates and bootleggers and all kinds of boy things that I had previously been sheltered from.”

Lady Gen laughed. “Those rascals. You know that you should only believe a small portion of what they tell you. Little boys are known to tell tall tales.”

Anne smiled back at Lady Gen. “I am inclined to agree with you.”

“Is it Ian?” Lady Genevieve continued with her original line of questioning. “I know that he can be a bit high on the instep. Honestly, the man isn’t nearly as stuffy as he pretends to be.”

Anne flushed. “Ian is all that is amiable. I promise you.” At Lady Genevieve’s quick glance, Anne amended, “I mean I have gotten to know a little of his character. He is a good man, and a better father.”

This was not what Lady Genevieve had anticipated. Most young girls were head-over-heels in love with Ian. Stanford was a rather handsome looking man, not a hint of the dandy about him. But that was only skin deep. It was gratifying to Lady Gen that Anne had chosen to look below the surface.

“Perhaps you just need to spend more time alone with him?” Lady Gen mused. Pretending not to notice when Anne gaped at her. “Once you have

had some time to exchange thoughts and ideas, I am confident that you will be fast friends.”

Anne choked, “Why does everyone insist on the two of us being friends?”

Lady Gen frowned. “Did you not want to be his friend?”

“Oh no, of course I wish to. It’s just... Well... Oh, I am being a ninnyhammer. Please ignore me.”

“If it isn’t the children, and it is not Stanford, what is troubling you, my dear. And do not tell me that you are not troubled, you have redone that same stitch of the past half an hour. I cannot tell if you are making a sheep or a horse, but I daresay you can stop adding stitches.”

Anne looked down at her embroidery and noticed that she had indeed made a mull of her needlepoint. “It was to be a butterfly,” Anne’s lips twitched, “I told you that I am terrible at the finer things, Lady Genevieve.”

The older woman laughed. “Nonsense! I get the best compliments on the pillows you made for the drawing room.”

Anne made a face. “The trees look like wild animals, I am confident that they are conversation pieces, but I think you are doing it a bit too brown saying anyone would ever compliment them.”

Lady Genevieve’s light laugh twinkled in the air. “There is a bit of wildness to your work that I delight in.”

Anne groaned. “I really wish that you would not keep those pillows out for company.”

“But then with whom would I share them? Such works of art should not be hidden away.”

Anne laughed, and it felt good. Perhaps she hadn’t been herself lately. “Works of art? Now that is doing it a bit too brown.”

“What works of art are we discussing?” Henry bound into the room with Brant and Millie on his heels.

Anne shook her head. “Not works of art. Lady Genevieve is speaking of the pillows I embroidered for the front parlor.”

“The ones with the buffalo on the front?” Brant asked as Lady Genevieve’s eyes danced.

“Those are not buffalo,” Henry rolled his eyes at his twin.

“No, they aren’t,” Lady Genevieve grinned.

“It’s cats dancing, right Anne? She loves dancing.” Millie added superiorly.

Anne’s lips trembled with mirth. “They are trees.”

Henry frowned. "Never say that! They don't look like any trees I know."

"Are the trees dancing?" Millie asked, wrinkling her brow.

"No, they weren't meant to be, dearest," Anne smiled widely. "And this, Lady Genevieve, is why they should not be out on public display."

"Are we discussing the pillows on the settee?" Ian asked as he entered with his usual flourish of strength and virility that had Anne's face heating.

"Yes, indeed we were," her voice trembled a bit before she swallowed and pasted a smile on her lips. "There seems to be a debate on what is actually embroidered upon them."

Stanford's usual firm mouth twitched in amusement. "I see. And are you the artist behind the pillows in question?"

Anne's flush deepened. "Yes, although I do feel that the term *artist* might be stretching things a bit."

His lips widened. "Is it so exceedingly difficult to decipher? I myself, am quite partial to the pillows. They remind me of the trees that grow near my country home in Sussex."

Lady Genevieve's jaw dropped in astonishment, causing Anne to giggle in delight. "Ha! You are shocked that Stanford actually knew what I had sewn. Admit it, Lady Genevieve! The pillows are a source of amusement. And that is why you keep them."

Lady Genevieve laughed along with her. "I shall never admit to such a thing! I can only say that obviously, Ian Stanford is of superior intellect. That is why he knew right away about the trees."

Ian had taken a seat near Anne and motioned for the twins and Millie to take a seat. "There is something that I wanted to discuss with everyone. The festival is approaching next week, I am planning on making a party for all of us if that is agreeable. I have even procured tickets to the Christmas Eve ball for Lady Gen, Anne, and myself."

Amelia's little face lit up. "I do wish that I could attend."

"Soon enough for you, imp. Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. I am sure there will be enough festivities through the week to keep us all entertained."

"Capital!" Millie jumped up and ran to embrace her father. The twins piled on soon after. Ian laughed as he tried to disentangle himself from the children.

"Henry and Brant, have you taken Amelia to see the new barn cat that Cook brought home?" Lady Genevieve asked.

Millie looked from her father to Lady Gen. “May we please go see it? We won’t get in Cook’s way, I promise you.”

It wasn’t lost on Anne that Ian glanced at her as if to get her opinion before he sent the children off. It pleased her more than she could have known. “Please do not make trouble for Cook, darling. But if she is amenable, I think it is a grand idea.”

Millie launched herself into Anne’s arms, who froze for a moment before returning the child’s embrace. “Thank you for making this the best Christmas ever, Anne.”

Millie didn’t wait for a response. One moment she was in Anne’s arms and the next she was racing to see the new calico cat with Henry and Brant running alongside her.

“They are wild,” Lady Gen said wistfully. “What I wouldn’t give to have that energy back again. However, it would seem that it’s wasted on the youth. Please excuse me, I have some things I need to go over with the new housekeeper.”

Anne’s head snapped up. “New housekeeper? What happened to Mrs. Fitzgerald?”

Lady Gen gave Anne a hard look. “It came to my attention that she wasn’t quite up to snuff.”

Then without another word, Lady Gen left the room.

Anne glanced up sharply at Ian. “Do you know what she’s talking about?”

Ian shook his head. “Not the slightest. But trust Lady Gen to always know what’s happening behind the scenes. The woman has her finger on the pulse of this household.”

Anne thought about the cruel things that Mrs. Fitzgerald had said about Millie. She certainly wasn’t sad that Lady Gen sacked the woman. If anything, she was relieved. The more she had gotten to know Ian and his daughter, the more that Anne had come to care for them. If she wasn’t careful, she would soon find herself with a broken heart.

Chapter 11

It was the following morning when a ragged street urchin delivered a letter for Miss Amelia Stanford.

Millie, having never received correspondence of any kind, became quite pale when the silver platter was extended to her by the butler during breakfast. Ian was quick to snatch the letter from the tray; without any preamble he broke the seal and began to read.

From his grave expression, the other occupants at the table could garner that this wasn't a friendly missive.

With a growl, Ian crumpled the letter and swiftly turned on the butler asking, "Who brought this letter?"

The old butler described the child, but with the soot and grime, it honestly could have been anybody.

"Ian, what's the meaning of this?" Lady Gen demanded once the servants had been dismissed.

Ian glanced at his daughter, who was looking at him with an expression of confidence that he could almost believe if it wasn't for the fear lurking in her eyes.

"It was nothing," Ian said curtly. "Only an individual trying to stir up trouble. I am going to speak with the local magistrate to have a few men watch over the property. While I don't think there is any danger, I do feel it wise to be careful."

Anne bit her lip. "Why was the letter addressed to Millie?"

Ian shook his head. "I don't know."

Millie frowned. "I bet it was the old housekeeper."

Anne's eyes widened, "Mrs. Fitzgerald? But why would she... Did she say something to you?"

Ian turned to his daughter. "What happened with Mrs. Fitzgerald?"

Millie's cheeks heated. "I didn't mean to listen in, honestly. It's only that when we first came to stay, I heard Anne talking to the housekeeper. Mrs. Fitzgerald said some things."

"What things?" Ian asked through clenched teeth.

Anne let out a little sound of horror. "You heard all of that?"

Ian's angry gaze swung round to Anne. "If there was a problem concerning my daughter, I should have been alerted right away."

"No, Papa, it's not like that. Anne defended me," Millie insisted. "She put the woman in her place."

Ian had turned back to face Millie. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I can't run and tell tales every time someone calls me a mean name. Papa, I'm not a child anymore. Besides, Anne took care of it."

"I do apologize," Anne said gently. "I should have reported the incident to you."

"Damn right you should have," Ian said sharply. Then he turned to Lady Gen, "Were you aware of this?"

Lady Gen's face said it all. "I fired her immediately. There is no room for such bigotry and hatred in my household."

Ian rubbed a hand over his face as if scrubbing it. "And do you feel that this woman would be spiteful enough to try and stir up trouble?"

Lady Gen fluttered her hand a little in distress. "I don't know."

"She was turned out in the middle of winter without character," Anne replied. "Despite the fact that it was well deserved, if the individual in question doesn't agree, they could want some form of retaliation."

"Where is Mrs. Fitzgerald from?" Ian asked.

Lady Gen frowned. "I hired her from an agency in town. I'm sure they would know how to reach her."

Ian pushed his chair back and stood. "Very well. It would appear that I have an appointment with the magistrate and this agency."

"Can I come along?" Anne surprised herself by asking.

Lady Gen beamed at Anne. "What an excellent idea. Two heads are always better than one."

Ian looked as if he wanted to refuse. Anne tried not to let that hurt her feelings. Perhaps he was still upset with her for not telling him about Lady Fitzgerald. It had been a judgement call that she had thought was right at the time. Surely, he wouldn't be holding that against her.

"Very well," Ian said at last. "I am afraid that the festival is out of the question today, Millie. Hopefully, we can wrap things up and attend tomorrow."

Millie nodded solemnly. "I completely understand. I only hope that we can get to the bottom of this quickly. If I might be excused? I will run along and tell the twins of our change in plans."

“While Millie is doing that, I will get my cloak,” Anne said briskly, rising with Millie.

As they walked out of the breakfast room, Millie grabbed Anne’s arm and pulled her aside.

“Don’t blame yourself for not telling Papa. You didn’t know us then and you still defended me. I won’t ever forget the kindness you showed me, Anne.”

Anne’s troubled eyes met the younger girls and she gave her hand a squeeze. “I can’t imagine the hatred that you have faced in your young life. I don’t care what people say, words hurt, even if you try and pretend that they don’t. I want you to always remember something for me.”

“What is it?” Millie asked eagerly.

“Close your eyes and picture an empty room,” Anne instructed.

Millie promptly closed her eyes. “Alright.”

“Now I want you to picture the people who love you. Your father, Lady Gen, your aunts, uncles, cousins, and me. How full is that room?”

Millie laughed. “It’s getting rather crowded.”

“You can open your eyes now,” Anne replied. When her gaze met Millie’s she said, “Whenever someone tries to tear you down, remember all of the people who love you. Don’t let someone’s opinion, who doesn’t matter, have more credence than those who truly know you and adore you.”

Millie impulsively wrapped her arms around Anne. “Thank you. I hadn’t ever thought of it that way. Is that what you do when things are difficult?”

Anne looked surprised for a moment, and then she laughed. “You know, perhaps I should start taking my own advice.”

Chapter 12

Ian had opened the infernal letter once again trying to find any clues as to who might have sent it. The handwriting wasn't familiar, and it seemed to be thick parchment, obviously someone who had the funds to pay for such frivolities. That wasn't in keeping with the theory of Mrs. Fitzgerald unless she happened to steal some from Lady Gen before being dismissed.

"What does it say?" Lady Gen's asked quietly.

Ian glanced at her. Lady Gen noted that there were lines of worry between his brows and his mouth was pulled taunt. His fist tightened, but he kept his tone light, "It's nothing I can't handle."

Lady Genevieve shook her head. "That bad? I am worried, Ian, and I don't mind telling you. We have never had anything like this happen before. I shall feel much better when you've gotten to the bottom of this."

Ian tapped his gloved finger against his chin. "There has to be some logical explanation. I just don't know what it could be. How does one threaten a child? It's repulsive."

Lady Genevieve gave him a look of horror. "Ian Stanford, I must insist you tell me what was in that letter."

Ian sighed and handed the letter over to Lady Gen. Opening it she read the entirety of its contents before returning it back to him.

You can dress up a bastard in fancy clothes, but you will always be a bastard. Go back to the gutter where you belong.

"What vile nonsense!" Lady Gen said angrily. "If this is the Fitzgerald woman, she will regret the day she ever penned that letter."

"I am ready when you are," Anne said from the doorway.

In her bright blue cloak and matching muff, Anne was as pretty as a painting. Ian couldn't help but feel that there was just something about her that made him want to take care of her. She was someone that he could really fall for.

"I will be with you in just a moment," he blurted out. "You look lovely."

Both ladies dropped their jaws.

"You are likely to catch flies that way, Lady Gen," Ian said with a grin as he walked out of the room.

“Did Ian Stanford just compliment me?” Anne asked in a choked voice.

Lady Gen burst out laughing. “If I hadn't been here to hear it, I don't know if I would have believed it.”

“I'm sure it doesn't mean anything,” Anne added quickly.

Lady Gen's eyes danced merrily. “No, I am sure it doesn't. Unless perhaps we're wrong.”

Anne sucked in a breath. “Don't be ridiculous.”

But try as she might, Anne couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. Once her gaze met Lady Gen's they both started laughing again.

“Is everything alright?” Ian asked when he came back with his cloak on.

“Indeed,” Lady Gen replied, wiping at her eyes. “Things are just as they should be.”



* * *

Anne took the letter from Ian's outstretched hand. Straightening the page, she read the short message. Revulsion rolled through her. Not even wanting to hold it any longer than was necessary, Anne passed the letter back to Ian.

“Only a coward handles their problems in such a fashion,” she said in a muffled voice.

Ian tucked the note back into his coat. “I am afraid we don't have much to go on. The magistrate promised to send two men to watch the townhouse morning and night.”

“I am still confused on how the agency lost all contact with Mrs. Fitzgerald. It seems a little fishy to me,” Anne added.

Ian nodded. “I agree. Something isn't adding up there. The man who ran the agency was quick to rush us off.”

“Mr. Brown? Yes, he was rather unsavory. Wasn't he?” Anne agreed.

Ian couldn't help but marvel at the way Anne had handled the events of the day. She had been a true helpmate to him.

“Ian?” Anne's eyes searched him inquiringly.

Rather than respond, Ian took Anne into his arms and kissed her.

Anne had never been held by a man before, let alone been kissed by one.

She almost pulled away out of fear that she would embarrass herself.

But the feel of Ian's lips on hers was amazing that Anne could no sooner move away than she could fly to the moon.

Sensations raced through her body as if she were on fire. His warm hands had pulled her against his firm chest. His lips were surprisingly soft and yet insistent.

Ian pulled back for an instant to whisper, "Sweet Anne."

However, before she could even force her brain to come up with a response, he was kissing her again. Anne was lost in the tenderness of his touch. The gentle kiss was the perfect foil for his strong arms.

He held her as if she was the most precious thing in the world. Anne had known a life of loneliness. But in this moment, she felt like she was the center of his world.

It was every bit as tender and innocent as a first kiss should be. And it lasted all of a few moments. She pulled back, flushing—proud of how brave she had been.

Ian's firm lips twisted into a smile. "Have I shocked you?"

Anne frowned. "Not in the slightest."

She could have no idea how sweet she looked with her cheeks tinged pink and her lips swollen from his kiss.

He laughed. "I certainly surprised myself."

Anne's lips twitched and she wriggled to get out of his embrace.

Ian tightened his hold. "I don't think so. I'm not finished with you yet."

His lips once again descended, but this time there was no hesitation. He captured her mouth with his, pulling her tight against his muscled frame.

There was intent and purpose in his movements. He lightly licked her bottom lip, startling Anne into opening her mouth. It was then that everything she had thought she had known about kissing went out the carriage window.

His mouth slanted over hers, his tongue gently entered her mouth. And Anne met him shyly with her own.

Ian had kissed his fair share of women—well, perhaps more than his fair share.

But nothing in his sordid history could compare to this small girl who was well on her way to stealing his heart.

Anne moaned, tightening her grasp on his arms. Ian couldn't have held himself back even if he had wanted to.

The innocent kiss quickly took on a more sophisticated air as he

plundered her lips. Anne was more than up for the task and bravely met him, sally for sally.

Her nipples tightened as her lower belly burned with something she wasn't familiar with.

Her hands slid up into his dark hair, loosening the queue that held his strands back.

At that very moment, the carriage halted, and Ian reluctantly raised his head. "Looks like we are home."

It was said in innocence. But the moment Ian said the words he knew that he wanted to take Anne home with him. He didn't want to leave her behind when the Christmas holidays were over. As much as he didn't deserve her, he was falling in love with her.

Now he only had to convince her to fall in love with him.

Chapter 13

The nightmares that had plagued Millie since early childhood soon returned. The first night after the note had been delivered, she awakened with her body coated with sweat, and her throat sore from her cries.

She had hoped that no one had been disturbed, and indeed nothing was said to her the following day. But the next night, she was awakened by her father gently shaking her.

“Millie, dearest, it is only a dream,” his calm voice penetrating the terror that she felt was consuming her.

“It seemed so real,” her teeth were chattering despite the dampness from perspiration along her hairline or perhaps because of it.

He pushed her dark hair back and couldn't help but feel that she looked so terribly young. It angered him even more that someone would try and hurt his daughter.

“Do you wish to talk about it?” He asked gently.

Millie shook her head, clutching his loose nightshirt in her hands. At that moment, the door opened, and Anne rushed in. She hadn't even grabbed her dressing gown. Clad only in her nightdress, Anne raced to Millie's side.

“Dearest child, I heard your cries.”

To Ian's surprise, Millie threw herself into Anne's arms and began to cry.

“There, there, darling. Don't cry, I'm here now.”

Anne was a natural mother. Perhaps it was female intuition or perhaps it was the genuine love that Anne had for his daughter. But if Ian had harbored any reservations before, they were completely smashed at this moment. Anne was meant to be a part of their family.

Ian wasn't sure how or why, but he knew that Vivian would approve of Anne being in Millie's life. One couldn't see the two of them together and not feel the love they had for one another.

After some time rocking her back and forth, Millie eventually fell back asleep. Ian and Anne tucked her back into bed and then moved into the hallway to speak.

It was only then that Anne realized that Ian was indeed standing next to her in his bed clothing.

A delicate flush spreading across her high cheekbones. Looking anywhere but at him, she stammered, "I didn't mean to intrude. I just heard her cries and had to come."

Ian's brow furrowed. "Did you have nightmares as a child?"

Anne ducked her head. "Yes."

"Who came to make sure you were alright?" Ian asked, tipping her head up with his thumb underneath her chin.

"Eliza," Anne replied with a smile. "She was my nurse, but she was truly more than that."

"Does she still reside at Starcrest?" Ian asked.

Anne shook her head. "No, she almost died alone after spending her entire life caring for me. I learned that she was ill during my last season in London."

"I am so terribly sorry," Ian's voice was soothing as he replied. "I'm sure she knew how much you cared for her."

Anne's eyes filled with tears. "I miss her more than I can say. She was the only mother I ever knew. When she passed, I felt like I was abandoned in this world. It was a very dark time."

Ian took her hand and pulled Anne into her bedroom. There he wrapped her in his arms. "You have many secrets, Lady Anne. But the biggest one is that you have such a pure heart. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for you."

Anne pressed her face into his dressing gown, but she didn't speak. It wasn't lost on her how comforting it felt to be in his arms. Ian lifted Anne and settled her on the bed. She stared back at him with wide eyes.

Anne couldn't help but feel that Ian was eminently more approachable with his thick dark hair loose about his shoulders. There was a fine layer of dark whiskers decorating his jaw, and she longed to reach up and see if they were soft or prickly.

He smiled suddenly, and it warmed her to the tips of her toes.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked, his gray eyes observing her.

Anne dipped her head into her arms, "My thoughts are not of import."

She squealed when he sat beside her on the bed.

"I will always find your thoughts riveting," he tucked a honey-colored curl behind her ear.

"You should not be so kind to me, Ian," she replied.

"Why?" He replied.

“You’re dangerous. Do you know that?” she said shakily.

Chapter 14

“I have a notion that you haven’t had enough kindness in your life, Anne.” He was so close that his breath hit her cheek.

Anne couldn’t think with him so close, and yet she felt safest in his arms. He was so much larger than she was, his body was hard where hers was soft. Unthinkingly she reached up to caress his cheek and smiled when the whiskers prickled.

“Dear heaven above,” Ian whispered against her ear. “You quite make me want to forget all of the proprieties.”

Her hand still cradled his cheek, and he turned to kiss her palm.

“You never told me what you were thinking about?” his eyes searching hers.

Ian knew that he was in deep water. This innocent enchantress had no idea of the sexual frenzy she was raising in his body. He plucked her up and placed her in his lap.

The curve of her bottom rested against his enlarging member. Her soft breasts could be easily felt through her thin garment, but most disturbing was the absolute trust he saw in her eyes.

He wanted to tell her that it was misguided. He was not a hero. In truth he was having thoughts of ravishing her right here and now. But every good intention flew out the window when she gave her one-word response.

“You,” her eyes never leaving him. “I am thinking about you.”

His lips came down upon hers, tasting their sweetness and innocence with a hint of the siren that she had become to him.

He groaned at the sheer beauty it was to hold this precious woman in his arms. He wanted to go slowly, teach her the ways of lovemaking, and to mark her as his own.

She would be his, he vowed, there was no other option, for his heart was irrevocably lost. Anne held his happiness in her hands and had no idea that she possessed the power to destroy his world.

Slanting his lips over hers, Ian gently pushed her back on the bed so that they were lying beside one another. He didn’t break the kiss but licked her lips urging her to part for him.

Anne had so many emotions flying around her. His lips were firm and insistent upon her own. His muscular body, radiating heat with something dark and dangerous that she desperately wanted to explore.

She couldn't help but recall the day she opened her eyes to see him in the throes of passion. His hand stroking his massive cock. His face as his pleasure was upon him. Anne felt the telltale signs of desire as her breasts tightened.

It was true that she hadn't much knowledge of what happened between a man and a woman. But she did know her body. Never before had she felt as if her skin were on fire. Never before had she wanted to rip the clothes from another person. She desperately wanted to touch Ian, to see what his chest looked like.

His hands began inching her nightdress upward, and she whimpered in agreement. It was too hot in his chambers. Her skin was on fire.

She wanted to touch him. She tugged at his dressing gown.

His muffled laughter brought her eyes to his gray ones. They had darkened imperceptibly.

Stanford stood for a small moment and reaching behind him, he grabbed the collar of his garment and ripped it over his head.

Anne lay there with her own nightdress around her thighs, panting as she tried to commit every inch of him to her memory.

He was perfect. His chest was broad and scattered with dark hair that led down his muscular stomach. At the base of his hips, Anne followed the deep vee to see more black hair; in the center was his massive cock. He was thick and impossibly wide. The tip had a mushroom-like head. Only this time he wasn't touching it.

Unconsciously, she licked her lower lip. Anne didn't know what to say to bring him back to the bed. In a moment of madness, she grabbed her own nightdress and pulled it over her head.

Ian felt the air leave his chest.

For someone as jaded as he was, the vision in front of him knocked him to his knees.

"You are stunning," he breathed and then reached for her, knowing that this was a choice. There was no coming back from what they were about to do.

She may not realize the implications of their actions, but he did.

In a flash, he was beside her and then she was under him.

The nipples on her breasts abrading his chest, and his cock resting just above the heated juncture of her thighs.

Anne wound her arms around his neck. Loving when he moaned and dipped his head low for another kiss.

“Ian,” she breathed against his lips, and he was lost.

Chapter 15

Anne could feel the power radiating from his muscular frame as he kissed her ruthlessly. Gone were the sweet touches that had started this little game, and in its stead was a raging inferno that she prayed would never burn out.

Her hands were everywhere. She wanted to touch every hard inch of him. She felt the muscles clenching beneath her fingers and loved that he was as much affected by her as she was by him.

He was holding himself above her, careful not to smash her with his weight. But she longed for it, wanted to feel every inch of his skin against her own.

He was kissing her jaw, running his nose along the shell of her ear and then nipping at her neck. Anne thought she would go crazy with want.

“Touch me, please!” She hadn’t even realized that she had vocalized the cry until he looked up at her and smiled darkly.

“Where?” He asked. His eyes told her that he knew precisely where she wanted his touch.

Anne flushed, but the passion in her wanted relief, and without skipping a beat she took his hand and covered her breast.

They moaned simultaneously.

“Your shyness is such a bloody turn-on,” he growled. “But then there is nothing about you that isn’t appealing to me.”

His hand tightened on her breast, testing its weight and feeling the silky skin. “You are utterly perfect,” he breathed against her.

Anne was too caught up in the moment to try and set the record straight. She knew that she was far from perfect. But the way he looked at her made her feel like the most precious thing on earth.

He ran the tip of his finger around her areola watching her nipple tighten with need, and then his lips captured it in his hot mouth.

Anne’s back arched, pushing her breast further into his mouth. Her moans were long and steady as her hands twisted in his hair to hold him closer.

Ian drew the tip out and then flicked it with his tongue. Her hips arched, and he felt the dampness of her curls. It was all he could do not to sink into her right then.

Trying to buy some time, he moved his aching cock further away from her as he teased and played with her nipples. Anne's head was thrashing back and forth. Her night braid had come loose, and her hair was a curtain across the pillows.

Her breasts were pink from his whiskers, and there were little red marks from his teeth.

He sank lower kissing her ribs and stomach.

Anne wasn't sure what his intention was until he kissed her pubic bone right above her most intimate area. Admittedly, he wouldn't kiss her there—would he? But it seemed that there were no boundaries that Stanford wouldn't cross as he pushed her thighs apart and kissed the top of her mound.

"Ian!" She meant to cry out in outrage, but his name was more of an uttered plea.

He dipped his head, and she felt his nose against her core. She was mortified that he saw how wet she was. His fingers parted her folds, and he stuck his tongue into her soaking folds.

Anne cried out as she thought this scandalous act must be a sin. But if she were a sinner, she would happily find her spot in hell, for there wasn't a chance on earth that she would end this delicious torture.

He licked her firmly, using the broad part of his tongue, tasting her desire and seeming to revel in it.

Anne's legs raised further of their own accord. She opened as wide as her body would allow and dug her fingers back into his hair.

He chuckled against her core, and she felt a tightening in the bottom of her stomach. She thrust her hips up at him, wanting more.

He slid a finger into her core. It was tight, and for a moment she wasn't sure she liked it.

Ian began kissing and licking her again, as he slowly eased his finger in and out of her.

The pressure that she had felt before tripled. Anne couldn't contain the thrusting of her hips now. She only knew that she needed something and that he was the one that could give it to her.

Ian's kisses became more insistent. He started circling the little nubbin between her legs, and his finger had sunk all the way inside of her.

"Please, please, please," she chanted, not knowing what she wanted.

Her grip on his head was iron tight. No doubt she would find his dark stands laced through her fingers when she pulled away.

Knowing instinctively that she was ready, Ian sucked her clit into his mouth and sucked hard.

Anne saw spots swarming before her eyes as everything broke apart around her. Waves of pleasure washing over her until she was sure that she would die.

He held her throughout all of it, his finger stroking her until the last wave was gone.

Her eyes threatened to close as she stared up at him in wonder. Ian kissed her gently once again and whispered, "Sleep, my love. I won't leave you."

Anne snuggled up against him. Too naive to realize that his hard erection meant that this would indeed be a sleepless night for him. But he didn't care. This was the best night of his life, and he wanted to cherish every moment.

Kissing her damp brow, he noticed that her breathing had evened out. And he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. She had been a spitfire, and this was only their first encounter.

Heaven help them when she learned more.

Chapter 16

The maid received the shock of her life when she found not one but two sleeping occupants in Anne's room the following morning.

"What the devil is she shrieking about?" He groused sleepily, pulling Anne more tightly against him.

But Anne was too embarrassed to reply. Their night of passion had seemed untouchable in the darkness. But in the stark daylight, she was suddenly reminded why this was such a terrible idea.

Ian didn't love her. What had she done?

Tears slipped down her cheeks, and Ian turned her to face him.

"Why are you crying?" He asked tensely. "Do you regret what has happened between us?"

Anne couldn't respond. She only cried harder.

Ian took her firmly by the shoulders. "Anne, my darling, my love. Please tell me what's wrong."

"That's just it," she sobbed. "I'm not your love."

Ian stared at Anne with amazement. "You bloody little fool, I love you so much that I can't think straight. I know I don't deserve you, and I had meant to tell you in another way. But blast it, I won't have you thinking that I don't care for you. I am in love with every inch of you. I want to marry you."

"You do?" Anne hiccupped.

"Well, what do we have here?" an amused voice came from the doorway.

Anne didn't recognize the handsome man standing there and quickly ducked under the covers.

Ian grinned at his older brother. "Hello, Ryan, have you gone to see your brats yet?"

Ryan laughed and pointed at Ian. "I have. I had to keep the children away from this den of iniquity."

At that comment, Anne moaned ruefully under the blanket.

"Dear Lord, Ryan, come away from there!" A woman's voice floated to Anne's ears.

"Lillian, you are looking lovely as ever," Ian greeted his sister-in-law.

Lillian's gaze narrowed to the lump containing Anne. "I assume you have

a reasonable explanation for this?"

Ian shrugged. "I'm in love."

Anne grinned underneath the covers. It was too bad she couldn't have seen Ryan and Lillian's matching looks of surprise. It would have tickled her right to the bone.

"What's that stupid look on his face?" Ryan remarked to Lillian.

"I think he's smiling," Lillian replied.

Ian frowned at his family.

"Oh! There's my brother. For a moment I wondered if something had taken over his body."

"Hilarious," Ian snorted. "Close the door. I have more to discuss with my betrothed."

Anne squeaked again when she heard the door close and Ian yanked back the covers. Without a word he covered her lips with his own and kissed her soundly.

Chapter 17

Henry and Brant burst into their Uncle Ian's bedchamber without knocking.

"Is it true?" Brant's eyes were dancing as he took in Ian's bedraggled appearance.

Henry hooted, "It must be. Mother wouldn't lie. And just look at him, Brant, he looks positively knackered!"

Ian let out a foul curse. "What are you two doing here? Shouldn't you still be abed?"

"How could anyone sleep through all of the commotion? Mother sent us to fetch you. Lady Gen wants a full accounting of the morning." Henry tipped his head to the side. "What was Lady Anne doing in your bed chambers? We aren't buying the story that she saw a mouse."

Ian felt a flush rising in his cheeks. "It is none of your damn business, either of you."

Brant laughed. "Looks like you're in the suds now, Uncle Ian! Lady Genevieve was none too happy when we passed her in the hallway."

"Get out of here and tell them that I will be down shortly."

"In a single, unattached female's bed no less," Henry added with a wink, just as Ian threw a pillow at him. "I am sure it was purely platonic."

"Well, it was!" Ian retorted, then swore again when he realized he had fallen into Henry's trap. The boys just laughed and raced out of the door as Ian growled at them. It wasn't until they were gone that Ian grinned to himself. Those two would certainly give Ryan a run for his money.

It wasn't until Ian was dressed and striding into the breakfast room that he caught the tense situation. At once he knew something was amiss.

"Ian, Lady Gen has been telling us about a certain note you received. It seems as if there has been another incident," Ryan murmured.

"What happened?" Ian asked at once.

Anne was the one who answered. "Someone wrote on the kitchen door, in what we think is chicken's blood."

The color drained from Ian's face. "What of the magistrate's men?"

"He claims that he fell asleep," Lady Gen replied. "I personally think that is balderdash."

Lillian raised a brow. “You think that this man might have been in on the crime?”

Lady Gen nodded. “I do. It’s far too coincidental that such an event would happen to transpire at the same time.”

“What do we do?” Anne asked.

“We need to discover the man’s name,” Ryan answered. “Then Ian and I need to pay the man a visit.”

Lillian pursed her lips. “That’s well and fine. But the children have been promised a festival and today is the last day.”

Anne nodded. “That’s right. Tomorrow is the Christmas Eve ball. If we don’t go today, they will miss everything this year.”

The vein in Ian’s jaw ticked as he ground his teeth. But after a moment of consideration he said, “Very well. We shall go into town for the festival. If we stick together, there shouldn’t be any reason that Millie isn’t safe.”

Millie, who had been secretly listening in with the twins at the closed door, let a whoop of joy.

Ian stood and opened the door, causing the three children to stumble inside.

Millie had the decency to look chagrined. The twins merely laughed at being caught.



* * *

Once everyone was dressed for the outdoors, the party gathered into two coaches and made their way to the Royal Pavilion. There were jugglers, fortune tellers, roasted nuts, ice skating, street performers and so much more.

With flushed cheeks and childlike enthusiasm, the entire group had a wonderful time. It wasn’t until they were leaving that Brant leaned into whisper, “Uncle Ian, do you recognize that man there?”

Ian frowned and followed where Brant was pointing. There was a thin man of middling years drinking ale and listening to a woman harp at him. For a moment Ian felt sorry for the fellow.

“I don’t, Brant. Should I?”

Brant nodded. "He was the one who supposedly fell asleep."

Ian's gaze snapped back to the man. "Is he? Ryan, come here for a moment. Would you?"

Ryan excused himself from the ladies and went to speak with Ian. After a moment to confer they both decided to confront the man.

Walking across the cobbled street, the man hadn't noticed Ian and Ryan until they were nearly upon him. Because he had been caught unaware, his first look at the men was purely instinctual. Ian saw the hatred burning bright right before a mask slammed down on his expression.

"What can I do for you gentleman?" The man asked, glancing nervously at the woman who was staring at Ian and Ryan with a hooded gaze.

"You are the man the magistrate set to watch Lady Genevieve's home. Are you not?"

The man ran a dirty finger underneath the neckline of his even dirtier neckcloth.

"Aye, but I already explained. I fell asleep. I didn't see anything."

Ian nodded. "Yes, so we heard."

The woman snorted and Ian's gaze swung to meet hers.

"Did you have something to add to the conversation, madam?"

She raised her pointed nose. "I got nothing to say to you, Guv. I know what you toffs are like."

Ryan leaned back, showing a deceptively relaxed stance. "I assume you can tell from our accent that we are American."

She rolled her eyes. "I can see by your wealth that you are high on the hog. Don't care much what you do to anyone else. Do you?"

"Margie!" The thin man warned, but the woman was just warming up.

"You rich lot are such hypocrites."

Ian's tone was icy when he replied. "Pray tell, madam, what are you speaking of?"

"My mother!" She snapped. "The grand ladyship tossed her out on her ear and now we are supposed to care for her. We barely have enough as it is."

Understanding lit Ian's face. "Am I to presume that Mrs. Fitzgerald is your mother?"

The woman sniffed. "She is. What kind of person throws a faithful servant out at Christmas?"

"Your mother was dismissed for saying disparaging things about my daughter," Ian said through clenched teeth. "Not only was she rude and

disrespectful to a child, but she chose to make these remarks about the Duke of Bilkshore's niece."

"The Duke's niece? I thought she was just a bas..."

Before she could say anything more, Anne stepped up and interjected, "Finish that sentence and it will be the last thing you do."

The thin man raised his arms. "We don't want no trouble."

"You should have thought of that before taking that woman in," Ian said tersely. "Or do we have you to blame for the threatening note and the blood on the door?"

The thin man shook his head. "No, sir! That was cooked up between Margie and her mother. I told them that they would be caught. But they wouldn't listen to me."

Anne frowned. "Why did you let them get away with it then?"

The thin man blushed to the roots of his hair.

But it wasn't him that answered, it was Margie. "Went out like a light the moment ma struck him in the head. Good for nothin'."

The man scowled at his wife. Then to everyone's surprise, he grabbed her wrist. "You can tell that story to the magistrate. I have covered for you long enough, Margie. You and your mother are dangerous."

"Where is Mrs. Fitzgerald?" Ian asked.

The thin man smiled grimly. "I'll take you right to her, sir."

Chapter 18

Anne went to her closet and shuffled through the gowns hanging there. She hadn't commissioned anything new for the Christmas Eve ball. Between the trouble with Mrs. Fitzgerald and falling in love with Ian, there simply hadn't been time.

But now that the ball had arrived, Anne was a bundle of nerves.

A quiet knock came at her door and Anne listened as her maid Mary went to open it. Millie came bounding in with all of the youthful exuberance of a well-loved child who is expecting Father Christmas the next morning.

"How I wish that I could go to the ball with you!" Millie sighed as she moved to look at the pretty gowns. "What are you going to wear?"

Anne shrugged. "I was just trying to decide that when you came in. Perhaps you can help me?"

Millie's eyes lit up. "That would be fantastic. I should love that above all things."

They went through the different ball gowns until Millie had it narrowed to three. The first was a deep-green velvet that fastened just below the bust. The second was a vibrant red satin that had a scalloped neckline. The third was a creamy chiffon that had tiny pearls sewn into the bodice and French lace on the sleeves.

"You have excellent taste," Anne said with a smile. "I may have to defer all of my clothing choices to you."

Millie laughed. "Well, I should certainly love to take on that task. Anne, might I ask you something?"

Anne nodded. "Of course."

"Are you really going to marry Papa?" Millie looked up at Anne with such a hopeful expression that Anne was touched by the child's emotion.

"I love your father very much. I hope that you don't feel like I am intruding on your family. I promise not to."

Millie laughed. "Good heavens, no! Papa used to be so grouchy all the time. He never smiled, he never laughed. Since meeting you he has become so happy. I know that he blamed himself for my mother's passing. Even if it was indirectly. I never thought to see my papa like this. Anne, I want you to

be a part of our family. I want a mother more than anything. But not just any mother. I want you.”

Tears pricked Anne’s eyes. “And I want you as a part of my family. Thank you for that.”

Millie stayed with Anne as Mary styled her hair and helped to make the final decision on the red satin gown. Anne was secretly glad that Millie hadn’t chosen the cream-and-pearl gown. It was what she wanted to wear when she and Ian married.



* * *

Ian led her out into the first dance and thereafter never left her side. It was whispered that they had danced no less than three waltzes. And at the stroke of midnight, Ian announced his betrothal to Lady Anne.

The following day started the Christmas festivities. After a long morning in church, the children were thrilled with the presents that awaited them back at Lady Gen’s townhome. With plenty to eat and drink, the next twelve days were some of the happiest of Anne’s life.

Kissing boughs were hung over the doorways to encourage goodwill into the home. Mistletoe was placed in a variety of strategic places that Ian had no trouble whatsoever of using to his advantage.

Songs were sung around the Yule Log as the children played various games of Snapdragon and Charades and the adults drank more wine than was sensible. It wasn’t until Epiphany that Lord Rawlings joined the festivities in Brighton.

With the house already at its maximum occupancy, Lord Rawlings happily put himself up at the inn. He was, however, thrilled to sign the marriage contracts with Ian. In a rare burst of emotion, he even told Anne that she had always made him proud.

Anne, having the foresight to know when it was best to keep one’s opinion to herself, chose not to refute him.

The wedding was short and sweet. Lord Rawlings insisted on giving the bride away. Lady Gen insisted on giving Anne her pearl brooch, and Millie

gave Anne a wrapped package that she wasn't to open until later that night.

Tears of joy pricked Anne's eyes as she and Ian exchanged their vows. Nothing could have made her happier than to wed the man she had grown to love more than life itself.

Ian had never seen Anne look so beautiful and couldn't stop from stealing glances at his bride, even missing his cue to say, "I do," much to the priest's dismay.

The twins groused about being trusted up like Christmas hams in their finery, but Millie was in her own kind of heaven. Anne had made certain that Millie had a new gown just for the occasion. Millie proudly wore a pale pink satin gown, with forget-me-nots entwined on the bodice and roses in her hands.

Ian could see then and there that his daughter was truly growing up. He couldn't help the surge of gratefulness he had for Anne for making sure that Millie had a special day as well. It took one amazing woman to look outside of herself on her wedding day.

It was something that Ian would never forget. He loved Anne more than words could say.

Lady Gen and Millie exchanged secretive glances after the wedding, and it wasn't until the bride and groom had departed that the whole truth finally came out.



* * *

"Are you telling me that there were no special investors for Ian to investigate?" Ryan asked incredulously.

Lady Gen grinned at the younger man. "Of course, there wasn't. I had a devil of a time concocting something plausible enough to bring him to Brighton. I knew they were perfect for one another. I just had to give Ian and Anne some time to figure it out for themselves."

Millie smirked. "And she had an accomplice."

"And the two of you kept this secret the entire time?" Lillian asked incredulously.

Millie nodded with all of the authority that a thirteen-year-old girl possesses. “Of course! Any lady worth her salt knows how to keep a secret.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes when Lillian nodded along with the other women.

“What secrets are you keeping from me?” Ryan demanded.

Lillian smiled at him. “If I told you, darling, it wouldn’t be a secret, would it?”

Chapter 19

When Anne and Ian finally arrived at the inn up the coast, he swept her off her feet and carried her to their fanciest bedchamber. Anne's sweet laughter left a trail behind them.

Ian kicked the door closed and proceeded to kiss his new wife until she was completely senseless.

Anne felt the kiss straight to her toes, and leaned into him, taking hands and weaving them into his dark hair.

Ian kissed her passionately. He was done with holding back his feelings for her. They were married, and by Jove he was going to worship her body as she clearly deserved. He wanted Anne to know just how special she was to him. He gently unbuttoned her satin gown and with care removed her underclothing until she was bare before him.

Anne flushed at his apparent arousal. His wedding breeches were tented, and his hands shook as he tried to unbutton his own garments.

She came and took over for him.

Ian stilled when her hands touched his bare chest. "I have waited a long time for this moment," he rasped.

"You don't have to wait, my love. I am yours." The truth of her words was shining in her eyes as Anne stepped on her toes inadvertently brushing the tips of her breasts against his chest as she kissed him.

Ian pulled her against him and then lifted her and placed her onto the large bed. Anne giggled and scooted clear to the top, watching as Ian lifted a brow at her antics.

He climbed on and stalked her until she was inches from his lips. Then he reached out and devoured her mouth at the same time his hands reached for her breasts.

Anne cried out, deepening the kiss as he swept his tongue forcefully against her own. Ian caressed her lovingly and worried her nipples until she was writhing under him.

He then slid one hand down her silky body to find the curls hiding her womanhood damp with arousal. He parted her nether lips and began to stroke her. Anne felt as if she had died and gone to heaven.

Her hips began to follow along with the rhythm of his fingers, and her kiss became almost frantic.

It wasn't long before she felt the tightening in her core and knew that she was about to fall.

Breaking her lips away she cried out, "Ian, dear Ian," as her orgasm overtook all reason.

Before she could come down, Ian positioned himself between her thighs and gently began to enter her. There was a burning that she hadn't expected, but Anne urged him onward. She wanted to be one with him, to have no more barriers between them.

When he pushed past her innocence, she cried out. Ian hated that she was in pain and yet he couldn't have stopped if he wanted to. Instead Ian whispered sweet nothings to her before softly kissing her lips.

Once she had stopped clenching her teeth and began to deepen their kiss, Ian knew it was safe to move again. He pulled out, and she clutched his arms as if trying to make him stay. But then he thrust back in again, and she moaned loudly.

"Anne, dearest," he panted, trying to hold back. "Are you alright?"

She looked up at him with all the love in her heart. "I am with you. All the world is right."

He slid back into her again and again, not able to control his passion, and as he moved Anne's body began to hum again. She lifted her legs and tightened them around his waist. She began meeting him thrust for thrust.

His heavy body felt perfect against her own, and she knew that this was heaven.

Ian's thrusts became sloppy, his arms straining as he wanted to come. But he would not climax without her. Reaching between their bodies, he found her clit and began to rub circles on it as he thrust into her core.

Suddenly she was crying out, digging her nails into his skin as her core milked his cock. He exploded inside of her. Never had he ever felt this way before while making love.

This truly was making love, he realized. Anything in the past melted away as he clutched his new wife.

Anne panted, trying to catch her breath. "Is it always thus?"

He smiled into her neck, and she grinned as she felt it. "Only with you, my love. Only with you."

Epilogue

Five years later...

“Millie, do we honestly have to take Michael along? He’s just a baby.”

Anne turned to see her son James addressing his older sister. Millie was preparing for her first season in town. While there had been a lot of back and forth on whether or not it was the best choice, Anne ultimately left the decision up to Millie.

Ian had tried to protest, but Anne put her foot down.

“Millie is old enough to know her own mind. She is well aware of what awaits her. I know that people will be unkind. But there will be those that aren’t so narrow minded as well. It’s not our place to stifle her, Ian. It’s our place to be a soft spot for when she falls, and to be her cheering section for when she soars.”

Anne only had one caveat for Millie’s season. The entire family would go to support her. Not only would they be the guests of the Duke and Duchess of Bilkshire, but her step-grandfather, Lord Rawlings, insisted on having a ball in her honor.

Life had certainly changed in the five years since Ian and Anne first wed. James was a honeymoon baby and had been bossing the family around pretty much since the first moment he could speak. Three years later, his brother Michael joined the family.

Millie doted on her little brothers. James thought the sun and the moon rose and set with his older sister. However, he wasn’t convinced there was anything good about Michael. According to four-year-old James, Michael was only good for screaming and wet nappies.

Millie’s lips twitched as she took in the indignant state of her younger brother. Not wanting to belittle his concern, Millie crouched down until she was at eye level with him. Then she said in a faint voice, “If we try and leave him home, mother won’t come. I can’t do this without her, Jamie. I hate to say it, but Michael has to come along with us to London.”

James blew out an exasperated breath. “He ruins everything.”

Millie suddenly stuck on something that was bound to cheer James up.

“Little man, mother said that Brant and Henry would be down from Eton. I would be willing to wager that they won’t want anything to do with a baby like Michael. But you, well, you’ve grown so big and tall this year. Chances are they will be looking for a mate like you to hang around with.”

James’s eyes grew wide with delight. “Oh, do you really think so, Millie?”

Millie laughed and kissed his cheek. “Absolutely. Besides, I have already promised to take you for ices and Gunter’s. You will be so busy having the time of your life that you will forget all about Michael in the nursery.”

“But I’m in the nursery,” James argued.

“You won’t be forever,” Anne decided to intervene. “Now, Mary is looking for you. I know she has strawberry tarts for tea today. You had best run along.”

James kissed his sister and mother quickly before running off to find the strawberry tarts. It was his favorite dish. Once they were alone Anne moved to review the things the maids were packing for Millie’s season.

“Thank you,” Millie said softly.

“Hmm?” Anne mused as she tucked a honey-gold curl behind her ear.

“Thank you for being the mother that I didn’t know I needed.”

Anne turned and took her stepdaughter’s hands into her own. “I love you, Millie Stanford. You are going to knock those London gentlemen off their feet.”

Millie laughed and looked up to see her father entering the room. He was starting to get some gray through his temples, which only made him appear more mysterious and handsome. Knowing that her parents were bound to get overly mushy, Millie promptly invented an excuse to get her out of the room.

“Are you sure she’s ready for this?” Ian asked.

Anne shook her head. “Nobody is truly ready for growing up. It’s one of those situations where you have to take a leap and hope that everything we’ve taught her through the years will be enough to get her through.”

Ian wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. “You look far too young to have a daughter entering the marriage mart.”

Anne laughed. “I am nearly five-and-thirty. Sometimes I feel at least three times that age. How does it feel to be married to an old woman?”

Ian growled. “I am not married to an old woman. I am married to an enchantress that stole my heart one Christmastide and changed my very soul.”

“You say the loveliest things,” Anne said as she reached up and kissed his lips.

Ian grinned at her. “My brothers would beg to differ. But I thank you just the same.”

While Ian was speaking his hands went to the laces up her spine and, with deft skill, he began to unfasten her dress.

Anne’s body broke out in goosebumps. She wasn’t sure if it was the sudden chill from her back being exposed to the air, or if it was because of this man kissing her into oblivion. She couldn’t imagine another person on the earth that could elicit such a conflict of emotions inside her.

Pushing back from his kiss, Anne allowed her dress to fall from her shoulders to pool around her ankles.

Ian’s eyes darkened as he took in her lovely body. Their time together had changed her. She had a woman’s body, with full curves and heavy breasts.

As if he couldn’t help himself. Ian fell to his knees, pressing a kiss on her mound. He then helped to balance her so that he could lift one leg over his shoulder and open her sweet core more fully to him. The smell of her arousal was enough to cause his cock to jerk in his pants. This woman was his weakness.

He licked her folds, loving the sound of her gasps and moans. Her hands sank into his hair and she pulled mindlessly as he licked and sucked her pussy until she was writhing and struggling to stand.

It didn’t take long before he stood and picked her up. She cried out at the loss of his mouth on her folds. But she didn’t have to wait long. This time Ian placed both of her legs over his shoulders. Picking up her heart-shaped bottom, he buried his face into her wet heat.

Sucking hard on her clit, he began a rhythm. Licking and sucking, only to come back and swirl his tongue around her tender nub. Two fingers went inside her pussy and stroked her.

The moment his fingers entered her. Anne knew that she wasn’t going to last. His continual onslaught of her sex was almost more than she could bear.

Suddenly things began to tighten, and she knew that her release was imminent. She was climbing, struggling, clawing her way toward the precipice and then suddenly she was free. Her body convulsed as wave after wave of pleasure washed through her.

Ian never let up, causing one orgasm to slide into another. By the time he

lifted his head, Anne was near tears from sheer pleasure.

Ian, having already removed his cravat, grabbed his shirt and yanked it over his head. His breeches were soon to follow, and then he was gloriously naked.

Anne's eyes ran over every inch of his muscular frame, from his broad shoulders and strong chest to his flat stomach and narrow hips. Her eyes automatically went to the chiseled vee that led to an impressive erection.

She hadn't even known that she'd gasped until she heard Ian's low chuckle. The masculine smirk on his face was enough to bring her back to her senses.

"Rather impressed with yourself, aren't you, husband?"

Ian grinned, saying, "Admit it, wife, you enjoy the view."

She tapped her lip, considering, but let out a squeal of laughter when he scooped her into his arms. Suddenly his lips were on hers and she tasted the faint hint of her musk on his tongue. He was relentless, his hands gently laying her onto the bed and then he was climbing over her.

His fingers sought the plumpness of her breasts, pinching and teasing her nipples until she was once again hungry for more. His mouth roamed from her mouth to her neck and then moved lower. Replacing his fingers with his mouth, he flicked and sucked her tips, driving her wild.

His hands roamed down her body until he reached her center. Anne eagerly opened her legs and moaned, arching up to meet his questing fingers. They thrust inside of her, sliding back and forth in rhythm with the suck of his mouth. Anne was caught in a maelstrom of pleasure. As much as she was loving every minute of his lovemaking, Anne wanted his thick cock to be inside of her.

"Please," she begged. "I need you, now."

"What do you need?" He asked against her hot skin.

"I need you to lay with me," she said breathlessly.

He laughed and then nipped at her skin, causing her to squeal. "I am lying with you. That isn't what you need. Tell me, Anne, tell me what you need."

"I need you inside of me," she said breathlessly.

Ian growled as he moved up to whisper in her ear, "Your wish is my command."

Then he slid his hands up the back of her thighs and pulled her closer so that his cock could rub against her clit.

Anne grasped at the sheets. "Please stop teasing me."

With a thrust he sank inside of her, the burning heat combined with the rush of pleasure, causing them both to shudder. Ian was unable to hold back. After all of these years, each time still felt like the first. Ian began thrusting in and out, over and over, loving the sounds that she made as she chased her pleasure.

“This,” he gasped, thrusting hard, “This is how it is supposed to be. You and me, Anne.”

Anne could hardly contain the emotions that were roiling inside of her. The thrill of Ian making love to her, the knowledge that he was hers forever. It was overwhelming; her heart was near bursting.

Ian lifted her leg and began to thrust deeper, her breasts bouncing with every thrust. The pleasure that had been climbing was near its breaking point. She was so close. Moving her hand to her clit, she began to rub it furiously as Ian pushed her closer and closer to release.

“Yes,” he growled. “Touch yourself, Anne. Show me what you like.”

Her orgasm washed over her, tightening her nipples to hard points and causing her toes to curl. The moment she released. Ian was helpless not to follow. He cried out her name as he filled her, his body bowing over her as he came harder than he had ever come before.

Ian slumped against her. He had no wish to smash Anne, but his energy was clearly spent.

When he managed to roll to the side, he saw the tears on her cheeks.

“Love, what is it?”

His tender question caused Anne’s tears to come faster. “I never thought I would ever be this happy. You are the best thing to ever happen to me.”

Ian kissed her forehead, gathering her close. “Anne, you saved me and my daughter. I will love and adore you all of the days of my life. Please don’t cry.”

She turned into his embrace, reveling in the warmth of his body, until the tears stopped, and her breathing evened out. “Ian, there is one other thing.”

“What’s that my love?” He answered sleepily.

“I know this isn’t the best timing, but...”

Ian tensed. “What is it?”

“I’m increasing again.” For a moment Anne wondered if he hadn’t heard her. But when his body began to shake, she was scared that perhaps she had pushed him too far. “Ian?”

“I should have known with the tears,” he said with a laugh.

“You’re laughing?” Anne smacked his chest indignantly.

“Don’t be mad,” Ian tried to apologize with a kiss. “I was just imagining James’s response to a new baby. Something has me thinking that our son is in for a crushing surprise.”

Anne smiled despite herself. “He takes after you, you know.”

Ian barked out a laugh. “That my dearest love, is true. Let’s hope he figures things out a little earlier than I did. I love you, Mrs. Stanford.”

Anne blushed and kissed him back. “And I love you, Mr. Stanford.”

The End

About S. Cinders

S. Cinders is an award-winning author who loves writing and cheesecake. She lives in the Midwest with her husband of twenty-four years and her two nearly grown sons.

Known as ‘the naughty romance author’, you’ll love her witty banter and engaging characters. Once you start, you won't want to stop!

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One Scandalous Christmas

by J. Burrelli



Chapter 1

*October 24, 1815
London, England*

“Good afternoon, Milton,” Kitty greeted the butler with a sunny smile. She slid off her gloves before unbuttoning her pelisse. “Are you well today?”

“I’m of excellent health, thank you for enquiring, Miss Katherine. Did you have a good walk?”

Kitty opened her mouth to respond, but her mother sailed past and brushed her aside, holding out her own pelisse which would have dropped to the floor if not for Milton’s quick hand.

“Have there been any callers today, Milton?” Her crystal-sharp tone was reminiscent of nails on a chalkboard.

“Several, my lady.”

“Yes, yes,” she interrupted, her hand fluttering impatiently. “Anyone of note?”

“The Marquis of Lansdowne left his card, Your Ladyship.”

Kitty did a double-take at their long and trusty retainer’s clipped tone. Milton was an excellent judge of character. Often, he was more fastidious than his employers about the suitability of callers. The fact that the most recent visitor to the Thorpe household didn’t meet with his exacting standards was most interesting.

With a dexterity that shocked Kitty, her mama pounced on the salver and rifled through the pile of cards and invitations and, scooping them up, wafted them in a fan. “Oh, I knew it wouldn’t be long before Anne-Marie made her first conquest,” she trilled.

Kitty rolled her eyes. Turning her back, she shrugged out of her coat. Her mother would now become all of a twitter, singing her sister’s attributes from the rafters. “A marquis, did you hear that, Anne-Marie? We had the Marquis Lansdowne call at our home.”

It would keep her mother preoccupied for the time being, and that suited Kitty very well. Her sister was welcome to the man. Kitty feared her younger sister was too easily impressed by a title.

“Anne-Marie, Anne-Marie, come, dear, we must get ready for the Seaton’s soiree. You need to look your best if we run across the marquis.” The door snapped shut behind the energetic whirlwind that was Lady Thorpe, and thankfully her strident tone.

Kitty puffed out a breath of relief and shared a conspiratorial look with the old butler. She could swear she saw the edges of his lips twitch. “We had a lovely walk, Milton. The weather is unseasonably warm. Packages will be arriving shortly; they are for Miss Anne-Marie. Please could you see them sent up to her room?”

A whole day of shopping with her mother and sister was enough to tempt her to take up holy orders, if only to gain some peace. Kitty removed her bonnet and ran her critical eye over the drooping hat and faded artificial flowers. Though one of her favourite bonnets, it was sadly out of date. How long had she had it—four, maybe five seasons? She was hardly going to cut a dash about town anytime soon, she mused, and was certainly living up to her reputation as the ‘Thorpe Drab’.

“May I have tea sent to the library, please, Milton?” This was the one room in the house that neither her mother, nor her sister ever visited. A safe sanctuary from their silliness.

“Certainly, Miss Katherine.”

Kitty slipped along to the room in question and breathed a sigh of relief, allowing the familiar scent of paper and tooled leather to comfort her—an instant balm to her irritation which had been building over the past several hours.

“As bad as that, was it?” The question emanated from a corner of the room.

Kitty jumped. Arranging her face into a polite smile, she addressed the wingback chair. A pair of legs poked out from behind a news-sheet. “Of course not, Papa, I just prefer visiting the circulating library over the modiste.”

The paper rustled, and twinkling blue eyes peeked over the top. Her father gave a conspiratorial nod. “Yes, I can imagine.”

Her grin genuine, Kitty acknowledged she’d inherited more from her father than his dark colouring; she had his bookish ways. If he had not been born to title, he could have easily taken up the role of a scholar, content among his books, so long as he had a warm hearth and decent food.

Kitty travelled the length of the shelves and ran her fingers along the

spines of some familiar friends and other friends yet to be discovered. She found the book she had recently been enjoying and settled into the twin armchair by the aforementioned hearth.

She smiled up at the maid who knocked and entered bearing a tea tray. “Would you like me to pour, Papa?”

Lord Thorpe nodded, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He appeared distracted, but that wasn’t anything new for her absent-minded papa. Kitty added half a spoon of sugar and a drop of milk to his tea, the way she knew he liked it.

“It is good you came, Kitty. I need to talk to you.”

Kitty paused midway through stirring the tea. She raised her head, startled by the gravitas of her father’s tone. She could not imagine what she might have done to displease him.

“What is it, Papa?” she asked, worrying her lower lip as she handed over his tea.

He looked distinctly uncomfortable and gave a tug at his cravat, shifting in his seat.

“I will come straight to the point, Kitty. You need to make a genuine effort this season to attract a suitor.”

Kitty’s hand slipped as she poured her tea. Liquid splashed onto the saucer. That had been the last thing she’d expected him to say. Her face became shuttered. “I have no interest in marriage, Papa,” she replied sharply, setting the strainer aside with a little more force than strictly required.

At four and twenty years of age, Miss Kathrine Georgianna Thorpe was considered to be ‘on the shelf’, and she liked it that way. The proverbial shelf suited her, it was comfortable and safe. One knew where one stood when one was on the shelf. Should a fashionable gentleman attempt to make her acquaintance, she would direct them to Anne-Marie. Kitty simply could not stand the idea of yet another season. In fact, the very idea made her feel ill.

“Dash it all, girl, I’m not getting any younger. What will you do when your mother and I are gone?”

“That will be a long time coming, Papa.” She sniffed.

He raked a hand through the wisp of white hair perched atop of his shining dome. It was true that Baron Thorpe had married later in life. He’d always said it was because his nose had been firmly stuck in a book until it was pointed out that he required an heir to continue the Thorpe line. He had set out to search for a bride, eventually marrying a much younger woman in

the hope of obtaining an heir. Unfortunately, no son had arrived.

“We don’t know how long we have left, Kitty, and with the estate entailed away to a distant relation, you will be left to face the tender mercies of this world alone.” He paused as if considering his words. “The world can be an extremely harsh place, daughter.”

Kitty became restless, a ball of agitation. She tapped her foot on the floor.

“What about your investments?” she asked matter-of-factly. Picking up her forgotten cup, she inhaled the calming scent of the tea.

“They are *not entailed*, and I have the brain to handle finance. You could put them into a trust.”

Papa’s mouth bunched.

Kitty lowered her eyes so he didn’t see her flash of triumph.

“Kathrine...”

She struggled to hide the wince at his use of her full name. Her father rarely called her Katherine.

“The investments will not be enough. They have taken a hit during the war with France.” His face paled. “I invested heavily in commerce that was dependent on North Sea exports.” His next words were heaped with self-loathing and bitterness. “Just before the market collapsed.”

The world fell out from under Kitty’s feet, and she was glad she was already seated.

“I had no idea, Papa,” she murmured. Of course, she had heard about the 1811 crises but only in the broadest of terms. That after previously booming, Britain’s exports reduce by a third without warning. Kitty wracked her brains trying to recall where she had been at that time, if Papa had shown any hint of distress. To her shame, Kitty could not remember. She had been too consumed by her own dismal affaires to see past the end of her nose.

Her cup rattled against her saucer. She made to rise, but her father raised his palm to forestall her.

Pain sliced across his face as he was forced to share the unpalatable truth. “Not to the degree that we are destitute, you understand, but with declining markets, we can no longer rely on them.”

Kitty sucked in her breath. Before she had come into the library, life had been normal. How could everything change so drastically in such a small space of time?

“You deserve to be the mistress of your own home, daughter, and experience the joy of having your own family.”

Kitty's lips took on a cynical twist, bearing a close semblance to a grimace rather than a smile. "I assume you refer to the joy of facing death to bear some imaginary husband's children, while he, no doubt, takes up with his latest lady bird."

"Katherine!" Papa spluttered, shooting her a look of reprimand.

She forced herself to take a mouthful of the near-scalding tea, just to keep anything else outrageous from spilling from her mouth. What had she been thinking letting her tongue run away with her?

"What do you know of such matters?" Baron Thorpe demanded, his papery cheeks turning a ruddy red.

She knew that tone, but the flare of her temper made her stand her ground.

"Come, Papa, I am not an ignorant miss straight out of the schoolroom," she pointed out while fiddling with her spoon.

"That does not give you leave to talk about such matters openly. It reveals a vulgarity that is beneath you."

Kitty pinched her lips together, and with a meekness her rebellious spirit was far from feeling, she made a tactical retreat. "I apologise, Papa."

The hypocrisy of the situation galled her strong sense of justice. They would see her wed and turn a blind eye to the generally accepted base practices of the supposed gentlemen of the ton.

After a moment of her father glaring at her, the starch left his spine, and for a moment he appeared to age before her eyes.

"You have much to offer, Katherine, but you seem determined to hide yourself away. You barely say two words while you are out at entertainments."

Kitty returned a pert volley. "That is because if there was an original thought between those posing peacocks, I would be forced to eat my best bonnet and run mad from shock." Not that she'd trust a word out of their insincere mouths. She'd learnt that lesson long ago. Neither did she have the features that would allow her to be crowned a diamond of the first water, unlike her sister. Anne-Marie was the image of her mother in her heyday. Her form was slight, and with blonde locks that could hold a curl, paired with the bright-blue Thorpe eyes, Anne-Marie was undeniably striking. Where her father's blue eyes kindled intelligence and a surprising wry sense of humour, Anne-Marie's held the shallowness of an eggshell.

Other than those eyes, Kitty was as different from her sister as night from

day, taking after her father with dark colouring. There had been those who had gone so far as to call her a little brown wren, and when they thought she was out of earshot, a drab. Some whispered she was destined to become an old maid. Kitty would rather walk over hot coals than go through *that* again.

She and her father glared at one another, the small space between them becoming a battleground.

“If there is no one of our social standing that you find acceptable, perhaps a curate or a local squire might suit? Mr Poppleton might be persuaded to court you. Your dowry could be used as an incentive.”

Katherine choked and engaged in an unladylike coughing fit. Mr Poppleton, heaven forbid! The man was twice her age, loud and of a ruddy complexion. He was blatantly seeking a mother for his brood of children produced by the first Mrs Poppleton after she had died in childbirth. Not only that, but his discussion consisted only of horses, dogs, and shooting.

Scowling over her teacup, Katherine sniffed and returned curtly, “I will be consigned to Bedlam within a month, neither am I one for sermons.”

Her father tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps,” he agreed. “Or Great Aunt Agatha is ailing and in need of a companion.”

Kitty shuddered at his other suggested, yet equally cruel fate. Aunt Agatha was a harridan, tyrannical and spiteful. Nothing ever pleased her. The woman lacked all warmth and feeling.

So, she was to become the unpaid nursemaid or have Squire Poppleton sweating over her in bed while she tried to deal with his unruly brood. Her nose wrinkled in distaste. Neither option was viable as far as she was concerned.

Her glare still in full force, Kitty drummed her fingers upon the arm of the chair.

Her father did not cow under her disdain.

“That was underhanded, sir,” she all but growled, her enjoyment from their sparring evaporating.

Lord Thorpe appeared unconcerned about Kitty’s ire and met her burning gaze candidly. “Nonetheless, those will soon be your *only* options if you continue along this path.”

She was loath to acknowledge that he had neatly outmanoeuvred her by presenting her with an honest view of her potential future and she hated it. The truth behind her father’s words were proving a bitter and difficult pill to swallow. It left only one potential option open to her where she might have

some say. As unpalatable as another season would be, the alternatives were far worse.

“Very well, Father, if I agree...”

Baron Thorpe snorted. “There is no *if* about it, Katherine, unless you wish to reap a mess of your own making in years to come.”

Continuing like he hadn’t spoken, she strengthened her spine and her voice. “However, may I point out a flaw in your plan?” she said, pleased she had managed an even tone.

“Go on.” Papa arched a brow.

“Mother,” Kitty said simply.

In her first season, Kitty had been pushed, pulled, and prodded and shoved from pillar to post in the most outrageous frills and furbelows that did nothing to flatter her plumpish figure.

“Hmm.” Lord Thorpe was back to rubbing his nose again. He knew only too well how badly her mother and she dealt with one another over a sustained period of time. The image of tying two cats’ tails entwined, each fighting and tugging in opposing directions, neither gaining ground, popped into her head.

“I have thought of an alternate solution.”

He leaned back, a sense of satisfaction emanating from him. The sinking feeling in the pit of Kitty’s stomach grew. God’s teeth, just what was she going to have to agree to now?

“Your Aunt Euphemia is in London for the season, and I know she would enjoy aiding your endeavours. Would that suit you?”

Lady Euphemia was Kitty’s favourite relation. A sensible widow with a wry sense of humour and a backbone of steel, her temperament and outlook mirrored Kitty’s in so many ways.

“She might not agree...” Kitty’s thought tailed away. She slouched back against the chair, staring at the ceiling, and worked through her frustration. “You’ve already asked her, haven’t you?”

“And naturally, Euphemia was thrilled by the prospect and accepted with alacrity,” the baron confirmed, failing miserably to keep the smugness from his voice.

Definitely outmanoeuvred, Kitty acknowledged wryly. Her mouth curved into a grudging smile.

She nodded and decided to play her last desperate card, her nose wrinkling in a grimace. “My wardrobe needs updating.” That was an

understatement. After her disastrous first season where she had not the spirit or inclination to resist, her mother had overseen her wardrobe with disastrous effect. What suited her mother's petite frame did Kitty no favours, and over time she had been browbeaten until she no longer argued with her mama. With Kitty dressed unsuitably in ruffles and styles that emphasised the breadth of her shoulders and width of her hips, her season had been a disaster.

"Is that all? With the little you have spent of your allowance over the past five years, I am certain you will have more than adequate funds to outfit yourself appropriately."

Kitty sat back, defeated. She took a sip of her long-forgotten tea. It now tasted stale on her tongue. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

He offered her a tired smile, again looking older than usual.

"I'm trying to ensure your future, Kitty. Understand, child, I only want what is best for you."

His sincere words softened her defences and curtailed any further arguments. She knew her father had her best interests at heart, no matter how misguided they might be.

"I know, Papa, I know." Kitty accepted her fate with grace, even though her heart sank at the thought of enduring another tortuous season.

Chapter 2

Considering it was early in the season, Lady Seaton's was a surprising crush. The rooms were hot and stuffy, and Miss Katherine Thorpe shifted uncomfortably, feeling her maid's efforts go to waste as her artfully curled hair became limp. That hair summed up her life precisely, sad and limp. Sighing loud enough for her mother to glance up from her animated conversation and shoot her a glare, Katherine schooled her face into a neutral expression and took her usual position with the rest of the wallflowers, every inch the spinster firmly on the shelf. Though her father's words were still echoing in her ears, it was harder to implement his plan, especially when she was attired in the trappings of the Thorpe Drab.

She was mentally prepared to endure another long, tedious evening of watching her younger sister be twirled about the ballroom with her never-ending stream of beaux. The conversations generally consisted of nothing more interesting than the latest *on dit* and the fashions in la belle assembly. This was what she had to expect in the coming months. Courage, she thought, straightening her spine, though there was a card room that had been set aside for guests if that was their inclination. Alas, neither was she a card player, her face too expressive. She allowed her features to remain in her polite social mask, making all the appropriate answers when needed and never offering more. Ruefully, Kitty was forced to admit, it might be the reason why after five seasons she had failed to take.

The back of Kitty's neck prickled, and she resisted the urge to scratch it. She peered around the room, searching for the source of her uneasiness and stifled the urge to dive behind a houseplant. Lady Barham was making her way over, and Kitty blinked several times. What in the world had she done to her hair? It was a shocking bright-red colour bordering on a heinous orange, that clashed terribly with her vermilion gown. The lady was equally well-known for her unsuccessful attempts to fight age after being a diamond in her day and one of the most spiteful gossips of the ton.

"Lady Thorpe," she drawled. Her blue eyes that once might have been likened to diamonds were now cold, hard lumps of coal. "A pleasure to see you, my dear, and Miss Anne-Marie is looking so well. Why, I'm sure after

your previous, ah”—she paused artfully, her gaze lingering on Kitty, the implication clear— “disappointments, that she will do well. After all, she has your stamp on her.”

“That is most kind of you, Lady Barham. Yes, we have high hopes for my Anne-Marie.” Her mother preened from the compliments she had received, either choosing to ignore the hidden insult to her eldest or it had gone over her head.

Lady Barham’s fan increased in speed. “Oh dear, forgive me, I’m forgetting my manners.”

Kitty fought back a snort; she would have to have manners to begin with.

“Allow me to introduce you to his lordship, the Marquis of Lansdowne. My lord, this is Lady Thorpe, her eldest, Miss Katherine Thorpe.” She leaned across, her breast brushing the arm of his coat when she pointed her closed fan in the direction of the dancers. “And the delightful creature dancing over there is her youngest, Miss Anne-Marie Thorpe.”

The older man inclined his head, his superfine coat straining at the shoulders. “Happy to make your acquaintance, my lady. Have you been in town long?”

At the mention of his title, Mama beamed from ear to ear. Dear God, did she have to be so transparent? Kitty frowned. His name was Lansdowne? Wasn’t that the name of the card left earlier? The one that Mama had been crowing to the rafters about? Under her lashes, Katherine surreptitiously conducted a further study while they engaged in the niceties. The man was not as old as he had first appeared, perhaps around five and forty, though a life of dissolution had aged him beyond his years, red-faced, and what once might have been distinctly masculine with its strong nose was giving way to jowls. Kitty nibbled her bottom lip. There was a familiarity to him that she couldn’t shake.

“Not until recently, my lord, leaving us with barely sufficient time to settle before starting the social whirl.”

But the man didn’t appear to be attending to Mama’s prattle. Instead, his gaze was trained over her shoulder and focussed on Kitty, who fought the urge to shift uncomfortably under such direct scrutiny. In fact, it was downright rude, and what exactly was the issue? Did she have ink on her nose? Snapping her fan shut, she met his gaze and held it with an impertinent tilt of her chin. Wallflower she may be, but never a shrinking violet.

When Mama paused to draw breath, the marquis smoothly inserted,

“Lady Thorpe, do you think that your daughter might be able to spare me a dance?”

The way Mama was fluttering her eyelashes at the man was nauseating. “I’m sure Anne-Marie will be utterly delighted—”

“Though I would be equally pleased if your younger daughter was able to so honour me, I was addressing your eldest, Miss *Katherine* Thorpe.”

Kitty choked on thin air. *Me?*

He wanted to stand up with her?

Her mother’s manners failed her, her eyes popping out of her head, but only for a moment, then she recovered her usual form and disguised it with a wave of her fan. “Of course, Lord Lansdowne, my *Katherine* is quite an accomplished partner as I’m sure you will find out.”

The marquis held out his gloved hand to Kitty. “Shall we?”

Aware of her mother’s glower beating down on her, Kitty unclenched her teeth and tilted her head in agreement and slipped her hand into his. “I am honoured, sir.”

Thankfully, no further response appeared to be required of her, but as he led her onto the dance floor, there seemed to be a ripple of conversation. Kitty kept her head high, telling herself it was only her imagination that people were taking note of her.

“You are quiet, my lady. Is the music not to your taste?”

“The music is fine, my lord, though I must confess I am out of practice regarding the art of conversation. Tell me, how are you finding the weather, it is unseasonably warm, is it not?”

He let out a bark of laughter, though his gaze appeared to be fixed to her chest, and she was suddenly glad of the protection the unflattering high neckline offered.

“Come now, Miss Thorpe, surely we can manage better than that. I’ve heard you enjoy riding.”

There was something in the way he had said that. Kitty was sure it carried a wealth of meaning, though for the life of her, she couldn’t decipher it.

She settled for arching her eyebrows instead of demanding answers. “Indeed I do, my lord, it is one of my few pleasures.” But how did he know that when they had only just been acquainted?

“I would like to know more about your pleasures,” he murmured, too low for any other of the dancing couples to hear.

Unease tickled up her spine; she was uncomfortable in this man’s

presence but lacked an escape.

“I’m afraid you will find me rather dull, Lord Lansdowne.” She laughed lightly, attempting to turn the conversation away from herself. “Do you ride at all?”

He surveyed Kitty from head to toe, and she fought a shudder.

“I have been known to partake if the urge strikes me.” His eyes gleamed, and he inched his head closer in a clandestine manner. “I’ve even been known to enjoy an illicit early morning gallop.”

Kitty’s heart stopped. That was where she had seen him before. It was about a week ago on a fine September morning, the leaves just beginning to change on the trees in the soft light. Far too early for the fashionable set to have risen from their beds, the park had been deserted except for the company of her groom, and Kitty had surrendered to temptation. She had given her mount his head, the fast-paced gelding streaking across the park, unheeding of dignity or propriety. Her shalто flew off her head, the air raking through her hair, it having been tugged free of its confines. For in that moment she felt alive, exhilarated, like lifting a veil that had been smothering her off her face. The colours were brighter and a fleeting spark of pleasure before her staid life stifled it. The horse kicking up clods of turf in their wake, she had pulled up and slowed her mount, and reached down to pat his heaving sides.

It was then that she noticed she was no longer alone. Across the green had been a man staring at her, his blue, red-rimmed eyes wide and mouth agog. She froze like a doe in a hunter’s sights, fighting to bring her breathing back under control, her breast rising and falling, her face flushed and her appearance dishevelled as her dark hair escaped in a riot of curls. The look on the man’s face changed to something darker that she couldn’t identify, and she was glad when her groom caught up with her. Those same eyes, though no longer blurred with what she assumed was a night’s dissolution, were watching her now.

“I believe you are mistaken, sir,” she replied, that particularly artful tone having seen off previous suitors intent on making a nuisance of themselves, and from then on, Kitty refused to engage in further conversation.

Chapter 3

The dance came to a blessed end, and Kitty had never been so glad to be escorted back to her mother, who was beaming, pleased as punch.

“Oh, Katherine,” she tittered when no one could overhear, “a marquis! You clever, clever girl. You will need to tell me how you’ve managed to come to the notice of such a distinguished gentleman.”

Gentleman might not be the best descriptor of her supposed admirer, but Kitty had a growing suspicion that her mother might be willing to overlook considerable faults in her daughter’s suitors if there was a title attached. Thankfully, she was saved from further questions by the timely arrival of a friendly face, Aunt Euphemia, who would henceforth be renamed Saint Euphemia in Kitty’s thoughts.

“There you are, my dear, it is wonderful to see you in town.”

“Aunt Euphemia,” Kitty distractedly returned the greeting, still reeling at the Marquis of Lansdowne’s marked regard. She hurried to gather her wits to fully attend her aunt. “I wasn’t expecting to see you until tomorrow,” she parroted automatically. “How are you?”

The dowager baroness, Lady Euphemia Mowbray, was her father’s younger sister and nearing fifty, not that you would ever hear her admit it. She was still an attractive woman, with only a hint of silver streaking her mahogany head of hair, and the crows’ feet at her dark velvet eyes could either condemn or invite an individual to share in a private joke. She had a brash sophistication that Katherine admired greatly. Direct and to the point, she was known to wield her quick wit with the proficiency of a fencing master.

“I’ve been to take the waters in Bath, a wonderful place you need to visit sometime if you can extract your mama from the delights of London.” She angled herself towards Mama. “Henrietta, you are looking well. Preparing for Anne-Marie’s come out, I take it?” she asked, pausing briefly for breath to nod in the direction of the dance floor where Anne-Marie was partnered with yet another beau. “I’m sure she will do splendidly.”

A verifiable whirlwind of politeness but no-nonsense. Kitty could never quite understand how she accomplished not engaging annoying

acquaintances in conversation but in a way that didn't cause offense.

"Come and take a turn about the room with me, Katherine, and I will tell you all about it."

Kitty was pleased to have at least one ally flanking her while she fought to regain her equilibrium. Aunt Euphemia linked Kitty's unresisting arm through hers and began to circulate.

"The Marquis of Lansdowne, dear?" Aunt Emmie muttered, waving at an acquaintance they passed. "He is quite unsuitable, you know? Why, he is a well-known unprincipled rakehell of the worst sort. Very unwise to encourage him. What was your mother thinking allowing him to ask you to dance?"

Kitty sucked in a breath. As usual, Aunt Emmie cut straight to the point.

"I have done absolutely nothing to encourage his attention," Kitty fired back under her breath, her conscience prickling. "I have no idea why he has sought me out." Not strictly true. Though she was not a mind reader, the only thing that could have brought her to his notice was that disgraceful gallop in the park.

"I adore your mother, of course, but I declare she has the sense of a pea goose at times."

"Don't you mean a peahen, Aunt Emmie?" Kitty said dryly, relaxing now she was away from the critical eyes of her mother.

The older women jerked her head by way of agreement. "*That* as well."

Deciding that if Lady Euphemia could be direct, then dash it, so could she, Kitty said, "I take it Father has filled you in with his plans for the season?"

A distinctly militant gleam entered Aunt Emmie's eyes, and Kitty prayed she was not biting off more than she could chew. What had she let herself in for?

"Just so, my dear. I've no idea why Gerald didn't ask me sooner. Handing you over to your mother was a mistake to begin with. But think no more of the past, Katherine, we start this campaign afresh. There are several people I wish to introduce you to this evening."

"Like this?" Kitty squeaked, her gaze flickering down to the golden monstrosity of a gown that her mother had thought she should wear, never mind that it made her complexion appear sallow and the high neckline gave her larger-than-average bosom a blockish appearance.

"Yes," Aunt Euphemia affirmed, steel coating her words, "*like this*. We

will gain their acquaintance now, and when they see you again we will stun them. For now, charm them with that wit you've hidden so well."

Her heartbeat pounding in her ears, Kitty had been effectively given her marching orders. Holding back a sigh, she pasted on her best smile as her aunt approached a well-turned-out couple.

"Ah, Lord and Lady Drummond, what good fortune our paths have crossed. I've been wanting to know if you would be in town for a season. Allow me to introduce my niece, Miss Katherine Thorpe..."

And so it begins, Kitty thought dispassionately, making her curtsy.

"I must strongly disagree, Lord Drummond," Kitty responded with vehemence a little time later, unheeding of the group they were attracting with the passionate debate. "The corn laws are self-serving, with many of those who voted for them protecting their own interests to keep the price of grain artificially high. It hikes up the prices of a layman's daily bread until they can ill afford to feed their families. What are we meant to do? Let them eat cake?" she asked archly as the older man grimaced at the reference to the arrogant comments of the French monarchy that had sparked the great terror.

"The chit has a point," someone muttered.

Ignoring the 'chit' comment, Katherine allowed pure exhilaration to fill her.

"Not only that, it stifles competition and innovation. A country that is unwilling to change stagnates, for without innovation, where would we be now? No mills, no canals, and no steam engines. Why, we would still believe the world is flat." She delivered her point with a decisive nod.

Lord Drummond tilted his head as if presented with a previously unknown specimen, and Kitty held his gaze. She was only saved from further scrutiny when he fixed a meaningful stare on Lady Mowbray with an anticipatory air that demanded an explanation.

"Don't raise those brows at me, Drummond, the girl has a fine mind of her own," her aunt said with pride.

A hint of warmth bloomed in Kitty's chest at the rare praise.

"Indeed, I'm just thankful you are not my opponent in the house, Miss Thorpe, or I fear I would be forever on the retreat. Tell me, what are your thoughts on—"

"Now, William," chided Lady Drummond, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Enough politics, though, Miss Thorpe, if you want to match

wits with my husband again, you are most welcome to attend my at home with Lady Mowbray.” The countess leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “It gets a touched spirited, but I’m sure you are more than capable of holding your own.”

“We will be delighted to attend, Lady Drummond,” Kitty said.

Lord Drummond shared a soft look with his wife that spoke of a long standing affection and said in good humour, “If I’m going to be denied my favoured topic and there is no further service I can be to you, my dear, I will seek my entertainment in the card room.”

The countess smiled and waved him off. “Goodness, Miss Thorpe, you have certainly made quite an impression. My husband usually finds these events tedious but insists on escorting me. You have livened up his evening no end. I hope you are prepared for when he seeks you out for a rematch.”

“I shall enjoy hearing his views on a range of issues, Lady Drummond,” Kitty replied, the very picture of demureness, until the spark of devilment ruined it and she grinned. “And I will no doubt find equal enjoyment introducing him to some of my views in the process.”

Lady Drummond gave way to soft tinkling laughter. “You are amusing, Miss Thorpe. Tell me, are you as informed upon literary works?”

Kitty’s grin grew to epic proportions. Confident she was in her element, she opened her mouth to ask the countess’ opinion on Wordsworth’s ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’, but Aunt Emmie cut across her.

“Now that is certainly a well-made man, but what on God’s green earth is he doing with Mrs Bingham?”

“Aunt Euphemia!” Kitty spat in disbelief, a mortified blush staining her neck and cheeks, and she cast an anxious glance in Lady Drummond’s direction.

“Pish! No need to pucker up, miss,” Euphemia admonished playfully. “I’m not so much in my dotage that I am unable to admire a fine figure of a man. Reminds me of Mowbray,” she added thoughtfully.

Kitty thought she detected a hit of wistfulness in her words.

“He always carried himself well.”

“I’m quite familiar with Euphemia’s outrageous plain speaking. When we have been friends as long as we have, it keeps life from becoming too staid,” the countess reassured her and turned her attention towards the ballroom, seeking this specimen of manhood who had snagged Kitty’s aunt’s attention.

“Oh, I see what you mean, Emmie. The breadth of those shoulders. How

did he manage to get them into that coat?”

“Stuffed?” Baroness Mowbray ventured after a critical examination.

Katherine almost choked.

“I don’t know,” a Miss Robertson joined in, a pretty girl but too anxious to please others by half. “What is your opinion, Miss Thorpe?”

Disinterested but attempting to be as obliging as possible, Kitty made to scan the room when deep masculine laughter rolled over the heads of the crowd and transported her back to hot, lazy summer days, relaxing under the shade of the leafy oak tree, her lover’s arm lightly resting across her.

Katherine’s stomach clenched. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t. She’d know that laughter anywhere and immediately scanned the rush of faces for recognition. Her gaze landed on the head of a tall gentlemen, his hair dark, fashionably tousled and streaked with a light chestnut colour, hinting of time spent in the sun.

Katherine forgot to breathe, a tight ball lodged in her throat.

“Miss Thorpe, are you quite well? You’ve gone as pale as a sheet.”

It couldn’t be. It couldn’t be. She repeated the mantra again and again, as if this would somehow make it true.

“Miss Thorpe?”

The man shifted, and she caught his strong profile and almost fainted dead away. Too strong to be classically handsome with a characteristic bump on the bridge of his nose, he was masculine and attractive nonetheless. It was a profile she had traced many times over in attempting to capture his silhouette.

“Yes,” a voice replied to her from a very far-off distance, and then Kitty realised it was her own. “I am quite well.”

Their eyes met across the ballroom, his just as deep and warm brown as she remembered. They would be flecked with amber, the colour of molten sugar.

It felt like a horse had kicked her in the centre of her chest, and she fought not to cast up her accounts. She grasped the wall behind her for support. Dear Lord, both he and Mrs Bingham were coming in their direction. She prayed for the floor to open and swallow her whole just so she didn’t have to face the man.

“Miss Thorpe, allow me to introduce you to Captain Vaughan.” Thankfully, years of her mother drilling in society manners naturally took over and saved Kitty from looking like a gauche debutante.

“Thank you, Mrs Bingham, but I am acquainted with the gentleman,” Kitty said coolly, applying her fan with a tad more vigour. How she was able to calmly speak those words when her heart beat so loudly... She didn’t know how her companions didn’t overhear it.

Mrs Bingham blinked at the unexpected reply. “Oh, I thought...” The words drifted off and she swung her full gaze on Katherine. “And when was this, Miss Thorpe? Come, come, you must tell me it all, for I demand to know.”

Kitty forced a smile and faced off from one of the biggest gossips within the ton, highly aware of Robert’s presence burning deep into her skin like a brand. “It was many years ago, Mrs Bingham, in the country. I suspect that Captain Vaughan hardly remembers the encounter.”

She mentally patted herself on the back as Robert’s eyebrow subtly rose, as if he were surprised by her comment. He was lucky they were in public or she would be sorely tempted to hurl whatever was at hand at his misbegotten head.

Her blood pounded a relentless deafening tattoo within her ears, and though she wished to spit in his eye and tell him to go to the Devil, Kitty held her smile in place.

“Have you been well, Captain?” she asked stiffly as good manners dictated.

Robert opened his mouth to respond, but Mrs Bingham’s titter cut across him.

“La, what you say is true, girl, you have not kept up the acquaintance. Captain Vaughan has been making himself a proverbial thorn in the lion’s paw with those blasted French.”

“A lion is a symbol of Britain, ma’am,” Kitty added dryly, thrown off kilter and unable to help herself. Before she could douse the urge, she said, “More likely he would have wrung the neck of the Gallic cock?”

For an outstanding few seconds, Mrs Bingham was at a loss, and a strained silence ruled for a heartbeat. A young blade broke the tension, throwing his head back and roaring with laughter, several heads twisting in her direction.

“Well said, Miss Thorpe, very well said.” Aunt Emmie’s lips twitched, while Miss Robertson’s air of bafflement remained unchanged.

Katherine somehow found herself the centre of attention of the small group, and a pair of gleaming amber eyes burned into her with an intensity of an unspoken challenge, and she would not shy away from it.

Of course, Robert had always been intelligent and sure of himself. Given the opportunity, she was not surprised he had distinguished himself, and a genuine smile surfaced from her animosity. “I thank you for your service, sir, and I am sure your recognition is well-deserved.”

“That is not all, dear.” Not to be outdone, Mrs Bingham leaned forward, her hand tapping her wrist in an impertinent manner, and Kitty drew back, fighting the urge to scowl. “It has been whispered that if Captain Vaughan plays his cards right, his efforts might soon be recognised by crown—”

Robert coughed, interrupting the incessant flow for the first time, a glimmer of irritation in his eyes, those amber flecks burning brighter. “You exaggerate, Mrs Bingham, there are many much more deserving than I.”

God’s teeth, did this Bingham woman ever cease harping on? Robert was fast coming to the end of his patience with the lady, and he used that term loosely, who had cornered him and chewed his ear off for close to twenty minutes. Drastic action needed to be taken.

The perfect opportunity presented itself when she paused to draw breath.

“Do you have a partner for the next dance, Miss Thorpe?” he blurted out before he could think better of it.

Katherine’s mouth pinched, and she glared down her slim nose with barely disguised scorn. How dare he have the temerity not to bow and scrape before her great ennobled name? It was then, after what Robert had done on a whim, that made him determined she *would* dance with him.

Her eyes fluttered to Mrs Bingham, who was watching their exchange avidly, well aware that if she put one toe out of line, one of the worst gossips of the ton would ensure it was common knowledge before the night was through, with rich embellishments added to whet the listeners’ appetites.

“I do not, Captain Vaughan.” She smiled sweetly, while her snapping blue eyes wished him to the Devil. “But I cannot rob Mrs Bingham of your companionship.”

Ha, an excellent parry. Against his will a grin formed, stretching the tight scar on his cheek. He’d forgotten just how quick Katherine’s mind was or the challenge she offered. He extended his gloved hand. “I’m sure you will forgive me for wishing to renew an old acquaintanceship, is that not so, Mrs Bingham?”

The woman nodded, the ostrich feather in her hair bobbing. “Oh, naturally, Captain.”

Satisfaction flooded through his veins. “Then will you kindly do me the honour of standing up with me, Miss Thorpe?”

Kitty inclined her head, placing her hand on his arm. In her doing so, Robert could feel the light tremors transmitting from her arm, but from a glance at her serene face, she appeared completely unaffected by their meeting.

“I would be delighted to.” Robert fought down a snort. She looked like she’d rather box his ears, and they took their place with the other dancers without incident.

“Why are you insisting with this farce, Captain Vaughan?” she hissed, the words dripping venom and fanning the embers from his anger six years earlier.

“What have I done to deserve such a cold reception, Kitten? I expected you to be married to some lordling or another by now.”

Katherine started and missed her footing, but he corrected her at the last minute. Robert could have kicked himself. Why had he done that? He should have left her to fall flat on her deceitful face.

“Marriage doesn’t interest me, sir. I find my independence too precious to barter in exchange for wealth,” she fired back with the virtuous air of a persecuted saint.

He gave a snort. What gammon. More likely she hadn’t found one rich enough for her blood. He was just about to call her out on it, but it appeared Kitty wasn’t finished yet, snarling under her breath, “And don’t you *dare* call me Kitten.”

Her eyes darted to see if they had been overheard, but the other couples were far enough away. There was that fire he remembered so well.

“Why,” he murmured, the Devil undoubtedly dancing in his eyes, “when you’ve always purred so nicely for me?”

Kitty’s cheeks heated, and it had nothing to do with the closeness of the room. Her eyes sparkling in rage, she ducked her head to hide her face, and he found himself addressing the crown of her head. She was ignoring him, just like she had ignored him all those years ago.

Kitty blinked furiously. He was heartless to tease her so.

This was the man who had sworn his devotion and then deserted her. The long-forgotten pain raked at her with sharp talons. And he dared to stand before her to show his face! If they were in private, she would have slapped

him. Mercifully, she kept her composure long enough for the dance to come to an end. “You know precisely why your presence is so repugnant to me, Captain.”

His eyes turned cold, and he led her back to her mother and Aunt Emmie. The man then had the audacity to ask her sister to dance and poured salt over the weeping wound.

A shaft of jealousy speared her hardened heart as she watched her sister flutter those eyes that had been compared to a summer sky at him. She was welcome to the faithless wretch.

Kitty pleaded a headache, and her mother at last turned her gaze from Anne-Marie. “Yes, you do appear pale.”

Kitty didn’t have to fake it, she felt quite unwell.

“Alas, I don’t think it would be wise to leave just yet.”

Desperation clawed at Kitty, and she felt that she was trapped in a snare, and a thousand eyes were staring at her, laughing while she desperately sought a way to free herself.

“That is all right, Henrietta,” Aunt Emmie said. “I’ve had quite enough tonight. It is a frightful crush. I will see Kitty safely back.”

God bless Aunt Emmie. Kitty would have to write to the Pope to request her canonisation at once.

“That is very kind of you, Euphemia, if you are sure it will not be putting you out.”

“Not at all. Come, Kitty, let’s get you home.” She ran a concerned eye over her. “You truly don’t look well.”

Together, they collected their cloaks and slipped away. Once safely ensconced in the darkened carriage, Kitty closed her eyes against the band of pain tightening around her head.

Robert had watched from the other side of the room as Katherine and an older, dark-haired woman slipped out inconspicuously. The anger in his gut solidified, and the evening he had planned no longer held any appeal. Which was why he was now at his club, with a perfectly good brandy cupped in his hand that tasted bitter in his current black mood.

“Robert, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Robert turned his head to see who called to him, and a man with sandy-blond hair who emanated a type of polish that he could only hope to emulate was purposely making his way in Robert’s direction. The absolute last person

he wanted to see.

Robert raised his glass in mocking salute. “It is good to see you, too, cousin.”

The only thing that hinted at their shared bloodline was the Graham nose and something about the eyes, but otherwise, Robert was able to navigate society without those in the know associating him with the prominent Graham family, or that he was currently his cousin’s heir.

The Viscount Preston dropped into a chair next to him. “What in heaven are you doing here? I thought you would be inspecting the offerings of this year’s marriage mart, or have you changed your plans?”

Robert’s dark temper reared its ugly head, and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell the man to go to the Devil, but he held his silence, staring moodily into the flames.

“Oh, like that, is it?” Preston signalled one of the servants with a flick of his hand and asked for some claret to be brought, then refocused his shrewd gaze back on Robert.

Far too shrewd for Robert’s liking.

“I didn’t invite you to join me, Preston,” Robert growled.

“Considering you don’t answer my blasted letters, I wasn’t going to take no for an answer,” Preston shot back tartly.

Robert blinked at his cousin’s affable mask slipping for a second, revealing a will of steel, then he lifted his head and the smile was firmly back in place.

Oh, yes, they had been raised in different spheres, his mother deciding to marry beneath her, but the same proud iron will of the Graham family flowed through their veins.

“There is only one thing that brings about that sour expression you are currently wearing.” Preston offered a crooked grin and leaned forward. “A woman.”

“Damn it, Preston, can’t a man have a drink in peace?” Robert snapped with a glower that would have sent his lieutenants aboard the *Defiance* scurrying to carry out his order post-haste. Preston was utterly unperturbed, holding his gaze easily, and Robert knew he would not be getting rid of him.

“I ran into an acquaintance,” Robert admitted stiffly, raking a hand through his hair, “who I’d at one time wished to form a more lasting attachment, but it was not to be. I had wondered if it was her family’s disapproval, but—” Robert broke off, clenching his hand as he remembered

the repulsion brightening Katherine's eyes. Not that she had any reason to put on airs, he thought pettily, an unwed spinster with a sallow complexion, and though the gown was of the best quality, it did nothing to hide the now decided stockiness of her frame. He'd hoped that if they had reason to run across each other they would have treated each other with amiability. Her scorn had scolded him like lye against exposed skin and even now ate at him with the determination of a blasted canker.

"Ah, the Thorpe Drab, I take it?" Preston guessed, his features hardening. Preston knew enough of the tale and was not ready to forgive what he saw as a slight to the Graham name. Not that the Thorpes had known he was connected to the Grahams.

Unexpected guilt pricked Robert at Preston's use of the unkind nickname, until he ruthlessly smothered it.

"I thought you had washed your hands of that bad business."

"So had I, until I saw her dancing with the Marquis of Lansdowne." The sight of Katherine smiling at the man, the complete opposite of her treatment of him, had inspired a visceral reaction. One that Robert did not want to examine too closely.

"Lansdowne?" Preston scoffed. "Even if she is dangling after a title, that is scraping the bottom of the barrel, and she will be sorely disappointed." The viscount dismissed the thought with a flick of his hand. "But forget about her, she is a spinster on the shelf, and you are now highly eligible, and if you'd just acknowledge our connection, you will be most sought-after."

Robert rolled his eyes. "It is the worst-kept secret in the entire ton. If we weren't both of an age they would think I was one of your by-blows. Particularly after your patronage at the admiralty for my promotions." He shot a glare at the unrepentant man, the knowledge still a sting to his pride. "Which was entirely unwanted, by the way."

Preston offered an elegant shrug, unashamed of his actions. "Those promotions were earned by your own merit. My interference, as you see it, just guaranteed that you weren't overlooked." He paused to take a sip of his wine and hummed appreciatively. "But we are getting off topic. I've heard rumours that you are seeking favour with the crown."

Robert let out a foul oath and tossed back the rest of his drink, revelling in the slow burn as it slid down his throat, and called for another. "I'd love to know the fellow who allowed that to become common knowledge and then wring their bloody neck."

“Perhaps I might lighten your mood with some news. Great-Aunt Amelia passed away.”

Robert was nonplussed before social politeness took over. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Preston waved his hand to forestall any further platitudes. “I regret to say I did not know her well, but from my understanding, she was quite a spirited thing. Never married due to Grandfather not approving of the match.”

He paused for a moment, and Robert wondered where he was going with this.

“She was somewhat of an eccentric but of vast independent means. She left her entire fortune to you and a modest estate a stone’s throw away outside of London.”

Robert blinked and then decided to put his half-drunk glass of brandy down on a side table. If he was now hearing things, then he had had enough. Apparently, an elderly relation of his mother’s family, who he had never met or heard of, had left him a fortune. He wasn’t that far into his cups surely?

“I beg your pardon,” Robert muttered, rubbing his tired eyes. “I thought you just said that I’ve inherited a fortune?”

Preston grinned with the self-satisfied air of a cat who’d become locked in the creamery overnight. “Great-Aunt Amelia,” he said with exaggerated slowness. “Your mother was a favourite of hers and admired her for marrying your father in the face of the opposition and the consequences it wrought for the both of them. She sought to make amends and give everything to your mother. Being that neither of your parents are no longer with us, it passes to you. Here, see for yourself.”

Preston passed him a document, and words drifted into focus, Robert’s brain struggling to string them together. This had to be a jest, and a very poor one at that.

“You want my advice, Robert?” Preston murmured in all seriousness. “Forget about chasing after a title. Even if they offer one, they will bleed you dry for it. Purchase a sizable estate, invest your money wisely, and marry a fine lady to grace your table and your bed, and your acceptance in the higher echelons will be guaranteed.”

There was logic in Preston’s words, a logic that Robert usually prized. But he just couldn’t get rid of the image of those twin eyes, bluer than the ocean and twice as mysterious, staring up at him in disgust.

“Your plan has merit,” Robert said slowly, coming to his decision in his

alcohol-fogged mind, about to change course and ride directly into the wind. “And I would be grateful for your aid in looking over some properties; however, I have unfinished business with Miss Thorpe before I can move on.”

Preston frowned at him and opened his mouth to argue, but Robert cut across him.

“Nothing villainous, I assure you. I just want to be able to have the last say so I can draw a line under the whole sorry mess.”

“Very well; however, I do have one condition?” Preston said.

Oh, this was going to be good. Robert stretched his legs out in front of him, fingertips lightly gripping the arms of the chair.

“What is it?” he prompted, when sufficiently braced.

“That you quit your current lodgings and come stay at Preston House.” Preston’s eyes flashed. “As is your due.” Robert scowled and opened his mouth to argue.

Preston’s hand cut through the air. “Those are my terms, take it or leave it.”

After much grumbling, Robert agreed.

Chapter 4

“No need to look so dour, Katherine. For goodness sake, we are going to the dressmakers not facing a French regiment,” Aunt Euphemia scolded, stepping through the portal.

“Are you sure this is absolutely necessary? Won’t none of my current gowns do?” Katherine asked, a note of desperation creeping into her voice. The modiste, in her experience, was her personal seventh circle of Hell.

Aunt Emmie pursed her lips. “One or two might be acceptable, but they have been seen. If we are going to get people to take notice, we need to show them something new. A knight will go into battle wearing a suit of armour; this will be the armour in which you face down the dragons of the ton.”

With that flowery description, so unlike her aunt, Katherine curled her lips into a begrudging smile. “Dragons, Aunt Emmie?”

“If it isn’t my most valued client.” A well-dressed petite woman just a little over five feet floated over to them, enthused. “What can I do for you today, Lady Mowbray, another evening gown perhaps? Was the emerald-green with the jet beading not to my ladyship’s taste?”

Aunt Emmie held up her hand to staunch the verbal flow before they were swept away.

“The gown was a delight, Madame Dupuis, I am simply waiting for the right occasion to launch it. No, this time I am here to outfit my niece, Miss Katherine Thorpe, for the season.”

For the first time, the proprietress noticed Kitty, her gaze running over her form from head to toe, and found her to be lacking.

Madame Dupuis hesitated, seemingly not wanting to offend someone of such esteemed patronage. “Your Ladyship,” she began hesitantly, licking her lips, “the season has already started, there is not enough time...”

Aunt Emmie smiled kindly, but Kitty was not fooled. Very few people ever told the Dowager Baroness Mowbray ‘no’.

“I quite understand, Madame, if you are not up to the task,” Aunt Emmie said.

“Not up to the task?” Madame Dupuis spluttered, clearly not realising her French accent was slipping, her broader cockney twang showing. “These

would not be the ordinary pastel creations, trotted out straight from the schoolroom, but something dashing.” She nodded, as if a puppet on a string.

Aunt Emmie became a concert pianist, weaving a spell to build the energy in the room until it crackled. “This is a real challenge, Madame Dupuis, not for the faint-hearted. Why, to change the entire perception of the ton, we will need creations that will set the ton on their heels!”

Aunt Emmie finished on a crescendo, and Madame Dupuis was hanging on every word. With performances like that, Aunt Emmie could be treading the boards. Kitty kept her gaze firmly fixed on her gloved hands, afraid that if she caught Aunt Emmie’s eye she would collapse into hysterical laughter. Set the *ton* on their heels indeed?

“Of course, only the most consummate of modistes will be able to pull off such a coup.” Aunt Emmie sighed, physically drooping in disappointment. “But if you are unable to accommodate us, we will have to go elsewhere, perhaps Madame Mercier?”

Madame Dupuis’ reaction was instantaneous. Her pencil-thin eyebrows snapped together, and she bristled with indignation. “Madame Mercier would not know dashing if it jumped up and bit her on the nose!”

Aunt Emmie chuckled. “Quite so, which is why you are the first person I would seek out for this particular endeavour.”

“Your Ladyship is wise in this aspect.” Madame Dupuis swung to Kitty. “Come, there is much we need to do.”

She indicated a stool, and Kitty, obligated, stepped upon it.

“Please turn, slowly.”

Feeling highly conspicuous and fighting not to squirm, Kitty did as instructed, her hands clenched tightly to her sides. In all honesty, she did not dare do otherwise. Madame Dupuis pursed her lips and cocked her head.

“We want to draw attention to your clear skin, your dark hair and lashes, with emphasis on your neat waist.” Madame plucked a pencil out from behind her ear and waved it erratically in the air. “Classical lines with gentle necklines,” she announced decisively, putting the pencil to sketchpad. “The gowns will be cut to tantalise and hint. You will catch the eye but not become the cause of vulgar gossip.” The pencil was moving, faster and faster across the page, accelerating in time with her speech. “Oui, once I am done, you will be a consort battleship.”

It appeared Madame Dupuis had regained her equilibrium, her French accent back in place.

She held up her sketchpad. "Something along these lines?"

Kitty nearly swallowed her tongue.

Aunt Emmie praised, "Yes, that is exactly what we are looking for. Oh, Madame, I knew only you could manage this."

They were both mad. Positively ready to be assigned to Bedlam. She couldn't pull off that gown. It revealed far too much shoulder for one thing, and the neckline was too low for another. But her feeble protestations were immediately overruled.

"Now, the fabrics." Madame Dupuis waved her hand, and her assistants brought out bolts of different shades and patterns, paper-thin muslin, luxurious silks, and delicate lace.

The modiste elected a bolt of claret taffeta and held it out for inspection. "With your complexion and colouring, Mademoiselle Thorpe, you need stronger colours and to avoid yellow tones."

Kitty fingered the fine fabric hesitantly. "I'm not sure Mama would think these colours are appropriate, though they are lovely," she tacked on as an afterthought, not wanting to give offence to the slightly temperamental modiste who instantly opened her mouth to argue.

But Aunt Emmie beat her to it and settled the matter. "Your mother and Anne-Marie share the same colouring, and pastels suit them, and they are appropriate for girls barely out of the schoolroom. But this is not your first season, neither are you barely out of the schoolroom. You are a Thorpe woman through and through and not some milk-and-water miss. Men enjoy sophistication, elegance, and the ones with something more between their ears will wish for intelligence. That is what we aspire to portray, not dewy-eyed youth and innocence." Aunt Emmie slanted a coy glance at her, the corner of her lips curling. "Unless you wish to practice fluttering your eyelashes?"

Kitty promptly agreed on the bolder colours on the spot.

They discussed different designs at length, debating back and forth. The evening wear had been easiest, and Kitty was thrilled when there was no mention of ruffles or bows in sight.

The one point of contention that she had stuck her heels in about was the riding habit. It needed to be able to stand up to the rigours of practicality and not just an ornament. When Madame crossed her arms and appeared set to argue, Kitty decided to take a leaf out of her aunt's book.

"Of course, I realise it is a challenge to craft something that is stylish

while not compromising the practicality of the garment.” She leaned forward as if sharing a closely guarded secret. “I am unfortunately not as decorous with my riding as I would wish to be, but I’m sure with your fabulous talents that Aunt Emmie has told me so much about, you are able to come up with a solution.”

The modiste reclined and looked over her speculatively. “I see why your aunt has brought you, you two are one and the same.” She wagged her finger in Kitty’s direction and clucked her tongue. “But I am unable to resist a challenge. I will see what I can create.”

“I’m sure it will be sensational, Madame Dupuis,” Kitty replied demurely.

After an afternoon of being pinched and prodded, Kitty flopped back against the swabs of Aunt Emmie’s carriage. Drained, and despite telling herself not to get her hopes up, there was an underlying frisson of excitement. Could a change of gown really make such a difference?

“You handled Madame Dupuis marvellously, Katherine. The woman is a dear, and her creations are more than up to snuff, but occasionally she needs steering in the right direction.”

The result had been satisfying all the way round. Madame Dupuis had a large order, and there were a couple of creations that had been made for another client, but they had scratched the order. As such, she was able to negotiate a good price for an emerald-green walking dress with the matching pelisse in velvet she was forced to admit suited her very well and several plainer afternoon dresses for making calls—her aunt assured her she needed them.

“Katherine? You are not attending, dear girl?”

Kitty drew her eyes away from the carriage window and back upon her disapproving companion, offering her a contrite smile. “I apologise, Aunt Emmie, I was woolgathering.”

Lady Mowbray’s shrewd eyes narrowed. “Hmmm, you have been doing an awful lot of woolgathering of late, since the Seaton’s ball, in fact. Do you wish to tell me about it, my dear?” She reached across and grasped Kitty’s hand in her own.

“It is just some tasks I need to attend, but nothing to worry about,” Kitty lied through her teeth.

Her aunt was far from convinced, but short of using thumbscrews, Kitty wasn’t going to reveal her secrets.

The marquis was still pursuing Kitty, and though Aunt Euphemia had headed him off on several occasions, her mother undermined her efforts by actively encouraging the roué. And it was becoming increasingly obvious that his attention was marked to the point it was starting to cause unwanted speculation. Kitty sighed and watched the world trundle by outside the carriage window. And as for the other matter, she had not seen Robert since the Seaton's ball a sennight ago, but she was continually on edge at whatever entertainment they attended in case their paths crossed again. But what had puzzled Kitty the most was the unabashed anger in his eyes. She couldn't fathom what *he* had to be angry about; she was the one he had played like a fool.

"It doesn't have anything to do with that handsome captain we met the other night?"

"No, he is of no consequence." Kitty was split between being proud and ashamed by how effortlessly that lie tripped off her tongue. It was a habit that had become far too easy, and some secrets she would take to her grave.

"Ah-ah, I see. Well, if you would like some advice, I'm here to help, Katherine."

Kitty was saved from further quizzing as they pulled up outside the Thorpe townhouse, modest by some standards, but enough for the Thorpe family, at least in Kitty's decided opinion.

"Are you coming in for tea, Aunt Emmie?" She was fighting a smile at Aunt Emmie's natural recoil, wondering how she would manage this one. It had been no secret over the last weeks that Aunt Emmie found Kitty's mother's presence aggravating and did not seek to be exposed to it for long periods of time. If only Kitty could exercise a similar escape.

"Alas, I'm expected at another engagement, but please give my regards to your dear mama. Next time, perhaps."

Kitty bit the inside of her cheek to keep a straight face. "Of course, Aunt Emmie."

Taking the waiting footman's hand, she was assisted from the coach, feeling drained. Who knew that shopping was such an exhausting pastime?

The footmen carried Kitty's packages in, and with one last flutter of her fingertips, Lady Euphemia rapped on the carriage roof, and the wheels trundled onwards. Kitty shook her head. She would love to know where her aunt got her energy from.

"Good afternoon, Milton," she said with her habitual cheerfulness.

“Miss Kitty,” he acknowledged, helping her out of her navy-blue spencer jacket when there was a self-assured knock on the door.

Kitty’s head swung in the direction of the noise. “Whoever will that be?”

It was only just acceptable for afternoon callers but a touch early, and though it was petty by her own admission, she wondered how long Anne-Marie could keep this one dangling.

“See who it is, Milton, I can straighten myself out,” Kitty added hastily, thinking back to the last time one of Anne-Marie’s would-be suitors had been left waiting. The snit her mother had been in and the peal she had rung over the staffs’ head had made Kitty thoroughly ashamed of her.

She handed her spencer to Clara, one of the upstairs maids, for her to take it to her room.

Milton returned quickly. “The Viscount Preston and—”

Kitty sucked in a breath. Cripes, her mother would have a fit if *he* was kept waiting. She would most definitely be at home.

With a smile that felt more like a grimace, Kitty said, “Send a footman to find Mama and Anne-Marie post-haste, and I will greet them in the salon.”

Wishing to get the unpleasant task of greeting this Viscount Preston, or whatever his name was, over with as soon as possible or she would hear no peace, Kitty swept away. She hurried to the salon with an unladylike rush, arranging herself and smoothing her skirts.

“The Viscount Preston and Captain Vaughn, Miss Thorpe.”

Kitty’s eyes widened, and her heart stilled for a beat. That other shoe had just dropped with a rather large clatter. It was Robert.

Robert raked his gaze over the dark-haired woman he once knew before him, startled at her attired in a becoming gown rather than that frilly monstrosity he had seen her in at the Seaton’s. He’d thought her blockish? He must have been blind. While Katherine’s form had filled out from the lightness of a budding girl, she had gained lush, womanly curves. Why, God in Heaven, had his mouth gone dry?

Her face was a pale mask of shock. This little hint of familiarity helped him regain his equilibrium when confronted with her sudden transformation. His Katherine had never been good at hiding her emotions, but to her credit, she quickly recovered. Belatedly scrambling somewhat inelegantly to her feet, she made her curtsy, a charming blush dusting her high cheekbones.

“Lord Preston and Captain Vaughan, welcome. My mother and sister will

join us shortly, I'm sure you will be glad to hear. In the meantime, can I offer you some refreshment? Tea perhaps?"

Fascinating to see her from being on the backfoot to gathering herself ready to repel all boarders. When Robert didn't appear to be inclined to answer, his cousin smoothly stepped in.

"Tea would be grand, Miss Thorpe."

Katherine efficiently arranged for tea and refreshments to be brought to the drawing room and settled her attention back on her guests. She gestured to the seats. "Please be seated, gentlemen."

Dark satisfaction uncurled through him at Kitty's look of horror when Robert claimed the seat next to her, her eyes darting to the door and window. There was no escape, and she could do nothing but suffer his company.

She visibly swallowed. "To what do we owe this honour for you to battle the elements to grace us with your presence?"

He chuckled softly under his breath. "I thought my reason for being here would be obvious, Kitten."

Though Katherine gave little outward indication of having heard him, from his vantage point he could see her hands briefly curl into fists in the folds of her skirts. Before either of them could say more, the rest of her family entered, and they climbed again to their feet to greet the new ladies. He shot them what was once a charming smile, but he now knew stretched the scar that ran along the left side of his face, courtesy of a French blade.

"Kitty, you should have waited for the rest of us before seeking out his lordship and Captain Vaughan," her mother scolded, clearly not recognising the man she had all but banished from the house.

Robert ground his teeth at the memory, her shrill phantom laughter ringing in his ears. That she would allow the daughter to a baron to be wed to a nobody like *him* was preposterous. A lowly lieutenant in the Royal Navy. He fought back the seething anger that flooded him with the memory and kept that stained smile in place through pure will.

Unaware of the tumult of emotions taking place a short distance away, Lady Thorpe continued with her play-acting. "You are a naughty girl wishing to have your time with the gentleman." She wagged her finger, and Kitty's blush deepened.

"She is indeed," Robert murmured from beside Katherine.

She caught the words and stiffened. The rest of the room engaged in exchanging niceties, she shot him a glower that if she had the power would

have incinerated him to the bone.

“What are you doing here, Captain Vaughn?” she demanded in hushed, furious tones.

Her eyes flashed, and his breath caught in his throat. That was the Kitty he remembered, filled with hidden passion and spirit, that if one was not looking close enough, it would go undetected.

“Why, accompanying my cousin to pay my respects to an old friend, of course,” he replied mildly, clearing his throat to get Preston’s attention

“Miss Thorpe, are you free this Wednesday to take a walk? Naturally, your sister would be in attendance,” his cousin smoothly delivered, addressing the mother.

Robert’s gaze never turned from the lady who held his interest. Kitty pursed her lips and appeared to be biting her tongue.

“I would particularly enjoy deepening our acquaintance,” Preston pressed.

“I’m afraid I will have to disappoint you, my lord,” Katherine interjected, a desperate attempt to escape the neatly laid trap. “For I have a prior engagement I must attend.”

“Nonsense, Kitty,” her mother cut across, sending her a speaking glance to be silent or there would be hell to pay. “You are free to accept his lordship’s invitation, you are getting your dates mixed up.”

Robert sat back and watched the little tableau unfurl, Lady Thorpe becoming an unwitting ally. The smile Katherine offered was more a gritting of teeth. Foiled by her own blasted mother. “Oh, yes, how silly of me. We would be delighted to attend, my lord.” If her disgruntled expression was any indication, she would rather be pulling her own teeth than accept the invitation.

“Excellent, I’m glad it was but a mistake. Shall we say three o’clock?” Preston said with a lazy smile.

Robert smothered a chuckle, more amused than he had been in an age. “I hope you don’t have plans to take the stage, Kitten.”

“Don’t call me Kitten!” she hissed under her breath.

“And yourself, Captain Vaughan, are we likely to see you during our promenade?”

The question came from the younger Miss Thorpe. What was her name again? Mary? Anne? She batted her large blue eyes at him, waiting for him to pat her on the head for her staggering contribution to the conversation, a

masterpiece of auditory genius. No doubt she was used to suitors climbing over each other, vying for her attention. He ran a critical eye over her, and though she was a more traditional beauty with her fair visage, it was Kitty's quiet intensity that drew him. It was like comparing a first-class frigate to a sloop.

"If I am in that direction, I may accompany my cousin. I am renewing my acquaintance with people after being away many years at sea," Robert replied.

"Oh, I can just imagine how exciting that must have been," leapt in Anne-Marie. "An adventure for sure, all the while fighting the French. You'll have to tell us some of your stories. Have you taken a ship? Have you seen a battle?" Anne-Marie, bombarded him with question after question without pausing to draw breath.

The image of the room wavered, and the scent of gunpowder and the sea filled his nostrils. Yes, he'd seen battle, as evidenced by the scar on his face, but he was one of the lucky ones. He'd seen his men lose limbs or their lives in the vicious fighting.

Aid came from the most unlikely source, the woman beside him.

"Anne-Marie, that is enough." The firm tone flicked out like the lash of the cat and brought him back to the present. She turned to him with an apologetic expression, concern brimming in her eyes. "You'll have to forgive my sister, Captain Vaughn. Sometimes it is easy to forget the dangers others face on our behalf while we reside in safety, and that war of any sort is a bloody business."

"Katherine!" Lady Thorpe gasped, her hand flattened to her chest. "What a thing to say, and in front of his lordship, too."

Katherine jerked her head back as if slapped. "I apologise," she began stiffly, "if my blunt manner has caused offence. I am simply aware that not all officers care to relive their experiences. However, if there are some anecdotes that Captain Vaughan wishes to share, please ignore my outburst."

Robert shot Kitty an appreciative glance, a tender emotion flickering to life within him, and he had the urge to take her small pale hand in his and run his thumb over her delicate knuckles. He ruthlessly squashed it.

"Miss Thorpe is quite right that some tales are not fitting for London drawing rooms. However, there are a few memories that I feel comfortable sharing." Robert then launched into accounting the time he went ashore while docking in Gibraltar and their host had kept a pet ape that had taken a liking

to the admiral's hat.

As the light conversation ebbed and flowed with Lady Thorpe and Miss Anne-Marie holding court, it became increasingly obvious to Robert the lady of the house didn't remember the young lieutenant who had offered for their daughter's hand, who she had chased off with scorn. In fact, Lady Thorpe was more than willing to fawn over him and his cousin. He struggled to keep his face neutral in the distasteful persistence of their hypocrisy. They now thought him a suitable potential match with his distinguished nautical career and fortune.

The butler entered the room, his expression one of having something deeply unpleasant thrust under his nose, and announced, "The Marquis of Lansdowne, my lady."

The man swaggered in with an assurance of being accepted and made a direct beeline for the seat closest to Katherine, stating his silent preference for the elder Miss Thorpe. Katherine did the introductions with polished poise.

"Captain Vaughn and Lord Preston, may I introduce you to the Marquis of Lansdowne; Lord Lansdowne, the Viscount Preston and Captain Vaughn."

Robert's eyes narrowed; it was all very prettily done.

Katherine angled her body to keep Lansdowne in her line of sight, instantly giving the man her attention. A spark of anger burned slowly in Robert's gut at this show of shallowness from her. And all it took was a title.

"Have you had time to enjoy any more rides, Miss Thorpe?"

"I have not, my lord. I've been so busy I haven't been able to turn my mind to it."

The strange, stilted phrasing struck Robert as unusual, as did her stiff, formal address, at complete odds with her usual easy, playful manner, unless she was attempting to put on airs to impress the marquis. Robert frowned. For the love of God, the man was salivating over her. Then, as if belatedly remembering his manners, Lansdowne shifted his attention.

"Do you enjoy riding, Mr Vaughn?"

Robert offered him a lopsided smile, the scar stretching on his cheek, and met the man's gaze unflinchingly. After facing down enemy broadsides, the marquis' attempts to intimidate him were laughable. "It's Captain Vaughn, and no, I don't particularly care to ride."

"Nonsense," Katherine teased, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "I recall you manage well enough, you are just not a lover of the pastime."

Robert gave an inelegant snort, a flash of humour briefly lifting his dark

mood. "I'm more comfortable with a tiller in my hands than I am reins or ribbons, I'm afraid."

Kitty released mellow, throaty laughter that knotted his insides. "You will make quite a sight on Bond Street, Captain." She shot him a saucy smile, her eyes lightening and inviting him to join in the joke.

Something powerful and potent arced between them and went straight to his loins. Robert inhaled softly.

Lansdowne cleared his throat, and the moment was broken, Robert settling his attention back on the man's annoying prattle.

"Unlike Miss Thorpe," Lansdowne added in a sly tone, "she has a magnificent seat, a natural rider if ever there was one."

A fevered blush stained Katherine's cheeks and crept down her neck, her eyes remaining fixed steadfastly on her teacup. Impertinent toad. Robert's lips curled in distaste. Couldn't the man see his remarks were making Katherine feel uncomfortable?

"I'm afraid you give me too high praise, my lord," Kitty said at last, retaining a death grip on the cup's handle. "I'm sure I am no more accomplished than any other lady, and I dare say less accomplished than most."

"Come now, Miss Thorpe, no false modesty. Many ladies in my acquaintance would not have braved the morning chorus."

"From that remark, I can assume that you don't have many young ladies in your acquaintance." She turned back glibly, taking a sip of her tea.

Against his will, Robert's lips twitched. Lansdowne frowned, as if trying to retrace his steps in the conversation and see where it had derailed. If he wasn't so dashed annoying, Robert could have almost felt sorry for the man, having been on the receiving end of Katherine's wit many times.

They continued to trade pleasantries for a while longer, and Robert became aware of an undercurrent between Katherine and Lansdowne. The words at first appearance were innocent enough, but there was...something. It was a peculiar puzzle, to be sure. Though Katherine attempted to include Robert, Lansdowne would inevitably turn the conversation back on to himself. To find himself shut out was a blow against his pride and forged his determination anew.

Though Robert would have liked to have lingered, Preston, after being compelled to engage in insipid conversation for the past three quarters of the hour, was making his farewell.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Lady Thorpe, Miss Katherine Thorpe, and Miss Thorpe. We have an appointment and are forced to take our leave.”

Robert had no choice but to follow suit and, stepping out onto the pavement, he breathed in a great lungful of air.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing, Robert?” Preston snarled under his breath.

For a moment in there, Robert wasn't so sure. Kitty's sensitivity and defence of him in the face of a delicate topic had taken him flat aback. And he'd had to fight the urge not to seek out her hand and squeeze it. Then thoughts of the Marquis of Lansdowne intruded and how her attention had been trained on him. Hot anger flared, baking and hardening his resolve. “Yes, Preston, I'm sure.”

Chapter 5

Nerves held Kitty by the throat in a stranglehold, or more accurately, the ruff scratching her nape did as she stood in the assembly line next to her aunt, waiting to be admitted to the masquerade that was to be one of the events of the season. It was even whispered there would be a Persian ambassador in attendance. Kitty released a deep breath and took comfort from the mask shielding the upper half of her face. The cloak was removed, and she flung her head high, proud and tall, even if the angle did threaten to break her neck. Tonight she was not Katherine Thorpe. No, tonight she was Elizabeth, the virgin queen. Her lips curled at her own self-derision—well, perhaps not so virginal.

“Just so,” Aunt Emmie murmured with approval, her lips teasing upwards.

The old-style corset emphasised Kitty’s small waist while thrusting her breasts up. It was the most daring article of clothing she’d ever worn. There seemed to be an awful amount of exposed skin from the bottom of her mask to the edge of her décolletage, and the lace ruff that flared behind her head like a scattering firework framed the whole ensemble and drew the eye to the curves of her form.

Anne-Marie’s mouth briefly dropped open, her gaze raking over Kitty, and it was not a kindly look. Her sister had gone as Aphrodite in a champagne-coloured gown, casting her blonde curls and blue eyes in an appealing light, rather risqué for a debutante by all accounts, with a thick, luscious lock trailing over her shoulder to the edge of her décolleté. It was in complete contrast with the bold, brash colour of Katherine’s gown, and the pastels paled in comparison to the crimson shot with gold. Pearls threaded through her dark hair piled upon the top of her head. Madame had worked a marvel, the skirt cut wider, nodding to the historical template but not to prevent her from dancing. Jewels edged the hem of her skirts, paste of course, but no one would know it with the Mowbray Diamonds gracing her neck. She was dressed to face off a second Spanish Armada.

Anne-Marie shot her a scowl before turning her nose up and gliding into the ballroom, and it saddened Kitty. She didn’t wish to be in direct

competition with her sister, and that was how she would see it. Stealing the time and chance that was meant to be hers to shine.

“Euphemia, what are you wearing?” Lady Thorpe demanded in a strangled tone.

Kitty was pleased the attention was being diverted away from her.

Her mahogany hair captured in a silk turban, Aunt Emmie was in a sleek flowing gown, except... Kitty’s eyes widened. The skirt stopped short just below her knees, and a pair of wide-legged trousers continued to her jewelled pointed slippers.

“Oh, yes, isn’t it fabulous?” Aunt Emmie continued on blithely. One would think she was oblivious of the growing pallor on her sister-in-law’s face, but Kitty knew better. “But despite my urging, I could not get Madame to take the skirt a couple of inches higher.”

A hacking cough assailed the baroness, and Aunt Emmie signalled a passing footman for some lemonade and handed her cup.

“Please, have a care, Henrietta.”

“That is scandalous,” Mama wheezed under her breath, “positively scandalous.”

“Scandalous, you say?” Aunt Emmie gave a decadent, throaty chuckle. “Well, if I am to be labelled scandalous, where are some likely rogues I can round up for my harem?”

Mama’s mouth was left agog, the rest of her body frozen.

“Are you coming, too, Henrietta?” Aunt Emmie called over her shoulder, making her way farther into the ballroom.

Unable to do anything else, Lady Thorpe took a fortifying gulp of lemonade and followed her outrageous sister-in-law.

Aunt Emmie shot Kitty a conspiratorial wink, and she was assailed by a sudden attack of the giggles.

The room was already stifling, the chandeliers burning brightly overhead and the room filled with overly perfumed bodies, or as the smug hostess would deem it, a ‘fashionable crush’.

Her mother and Aunt Emmie found their seats on the edge of the ballroom, where they could best survey their charges.

The young men gravitated to where her sister was playing court, humming like bees to a flower that had just opened, eager to sample and drain it before moving on to the next one. Appearing pink-lipped and with the dewy freshness of a rose in first bloom, Anne-Marie soon attracted her usual

crowd. Just waiting to be plucked, Kitty thought bitterly, pleased that the mask hid her unmistakable cynicism. She wondered how long this event would be before she could leave.

“And how goes it with the Spanish Armada?”

Kitty turned at the unexpected greeting and found herself facing what appeared to be a young blade, though it was difficult to be certain behind the Pantalone mask.

It took a moment for her brain to scramble for a remark. “Thanks to our good subjects, our borders are once again safe, though if you see Francis Drake, please send him to me so I may bestow the thanks of a grateful queen.”

There was quiet, and Kitty had wondered if she had perhaps overdone the play-acting.

A gentle chuckle rolled out of him, and Kitty relaxed.

“I appear to have chosen the wrong costume, my lady, for I would dearly love to be beheld in such a favourable light as Drake. However, in the absence of the gentleman, perhaps you would agree to dance with your humble servant?”

Kitty blinked, a blush coming to her cheeks. He was flirting with her?

Offering a wide smile, she extended a regal hand. “How kind of you, sir, I would find that most enjoyable.”

After that, Kitty had a regular stream of dance partners, and somehow, though how she had managed it was quite lost on her, was building a small circle of admirers that was soon on the verge of rivalling her sister’s. The anonymity of the mask granted her security, her guard relaxing, and Kitty found herself enjoying the party, her usual stiff manner loosening, becoming open and welcoming, the lively conversation flowing easily between the group centred around her.

“My dance, I believe, Your Highness.”

Mask or no mask, she would know that voice anywhere. Thankfully, she was prepared this time. “I fear there is a mistake, sir, that dance is already taken.” Kitty smiled sweetly up at the highwayman, his black eyes glittering through his mask.

“Indeed,” he said coolly. “Perhaps you are mistaken, my lady, and it might be worth checking your card.”

Drat, the blasted man was up to something. The only person who could be so arrogant was when they were already certain of the outcome. A lump of

tension curdling in her belly, Kitty checked her card. And there was his name, bold as brass, Richard Turpin. How he'd got his name on her dance card when he had not approached her all evening she didn't know. Closing her card, she offered an apologetic smile to the group. "It appears that Mister Turpin is quite correct, my apologies."

There were cries of foul and a witty remark came, "Be careful he doesn't steal your heart, m'lady." A shard of bitterness went through her—too late for that. With a calmness she wasn't feeling, she slipped her hand onto his arm.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Captain. I would have thought such an event not to your tastes," she dared to verbally prod him.

"It just shows how little you truly know me."

The slow anger bubbled in the pit of her stomach.

"Yes," she agreed, "time has made that revelation quite clear to me." She leaned back and surveyed him coolly, her words like caustic acid. "I suppose you feel quite at home here actually, in a room of play-acting and deceit."

His mouth twisted angrily. "Do not talk to me of deceit, Miss Thorpe," he snapped, "when you were its willing pupil."

Robert's harshness cut into her with unexpected efficiency of a French sabre. Despite her wall and her sharp retorts, he still had the power to hurt her. Kitty fell silent and kept gaze her fixed on Robert's cravat, blinking rapidly to disperse the sudden welling of tears. She had committed no deceit on her part.

"I-I must wonder, Captain..." Her voice caught, and she fought against the aching ball lodged in her throat. "If my presence is so repugnant to you, why do you persist in seeking me out?"

"I would dearly love to be able to answer that, too, Miss Thorpe," he muttered.

They finished the dance in strained silence and Kitty attempting to take up as before, with a light-hearted flirtation with the young blades in her court. But the previous enjoyment of the evening was incinerated by his bitter words and the remnant wisps of smoke blown away on the wind. She was rattled, her nerves stretched. Even across the ballroom she could feel Robert's eyes burning into her. Kitty shifted uncomfortably, as if being judged and found wanting in some way. She lifted her head, and their eyes met. She shivered; she could only read anger swirling in his dark gaze. He raised his drink to her in salute and tossed it back in a smooth movement.

“Ah, Miss Thorpe, what a happy occurrence that I have finally managed to come across you.”

Kitty instantly stiffened. Oh no, not him, not now.

“I’m afraid that is my fault, Lord Lansdowne,” Aunt Emmie interjected with a haughty sniff. “I’ve been monopolising my niece and I do declare this season is proving to be busier than all the rest combined. Why, with all our engagements, it’s amazing we even find time to sleep.”

Kitty bit back a moan. *Laying it on a might thick, Aunt Emmie.* Even if Kitty knew it was only an attempt to mitigate the sting when Aunt Emmie delivered a set down and sent him packing. It was still humiliating.

“However, I’m afraid—”

“Lord Lansdowne, a pleasure to see you,” Lady Thorpe cut across with militant determination. “I’m so sorry that my daughter has not been in when you called.” Her mother oozed her usual artless sophistication. “She will, of course, be delighted to make it up to you now.”

Aunt Emmie looked like she had been slapped around the face with a slimy wet kipper.

Devil take it! Katherine was struggling to bite back a resounding retort that the hell she would, but with her mother’s unwillingness to shield her, she found herself neatly trapped. She couldn’t even say she wasn’t dancing this evening, thanks to her previous partners. Aunt Emmie’s mouth bunched into a severe, displeased line. There was only one thing left to do.

Pushing her shoulders back, Kitty drew herself up to her full height and stared Lord Lansdowne dead in the eye. The communication between them was unspoken. If he tried *anything*, ruination be damned, she would cut up rough and the consequences could go hang.

“Shall we, my lord?” she asked with the enthusiasm of a sloth. Her cool response that usually had men second-guessing themselves appeared to have the opposite and undesirable effect. Lansdowne’s eyes heated, and he insolently dipped his gaze as if stripping the clothes from her body. A startling revelation struck Kitty.

He *liked* that he had manoeuvred her into a position where she couldn’t refuse, his lips turning up at the corners and eyes sparking with ill-disguised triumph.

“Certainly, Miss Thorpe.”

The first string of a waltz, and she paled. Not the waltz. A boulder lodged in her belly, Kitty took her position on the dance floor at the first haunting

strains of the music. Now she would have to face the enemy at close quarters.

His hand drifted a little lower than was appropriate; she stiffened, unsure how to extract herself without causing a scandal. Kitty sucked in a fortifying breath and allowed the music to soothe her and kept her head up and focused just over the marquis's left shoulder, refusing to let this humiliation to cow her. This was nothing she couldn't handle.

"Let me come to the point, Miss Thorpe. You are not getting any younger, though there are some aspects of your person that I find appealing." His eyes were no longer looking at her face but toward her décolleté, and Kitty wanted to recoil in disgust. Of all the times not to be wearing a high neckline. "I think a mutual arrangement can be reached."

Kitty missed her step and had to fight to keep the patterns of the dance. The man was offering her carte blanche in the middle of a dance floor. Had he no shame?

"I have to wonder what the ice queen is hiding beneath that proper exterior."

Her lips pressed tightly together. "This conversation is most improper, my lord. I must *insist* upon changing the subject."

His eyes narrowed for a moment before he appeared to do as she'd requested. "I take pleasure in owning fine things."

Oh? Kitty wondered where he was going with this.

"I have my eye on a particular filly at the moment, a more stubborn creature if there ever was one."

Kitty closed her eyes. Dear God, this wasn't happening. Now the marquis had likened her to a blooming horse! She had got used to the double entendre, men believing that just because she was on the shelf she was desperate. She was not.

"Then you should take care, my lord, else find oneself bucked off by such a wild mount."

The marquess' grin widened. "Temperamental and spirited, needs a strong hand on the reins, but once she is mounted, I think she will give a jolly good ride."

Kitty was speechless. Mounted? A jolly good ride? Bile burned up the back of her throat. It would be a cold day in Hell before she allowed him to touch her like that.

He smiled pleasantly, but it did not reach his eyes. "I'm still in the process of negotiations but I'm confident a price can be reached."

That was out and out enough. Consequences be damned. They were on the edge of the dance floor now, and with fierce and deliberate determination, she brought her foot directly down on his instep, savage satisfaction thrumming through her at his surprised yelp. He reached down and clutched his foot, and Kitty hissed vehemently under her breath, "I am not for sale, Lansdowne."

Smiling, she signalled to a footman, aware of the eyes and titters swirling around her. Heads were already turning in Kitty's direction, and her reputation would be in tatters. It was worth it. Given the choice, she would snub the whole bloody lot of them.

"Please help his lordship into a chair. I'm quite afraid he has injured his ankle," she loudly told the bold-faced lie and fed that titbit to the crowd.

With a haughty tilt of her chin, she left the vermin on the dance floor and made her way to the edge. The whispers rising in a fever pitch, she studiously ignored them, keeping her gaze fixed ahead. Kitty put one determined foot in front of the other, every inch a queen.

Once she made it back to Aunt Emmie's side, who looked on with pride, the whispers died back and the normal hum of the room resumed.

"Very well done, my dear. Do you wish to tell me why you felt the need to create that little scene?"

"No," Kitty said shortly. "I handled it."

"I don't know what your mother is thinking."

Surprised, Kitty heard real anger behind Aunt Emmie's words.

"I'm beginning to wish I'd dressed as a highwayman so I could carry my late husband's pistols. That would see the brigand off."

Kitty swallowed down a bitter laugh, and it tasted sour. "Don't tempt me, Aunt Emmie, but I will not welcome any further attentions from that man." She spat the last words; they surprised even herself with their vehemence. In the face of her slipping control, she prompted herself to take a calming breath. "Excuse me, Aunt Emmie, I'm going to the retiring room to compose myself."

"Yes," Lady Mowbray agreed, her gaze sweeping over her with a concerned air. "I think that is a wise decision."

Kitty fled to the powder room and paused at the door.

"...and she left him on the dance floor!" a faceless, feminine voice extolled with relish, several gasps echoing from the room.

"Who?"

“Oh, the chit dressed as Queen Elizabeth, of all things, and the Marquis of Lansdowne.”

Nausea bubbled in Kitty’s stomach. They were talking about her.

“No!”

“What happened next?”

She was in purgatory, caught between the instinct to flee and march in there and shake the silly twit. Kitty bit her lip. What would Aunt Emmie do?

“Well, she claimed the marquis had injured his ankle and left him as bold as brass.”

The braying laughter tipped the balance of the scales, and anger won. There was no help for it but a full assault. Kitty sucked in a breath and stalked into the room with a swish of her skirts. You could have heard a pin drop. She entered the lion’s den with a confidence she didn’t feel and applied a damp cloth to her neck and chest.

“Yes, such an unfortunate accident,” she agreed, holding the gaze of several ladies until they were forced to look away, many of them red-faced. “Of course, it’s only to be expected, given the gentleman’s age and his fondness for refreshment stronger than Lady Debray’s punch. Alas, I afear’d the dance would go awry.” She let out a put-upon sigh. “I was unfortunately correct.”

“The marquis appeared quite steady to me,” a young lady dressed as a shepherdess challenged, her rosebud mouth moulded into a petulant pout.

Kitty identified her as the source of spreading the salacious tale.

“Of course he did, my dear,” Kitty offered condescendingly. “I was holding him upright. I declare my poor toes will be sore tomorrow.” Reaching into her reticule, she pulled out a scent bottle and dabbed the stopper behind her ears. The soothing and familiar scent of lavender swept over her.

There was a nervous titter of laughter, and Kitty replaced the bottle in her reticule and gave them a nod.

“Have a pleasant evening.”

She hid her trembling hands in the folds of her skirt. How had an evening started with so much promise and gone so wrong? She lingered at the edge of the ballroom but was not ready to rejoin the gaiety. Instead, she slipped through the door leading to the orangery, and the contrast of the air between here and the stuffy ballroom was immense. She could breathe again.

What the devil was the confounded woman playing at? Robert scowled as he tracked Katherine returning from the retiring room only to duck into the conservatory. Was she trying to ruin herself entirely? There was already an *on dit* raging like a wildfire about the scene she had created on the dance floor with Lansdowne. Robert frowned. Though it was a strange way to bring a suitor up to scratch, to be sure. Unless she was meeting a lover? The insidious thought slid through him, and he found his feet already moving in the direction of the orangery, not wanting to examine why the idea filled him with rage. Oh, he knew just how discreet Katherine could be when it suited her purposes.

He stepped through the orangery doors, scanning the ferns and palms until he spotted her silhouette.

She made a beguiling figure staring at the cloudy sky. He drew closer and noted the slight stoop of her shoulders and how her arms were wrapped around her middle. The whole line of her body screamed of defeat.

Robert accidentally brushed against the ferns, and her head whipped round, the gesture reminding him of a startled doe breaking cover, one hand fisted in her skirts, her fingers locked in a death grip on the material, raising them in preparation to flee.

“Who is it?” Her head bobbed, and she frantically scanned for the source of the noise. “Who’s there?” Her voice quavered, as if she was afraid.

And so she should be. If anyone else had caught her alone, her reputation would never recover, and the thought fired his anger. He stepped out from behind the tall potted palms, and, squinting, she relaxed instantly.

“Robert,” she breathed, the taut line of her body softening. “It’s just you.”

‘Oh, look, it’s just Robert.’ That was a blow to his pride, and an insidious thought snaked through him.

“And who else were you expecting, Kitten?” he asked silkily, stepping closer. “Who were you intending to meet?”

Katherine paled further, her skin almost translucent with the haunting beauty of a marble statue. Didn’t she know what she did to a man in that costume, the emphasis on her neat waist and full bosom? A man would have to be blind or a saint not to appreciate her feminine merits, and he was neither.

“That is none of your concern, Captain, though your timing is most inconvenient. Please, leave me to my thoughts. I intend to rejoin the festivities shortly.” And she gave him her back.

Robert blinked, standing numbly. The little minx had summarily dismissed him!

His blood was beating a steady tattoo against his temple, and he sidled closer until his legs brushed the edge of her skirt.

“Have you arranged an assignation with Lansdowne?” he asked casually, thinking the scene of the dance floor must have been a ruse.

He knew he should have dealt with the man when they had first met in the salon. He was not worthy of a woman like Katherine. He would toy with her before discarding her and seeking out the next one. Robert had seen it happen enough, and it was this shallow underbelly of the ton that he abhorred, especially when he had his parents’ happy marriage as an example.

When Katherine gave no reaction, Robert decided to probe further. “You know, I’ve heard of some extraordinary lengths that women will go through to secure a husband, but leaving the suitor you are trying to land on the dance floor is certainly an original one.”

She whirled around, fire and heat snapping in her fine eyes, and he gave an internal nod. That was better than that resigned expression.

“He is not my suitor, you idiot,” she snarled with an unexpected ferocity. “I *loathe* the man.”

“Oh dear,” Robert mocked with false sympathy, “what has the man done to fall foul of your fickle favours?”

Kitty groaned under her breath, then visibly rallied and deflected. “Well, you would know all about fickleness, wouldn’t you, Captain?”

His eyes narrowed. First she accused him of deceit, and now fickleness, and his voice hardened. “What are you insinuating, Katherine?”

“You know my meaning perfectly, Captain.”

Robert frowned. No, he most certainly did not. It was like their sparring on the dance floor, both puzzled by the other’s barbed remarks. He found himself being similarly studied and cocked an eyebrow in her direction, daring her to speak her mind.

Releasing a world-weary sigh, she angled her body to fully face him, hands braced on her hips, her features stamped with determination.

Robert’s thighs tensed, and he instinctively braced for the coming confrontation.

“What do you want, Robert?” she demanded. “What game are you playing?”

So she had at last chosen to speak plainly. Robert was not of such a

charitable mood. “What game are you referring to, Miss Thorpe?”

She just gazed up at him with large limpid eyes, and he fought the urge to shift uncomfortably under her intense regard, and with her crestfallen features, he had been found wanting.

“I never took you for a liar, Robert,” she spoke softly, averting her face. “Neither did I take you for a petty man who would play games. Other than being foolish in trusting you before, I don’t know what I have done to deserve your disdain.” Her breathing hitched. “Please, just leave me alone.”

Why was she playing innocent?

“The martyred act doesn’t suit you, Kitty.”

“Act!” she seethed. “You dare accuse what I have suffered as being an act! I waited for you, Robert,” she bit out, her eyes sparking with a combination of tears and fury. “I wrote to you, begging for word of you, what your intentions were towards me. That I would wait. All my letters went unanswered. At first I thought it was due to the war and they would take time to reach you.”

Robert studied her erstwhile expression, searching her face for even a hint of deception or a tell. There was nothing, she was completely guileless, vibrating with undiluted pain, too raw to just be playing the martyr. Kitty really did believe herself to be wronged. His head ached with the unsolvable conundrum. Nothing about this whole situation made sense.

“But as time passed, I was no longer able to deceive myself,” she said.

A bitter laugh bubbled from her throat, and he jerked at the sound. It was so misplaced he was struggling to reconcile it with Katherine. Her arms wrapped around her middle, as if trying to hold together the edges of a wound, but the emotions kept bleeding. Robert forced himself to review the past with an analytical eye, pushing the caustic emotions that usually coloured his memories aside. He raked a shaking hand through his dark hair. Good God. There was a possibility of a misunderstanding, a big, glaring misunderstanding. Why had he not seen it before?

“I heard nothing from you,” she went on, “and I decided I’d been fooled by the oldest trick in the book, and I was gullible enough to fall for it. Was there a time that you cared for me, or was it all a lie? For I have doubted my own judgement ever since.”

The cutting words he’d been prepared to throw back at her froze in his throat. The sincerity and the raw pain radiating from her...the mask was gone. Oh God, what had he done? Yes, the mask was gone, and he saw her.

All of her. The woman he loved. He tensed, and his heart missed a beat. Loved. That was the reason for his obsession, his possessiveness and protectiveness. It was why he couldn't leave her alone.

"Kitty..." He began reaching for her.

"No!" she cried out, dancing away from him and out of his reach, a wild look entering her eyes, like a trapped animal. "You've hurt me for the last time. Why have you sought me out if only to make me miserable? Do you hate me that much?"

"I don't hate you, Kitty," he said softly, when he at last found his voice and knew them to be the bone-deep truth. With a courage that humbled him, she had laid herself bare to him, and he could only offer her the same openness in return.

"I did offer for you, but it was rejected."

Kitty jerked, her mouth agog in disbelief, and shook her head. Denying his words. "No, no, you—"

Robert cut across her, determined to make Kitty listen, his voice strengthening and deepening, reliving the stinging memory. "Your family ran me off with scorn." By strength of will he reined in his temper and spouted the words that had haunted him for so long. "How does a no-account nobody, with no family to recommend him, have the gall to offer for a daughter of a baron?" His lips twisted with derision.

Kitty closed her eyes briefly. "I hear my mother in those words, but what of my father? Surely he would have the ultimate say."

"I was never given the opportunity to speak with your father. As a lowly lieutenant, I was sent packing."

"You should have me told me, Robert. I would have waited, I would have stood against them. It would have been better than the years of not knowing and doubting."

"What did I have to offer you?" he snapped. "I was a junior officer in His Majesty's navy, earning barely enough to live on let alone support a wife, and with no prospects..." Robert trailed off and pinched the bridge of his nose, and the silence stretched between them. "I did write to you," he said at last, resolute to tell the whole truth. "I broke the engagement in that letter and explained the circumstance and," he ground his teeth, "the reception my offer had been received by your family. But I assumed it was intercepted the same way yours were." It took a moment for his words to sink in.

"You think they stopped my letters? They wouldn't..."

He held her gaze so she could see his face, read the sincerity, and her words dried up. "I've never received a letter from you, Kitty, *not one.*"

Watching the emotions war on her face, swinging between denial and resignation, he could not help but feel pity for her. To find out this way, after all these years, that her mother had deceived her. In that instant, Kitty appeared very young and vulnerable, and he had to fight the inclination to wrap her in his arms and promise all would be well. But after his prior treatment, he doubted his attention would be welcomed.

The sudden whine of hinges alerted Robert to the potential danger at the door to the orangery opening. He reacted, seizing Katherine's arm, and led her to dense foliage, tucking them neatly behind it. Clipped footsteps were moving towards their hiding place, closer and closer. Katherine was trembling, and he tugged her into the shelter of his body and was assailed by the scent of lavender he associated wholly with her.

"Shhh," he whispered, guiding her head and burying her face in the wall of his chest.

Robert cursed her distinctive costume, fear for Katherine the uppermost in his mind. If they were spotted, the backlash against her would be vicious and unrelenting. He stooped and ducked his head to peer through a gap in the fronds, and the tightness in her chest eased. It was just a passing footman. As long as they remained quiet until he had departed, they would be fine. Easier said than done when Kitty's ruff was poking uncomfortably into his neck and one of the ends of lace tickled under his nose. Time slowed to the consistency of treacle on a December morning, but after holding his breath, the door clicked shut. Robert's eyes drifted closed—thank goodness for that.

He waited a moment longer to be certain the footman wasn't coming back, becoming fully aware of the armful of the soft beautiful woman, and his body stirred to life. "They are gone now, Kitty," he whispered, though his arms remained where they were, reluctant to release her.

"Are-are you sure?"

Her turned her oval face up at him, her full lips hesitantly parted. A better man would have broken away, he should have released her, but Kitty made no move to part them. He was snared by the magnetic pull of her gaze, her looking up at him with absolute trust. His head dipped, and there was scant space separating them.

"I'm sure," Robert murmured and closed the distance.

A groan lodged in the back of his throat. Kitty's lips tasted sweet. He'd

forgotten how intoxicating she was, and the emotions he had hidden burst their banks. Robert was drowning under the onslaught. He clung to Kitty in the eye of the maelstrom. Everything would be all right between them. He had found the woman he wanted for his bride.

Kitty's heart was fighting to burst from her chest.

That single touch had sparked a need within her, and the thrust of his tongue fanned that need into a raging wildfire that threatened to consume her whole. Her fingers took on a life of their own, and she clung to his shoulders, anchoring her in the eye of the storm. His tongue stroked the inside of her mouth. Flickers of pleasure echoed throughout her body, and Kitty chased after them, pressing herself tighter against him. Her aching breasts mashed into the hard planes of his chest, the friction tormenting her nipples to rigid points. She had missed this. Missed him, the warmth and weight of his body.

"Kitty," he murmured on a hungry growl, "I've missed this."

Cool, icy reason was dumped on her like a pile of snow. This. Robert had missed this.

Not. Her.

With a little cry, she scrunched together the last of her willpower before she was lost. She flung herself away from him.

"No!" She panted, her breasts rising and falling with her breaths.

Robert's gaze dipped to follow the movements, and Kitty fought the urge to box his ears.

A determined light blazed his eyes.

"No," she repeated.

She'd sunk a lot of strength into that no, and Robert froze in place.

"You want me," he accused, breathing hard.

Finding herself unable to lie, Kitty raised her chin a notch. "Yes." A flash of defiance. "And I'm a fool for it," she admitted, tasting the bitterness behind her words. "But I will not be used again. I learnt from my mistakes."

"You are calling what we share a mistake?" Robert repeated slowly, that soft, dangerous voice putting Kitty on her guard. "After I explained what happened before, I didn't desert you."

It was too much. The world had turned upside down in a short space of time. She had gone from hating Robert Vaughn to kissing him, and all her previous ill-feeling was unfounded? No. She needed space. She needed to think, and she couldn't do that with Robert touching her. Her only thought

was to push him away.

“I don’t believe you.” Her words lacked conviction.

Robert squared his jaw and took a step towards her.

She held her hand up to fend him off. If he touched her again, she would beg for him to continue. “The unwanted attention of one man is quite enough, thank you,” she snapped.

Robert’s eyes darkened. “Who’s been bothering you, Kitty?” Then his face cleared in realisation. “Is it Lansdowne?”

She bit her tongue hard, and the pain made her realise just what she had said. Damn and blast, she hadn’t meant to reveal that. The man was too clever.

“Katherine…”

Kitty got the distinct impression he was grinding his teeth.

“Who?” he demanded in that uncompromising tone that she could very well imagine him captain on his ship.

But she was not one of his crew. It was obvious in their years apart he had forgotten she was more than capable of holding her own.

“It is of no consequence, my lord.”

“I will decide what is of consequence and what is not, Katherine.”

Now she knew he was grinding his teeth.

She was regaining her equilibrium, taking comfort in the familiarity of striking sparks off Roberts’ temper, and dared to smile at him. “I don’t share your frankness, my lord.”

A muscle in his jaw ticking, Robert sucked in a great breath and took a determined step back—probably to prevent himself from wringing her neck, Kitty thought bitterly.

“We are far from finished, Kitty, but I think you had better go back to the safety of the ballroom.”

“For once we are in agreement, Captain.”

Robert released a pent-up breath, the ardour racing through his body watching the beguiling sway of Kitty’s generous hips as she stalked out of the orangery, her nose out of joint and firmly placed in the air. What a mess. Part of him wanted to drag her back into his arms and kiss her until she forgot their harsh words and past wrongs. He pursed his lips ruefully. But in that fractious mood, Katherine would run him round in ever-frustrating verbal circles until he lost his temper and she succeeded in derailing the discussion.

Enough words had been spoken in the heat of the moment between them.

Robert waited for the fire in his blood to cool and thoughts of Katherine to clear his head, then returned to the ballroom. He found a lone pillar and, propping his shoulders against it, began his vigil, resolved to keep a protective watch over her. Katherine was holding court, dazzling and mesmerising the young bucks who sought to impress her. He almost pitied them. Katherine was not a woman to be taken in with empty flattery and pretty compliments. At first glance, no one would even suspect that moments before she had been involved in a heated altercation, but if one looked close enough, she occasionally appeared distracted and gazed over the top, scanning the mingling crowds as if searching for someone. If someone was making a nuisance of themselves, he wanted to know.

Robert shifted, trying to become comfortable. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 6

Kitty curled into the window seat and watched the first flurries of the season flying by. The cold chilled her arms, but she just stared out, losing herself in the mesmerising flakes as they danced in their intricate patterns. Jane Austen's recently published *Emma* lay limp in her fingers and resting on her lap. For once it was not holding her attention, and she found the heroine, the namesake of the book, to be a meddling, self-righteous busybody. And in her frank opinion, life was complicated enough without others stirring the pot, no matter how well-meaning. She closed her eyes and, giving up the pretence of trying to read, leaned her forehead against cool glass.

Since the masquerade, she could not be in her mother's presence without her launching into a scolding rebuke for stranding the marquis on the dance floor. Kitty bore it, though she itched to bite back. Her mother should be thankful she had been in the presence of mind not to cause a scandal by slapping the man's impertinent face.

Kitty snorted, tightening her fingers on the volume with remembered indignation. A horse! The man had dared liken her to a horse. All things considered, she had controlled her temper admirably. And then there was Robert. Had he been telling the truth and they had both been wronged? She had played his words over and over in her head, and they had the undeniable ring of her mother, and during her contemplation, Kitty had found she *wanted* to believe him.

She froze when the door of the library opened then snapped shut.

"Gerald, you have to do something."

Kitty winced at her mother's nasal tone. It was one she had come to know so well in recent days. It said she was about to have one of her 'episodes' and her voice would rise in pitch that would have made her a world-class opera diva, if she wasn't off-key and tone deaf. Kitty muttered her silent prayers that behind the curtain she was invisible from prying eyes, even if guilt pricked at her for eavesdropping on her parents.

"Regarding what, Henrietta?" Her long-suffering father sighed.

"Kitty! She has to marry. That girl will be the ruination of us all."

Kitty's mouth dried, and her heart hurt.

“No one will even look at Anne-Marie while Kitty remains unwed, it is spoiling her chances of making a good match. Why, just this season alone...”

Kitty zoned out of her mother’s drone as she rattled off the most eligible of men who had danced with Anne-Marie and had called upon her. But none had offered yet, and her mother had determined that this was Kitty’s fault.

But Anne-Marie was her mother’s pet. A blonde, petite beauty, she had the whisperings of being the toast of the ton, just as her mother had been in her heyday. Alas, circumstance had led her to be wed to a baron rather than a loftier title, and she sought to remedy the fact by securing a higher standing for her favourite daughter.

“And then she had the audacity to leave the Marquis of Lansdowne on the dance floor!” her mother finished on a shriek that only dogs should be able to hear.

Kitty winced. So they were back to talking about her?

“Then I would surmise that his behaviour was inappropriate of that of a gentleman for our daughter to take such action. A diamond of the first water she will never be, but I can’t fault her for her judgement in character.”

“But it was the Marquis of Lansdowne,” her mother’s strident tone continued, as if that explained everything.

Her father snorted. “Madame, I don’t care if he is the King of Spain, I know for a fact that you have been inundated with invitations after that particular set-down.”

All true, with Kitty having to attend her fair share in order to stamp out the rumours as ruthlessly as she had stamped on the marquis’ foot. It had been a positively tedious business, but the task that Aunt Emmie had set for her had helped keep her mind from wandering to a certain illicit kiss.

“It gives us a bad name,” her mother hissed.

Kitty found herself leaning forward, waiting to see if her father would continue to defend her.

“Gerald.” Her mother whined. “I just want to see our girl settled. She is four and twenty and not getting any younger. Her bloom has quite gone, and the few marriage proposals she managed to attract, she turned them down. She has had five seasons. I doubt this situation will now change.”

Her father sighed wearily, and Kitty could imagine him sitting in his favourite armchair, removing his spectacles to rub the bridge of his nose as he was known to do.

“I’m beginning to wish that we let her wed that young upstart,” Lady

Thorpe grumbled with venom.

Kitty's heart stopped, her whole being standing to attention. She'd misheard. Her mind was playing tricks on her, trying to make sense of her argument with Robert.

"If only I'd known he was a Graham and cousin to the Viscount Preston, I might have given his suit more consideration."

Oh God. Kitty pressed a palm over her middle, the roiling in her stomach threatening to cast up her accounts.

"You did what?" her father asked in a voice Kitty had never heard him use, still softly spoken, but potent rage held a menacing undertone.

"That nobody, Captain what's-his-name, came seeking Katherine's hand. He wanted an appointment with you," Lady Thorpe replied with the same concern as one gave when ordering luncheon. "Of course, I sent him packing." She sounded supremely satisfied with that.

Kitty spied her mother's profile through a gap in the curtains, and a frown formed.

"That was before I knew he had connections."

A pregnant pause, and Kitty's throat burned, tears stinging her eyes. This was a bad dream, a terrible, terrible dream. It had to be.

"For the love of God, Henrietta!"

The roar made Kitty jump, the book almost slipping from her lap, and she lurched to grab it before it hit the floor.

"Katherine's heart was engaged!"

"And that was her lot in life, a lowly lieutenant? Besides, we gave her a season to get over her youthful infatuation."

Kitty's mouth twisted. She could barely remember her first season, a whirl of fragile facades, bright and colourful, but nothing was real. Unable to take anyone's regard at face value, she had not dared risk her bruised heart again and had found no joy in the various entertainments they had attended.

"Katherine is of a different character, and since when do you make sole decisions regarding my daughter?"

"Gerald, are you telling me you would have preferred our daughter to be wed to a man of no consequence?" Lady Thorpe was perplexed, her brow puckered.

"I would have wished our daughter to be happy," he snapped, crossing restlessly in front of the fire with a state of agitation that was out of character for the old baron. "Captain Vaughn is an honourable gentleman who has

subsequently distinguished himself in battle, and if the rumours are to be believed has become extremely wealthy. You have meddled in our daughter's affairs for ill."

"Humph, it's not all lost. After all these years, the man is still sniffing around her skirts. I'm sure with a little gentle prodding—"

"No," her father interjected, an edge to his voice.

"But surely—"

"I said no, Henrietta. I have let you organise events to your liking, and you have done so with no thought other than pleasing your own vanity. If you do not leave well enough alone or are unable to guide Anne-Marie in her come out, then I will send you to the country."

Kitty sucked in a breath. Her father couldn't offer a greater punishment to her mother. She loathed the country with a passion.

"Gerald, you cannot be serious!"

"Quite serious, Henrietta." Her father's voice grew fainter, his slower, more sedate pace moving to the door, followed by her mother's agitated tapping steps.

"Gerald I really think—"

Their conversation faded, and Kitty pressed the heels of her hands over her eyes, wanting to shut out what she had learned. It ripped open the barely healed wound, just as agonising and as painful as before. Finally, after long having lost feeling in her legs, she unfolded herself from her hiding place. In a daze, she made her way to her room and had enough presence of mind to write a missive to her aunt that she was unwell and unable to accompany her this evening. It wasn't much of a lie—a headache was fast developing behind her eyes, and a sick, throbbing pain beat at her temple.

Liar, she had called Robert a liar. The angry words spoken at their last altercation, the insults they had hurled at each other. Kitty's vision wavered, and tears spilt over the dam and streamed down her cheeks. Curling up on her bed, she wept a spate of bitter, angry tears, grieving for what might have been. The pillow that muffled her sobs became damp, the pain and shame of her own actions scoring her just as badly as her mother's, until exhaustion claimed her in a restless sleep.

Chapter 7

“I do declare you are as agitated as my stallion scenting a mare,” Aunt Emmie grumbled. “And are you sure you are up to it this evening? You are looking quite drained.”

Kitty offered her a strained smile and reassured her, yes, she was well enough for this evening’s entertainments.

After several days of keeping to her rooms on the premise of an illness, for fear that if she faced her mother she would not be able to keep a civil tongue in her head, Kitty had come to the conclusion she needed to clear the air with Captain Vaughn and apologise for both her accusations and her mother’s biting treatment.

With that in mind, she had sat at her vanity and attempted to draft an adequate letter. Her first efforts had soon been crushed in her hand and thrown in the fire, as had drafts two through seven. It was at that point she had slammed down her pen, a screech of pure frustration wrenching from her throat. Upon paper, the words were lacking and unsubstantial. In fact, sending a letter in the first place gave a flippancy to the wrongs done against him.

Sucking in a breath, she had once again taken her seat at her vanity. No, this would have to be done properly, in person. She was not such a coward to hide her failings behind a sheath of paper.

This message proved easier to write, and with that, she had summoned Milton to the library.

“I have an errand of great sensitivity, Milton, and I trust you to aid me in your usual discreet capacity.”

His brows had snapped together with concern. “What is it, Miss Kitty?”

She held up the sealed letter. “This is to go to Captain Vaughn. I need an answer immediately.”

Milton backed away as if the letter had turned into a viper. “Miss Kitty, this is most unwise.”

She followed him and pressed it into his hand. “I am trying to right a wrong, Milton. If you do not aid me, I will do it myself.”

It seemed it was on the tip of Milton’s tongue to refuse, but seeing Kitty’s

ardent expression, he reluctantly accepted the note. "I will see it done."

Impulsively, she seized his hands and gave them a light squeeze. "Thank you."

Later that evening, Milton handed her Robert's response, and she ripped it open with trembling fingers. The reply was blunt.

At your service, my lady.

And now she was frantically scanning the ballroom, searching for a particular dark head of hair, the time at which they had agreed to meet in the library marching steadily onwards with the speed of cold molasses. She couldn't see him, but he had promised, and as she had found out, Robert kept his promises. Only half attending to the admirers who now frequently gravitated to her at these gatherings, she had a faraway look that left many of her partners wondering where her sharp wit had gone. At last, she thought she had caught sight of him, and that knot of anxiousness sitting under her ribcage eased somewhat.

The festivities were in full swing when she whispered her excuses in Aunt Emmie's ear. She'd ripped the hem of her gown and was going to the retiring room to see to its repair. It should buy her enough time for her interlude with Robert before anyone could grow suspicious. Making her way towards the powder room, she doubled back and slipped into an empty antechamber.

Kitty was taking a risk, but she had to speak with Robert. She had to. Her skin prickled, and she sucked in a deep breath, her lungs inflating, and then let all the tension drain away. There was nothing left to do but wait. She tried sitting but couldn't find that elusive peace. Promptly bouncing back on to her feet, she paced, her skirt fluttering around her ankles. Her gaze flicked to the carriage clock on the mantel. Already ten minutes had passed. She wouldn't be able to tarry much longer.

The reassuring rattle of the handle lifted the oppressive weight from her shoulders. He'd come.

But when she turned in the direction of the arrival of her companion, her smile fled from her face. "What are you doing here?" Kitty demanded, the Marquess of Lansdowne moving farther into the room.

"Your sister helpfully pointed out your direction."

Oh, Anne-Marie, what have you done? Growing horror slithered through

Kitty at the potential danger she had placed herself in. She took a step back, and his grin widened by a sickening degree. Realisation struck Kitty—he was enjoying toying with her, feeding off her fear.

Kitty straightened her spine. Well, she would not give him the satisfaction. In her frostiest tone, she glared down her nose at him.

“You are intruding, my lord, I request that you leave.”

He ignored her and strolled closer, his gaze fixed upon her person in a most unnerving way, dark and gleaming, like a fever was racking his body.

“You have led me on a pretty dance, Miss Thorpe.” His gaze slid over her insolently.

Kitty barely contained a shudder. It was invasive. She had to get out of the room. Now.

“One of the best I’ve encountered.” He shot her a sly grin. “But that is what makes the end all the more rewarding, don’t you think?”

“You talk in riddles, sir, and I have no time for it,” she said with a haughty toss of her head and strode purposefully towards the door.

He grabbed her shoulder with surprising strength, and she realised her error in coming within his reach.

“Release me at once,” she demanded, looking away, unflinching.

She tried yanking on her arm, but his grip remained firm.

His hot breath fanned against her cheek. “I will have you, yay or nay.”

With a violent push, Kitty toppled back on the sofa, and his weight followed her down.

She was caught, her hands curled into claws, and she went for his eyes. He knocked them aside and pinned them beneath him. Kitty couldn’t shift his weight. Disgusting slimy lips touched her naked skin, and she flinched with revulsion. His hands harsh and thick, his fingers dug into her shoulders like butcher’s meat hooks, and she fought to break his grip, leaving bruises in their wake. She opened her mouth to protest, to ring a peal over his head for daring to lay hands upon her person. It was a mistake. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she gagged. It was like trying to swallow a slippery eel. She tried to scream, but it came out in a choked splutter. He thrust it in a lewd parody of what he intended for her. The immobilising panic gave way to anger and rage firing deep within her. It stoked hotter and hotter with each moment she was forced to endure his odious touch.

His body was yanked off her, and she could breathe again. Air had never tasted so sweet. She scrambled to push up from the sofa and spied Robert

bodily dragging the marquis by the collar towards the door.

He leaned down until their noses were almost touching. “You ever touch Miss Thorpe again, and I will flog the skin from your back.”

The soft menace in Robert’s tone had Kitty convinced he meant every single word. This was the ruthless commander who had seen battle, who would gut any man if he thought it necessary. “And then I will use cannon to scatter your innards over the countryside. Now get out.”

Robert practically threw the man out of the room.

“Did he hurt you?” Robert’s rage was palatable, his hands shaking as he cupped her shoulders and steadied her enough to stand.

Kitty inhaled through her nose, attempting and failing miserably to bring herself under control. Tilting her face up, she offered him a wobbly smile.

“I take it I wasn’t the only one to receive an invitation?” he asked with a mocking arch of that cursed eyebrow.

He let her go, and Kitty instantly mourned the loss of contact.

He was shaking his head, an unfamiliar snap of temper in his eyes. “If you insist on playing with fire, Miss Thorpe, you might not find the consequences to your liking.”

“I haven’t been playing with fire you...you...you addlepate,” she snapped back, but the words kept flowing. “I have spent weeks dodging his insults and innuendos, doing my best to avoid him when my own mother insists on sabotaging my efforts. I abhor that man; he disgusts me. Why, that fat lob cock likened me to a horse! A horse, I tell you! To be broken and mounted. All because I will not accept his carte blanche, but no, I am forced to smile and pretend to be unaffected by that great Lubbock’s presence every time I’m coerced to stand up with him.”

Kitty finished her angry tirade, her chest heaving, then ruined it by promptly bursting into tears. Robert stared at her, slack-jawed. She couldn’t believe she had just spewed all that out.

Strong arms instantly enveloped her. “Hush, it’s all right, I’m here.”

She buried her face into his coat, a warm, dark haven.

His lips brushed her forehead.

“I apologise, Kitten, my jealousy got the better of me. I should have known you would not encourage a man like him.”

Katherine cried all the harder. No, no, no, she was the one who was meant to be apologising to him, not the other way round.

His hand rubbed her back, soothing her by degrees. “I’ll never let him

touch you again,” he murmured into her hair.

Kitty wanted to ask, pray tell, how he was going to manage this, but it was beyond her to form coherent sentences at that moment. Her sobs subsided to the odd hiccup, and if anything, Robert held her tighter. His finger curled under her chin, and with a gentle but uncompromising pressure, he raised her head.

She blinked away the remnants of the tears clinging to her lashes and was ensnared. Robert was so very close, his breath tickling her cheek. His eyes were black velvet dotted with amber, with faint lines at the corners that hadn't been there before. Kitty poked her tongue out and moistened her lips. If she just moved her head ever so slightly, their lips would touch. The firm wall of his chest pressed against her breasts. Kitty lifted her head and sealed the distance. At first, she'd wanted to find comfort in the familiar, replace the marquis' touch and words with something safe and good. Robert deepened the kiss, and she moaned low in her throat, the sound spurring him on, his hand tangling in her hair. The rest of the world faded into insignificance, as did her mission, and in this bubble there was only the two of them. The years and insults rolled away, and they were transported to hot, hazy summer afternoons and illicit rendezvous under the willow tree, completely out of sight of prying eyes.

He palmed her breast and circled the pad of his thumb over the nipple. Kitty gasped, darts of pleasure shooting to her lower belly, and closed her eyes at the sensation. Lost, she was completely lost. A frantic urgency filled her and, reaching between them, she cupped him, the hoarse curse he muttered a most gratifying reward.

Suddenly, Robert thrust her behind him, the cold air dousing her ardour. The door swung open, and Kitty froze, like a doe caught in the open as several people piled into the room, saw them clutched in their embrace, and froze at the threshold. Her mind went blank. Ruined. Caught. The witness' eyes widened in shock at their compromising position, and already she could see herself becoming the latest *on dit*. The gossips would tear her to shreds.

Robert stepped forward to shield her from view. The judgement of the room was a heavy, oppressive weight, but he forced a smile in the face of it.

“Apologies,” he began with that smooth confidence that penetrated the fog. Robert's lips twisted in a rueful smile that didn't meet his eyes. “Miss Thorpe has made me the happiest of men and agreed to become my wife. In the moment, I temporarily lost my senses.”

An old dowager grinned, and someone towards the back chuckled. "Young people."

"Come, my dear, no need to be shy," he commanded, offering his arm, taking the offensive.

She clutched his sleeve with a shaky hand, and with a poise she currently felt beyond her, she allowed Robert to lead her masterfully from the room.

"Keep your head up, we must find your mother," Robert muttered out of the side of his mouth. "Where is she?"

"The ballroom," Kitty croaked, "the far end."

As they walked through the ballroom, she swore heads turned in their direction and a scurry of whispers followed them like the swell of a wave. Kitty shrank closer to his side, and Robert caught the motion.

"Head up, my dear, you have nothing to be ashamed of," he encouraged, a warm, steadying presence at her side. "And remember to smile."

They paused, and Robert's gaze scanned the opposing side.

"She is there, sitting by the wall next to Mrs Fitzsimmons," Kitty whispered faintly, a headache fast developing at her temples. The blood rushed past her ears until the sound even blocked out the insolent hissing whispers.

"I will explain that we are engaged and that I will call upon your father. Can you last a little longer, Kitten, it will help scupper the rumour mill if you give them no credence."

She pulled her shoulders back and tilted her head up, a spark of spirit brightening her eyes. "That's it."

Lady Mowbray made a beeline for the young couple, and one might have been fooled by the delighted smile, if not for the stormy grey eyes threatening to have Robert keel-hauled.

"My dears," she chimed, an almost musical quality to her voice. "I am delighted I can at last congratulate you both now that our secret is out."

Robert looked over Baroness Mowbray with a new appreciation. Clever woman; she was fast on the uptake, making it appear like a prior agreement with the family, rather than a rushed job.

She embraced Katherine at his side, who had been remarkably silent. In fact, her quietness was giving him some unease.

"What the devil has happened, Vaughn? You better have a good explanation before I hang you up by your own entrails," the older woman

hissed, for their ears only.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Robert's lips twitched.

"We were caught in an innocent but compromising position, an upsetting event that has left Katherine shaken." His gaze slid to his new fiancée's face. She had a pale and somewhat glassy expression. She had withdrawn into herself, and his concern mounted. "I will be visiting Lord Thorpe in the morning to take care of the formalities."

Lady Mowbray's eyes narrowed into thin slits, and if they had been in a darkened street rather than in the middle of the glittering throng, Robert would have laid odds of his body being found floating in the Thames come morning.

"See that you do, young man."

Lady Euphemia and Robert posted guard either side of Katherine. They were greeted by well-wishers and together saw off the more impertinent questions. Lady Thorpe appeared a tad disappointed with the news but compensated the lack of an esteemed title by making a great show of pointing out Captain Vaughn's wealth to any who would hear it. Terribly crass, and it rankled to put his private affairs on display. Katherine nodded and smiled politely, adding her thanks to the conversation, but her mind seemed elsewhere.

Robert escorted her into the supper room. "How are you holding up?"

Large, anguished eyes peered up at him. "I didn't mean for this to happen Robert." Her grip tightened on his sleeve, desperation clouding her gaze. "You have to believe me, it was not my intention to trap you."

Robert covered her hand with his own and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "I know."

He didn't know how he knew. The meeting, the discovery, it spoke all the designs of a neatly laid trap, but that was never Katherine's style. She was too straightforward. If you pleased her, a wide smile split her face from ear to ear. If you angered her, she would ring a peal over your head, as he had found out in recent weeks. He didn't want to examine his thoughts too carefully. In the moment, all his energies were absorbed into protecting her at all costs. Her rare show of vulnerability called to him, resurrecting long-dead feelings of tenderness.

A few dances after supper, Lady Mowbray whispered in his ear that they would now be able to leave without causing speculation.

She drilled him with a final, pointed stare. "I look forward to seeing the

notice in *The Gazette*, Captain Vaughn.”

Robert met her gaze steadily. “It will be my second call of the morning.”

She nodded with decided satisfaction and moved to return to her party when Robert halted the motion. “My lady.”

She arched an imperious eyebrow at him. “Yes, Captain.” She sniffed.

“Miss Thorpe has had a very trying night.” Robert searched for the right words. “With certain persons pressing their unwelcome suit in an unsavoury manner.”

Fury sparked in the dowager’s eyes, and the grip on her fan became a stranglehold. “Indeed?” she said blandly as if they were discussing something as inconsequential as the weather. She was a cool one right enough.

“She is well but could do with careful handling.”

“I will see to it. We are thankful you were at hand, Captain. I trust you will tie up any loose ends.” Damn, she missed nothing, but he was far from done with Lansdowne. The man would rue the day he ever set his sights on his Katherine.

He locked his gaze with her. “I will see to it, my lady.” Robert would deal with the marquis, though not in a way that would leave Katherine open to speculation. It ruled out duelling, but there were other ways to run a quarry to ground.

Chapter 8

Making sure the thick black veil covered her face, Kitty exited the hackney to stand in front of the imposing facade of Preston House. She swallowed and stared at the lion's head knocker and cast a last figurative glance over her shoulder. Kitty screwed up her courage and before she could change her mind, grasped the knocker and slammed it down. The sound reverberated through her, and she stood frozen on the step. Heart seemingly in her throat, she waited for the door to be answered and in the same instance praying it wasn't.

A servant admitted her.

"I'm here to see Captain Vaughn," she commanded like she wasn't blatantly flouting social convention.

To his credit, the footman's face remained neutral. "And who should I say is calling?"

"I give no name," she said with a bravery she didn't feel.

That received a raised eyebrow. "Please wait here."

She studied the entrance hall, twisting her fingers in the folds of her gown, wondering if she had erred. A million possibilities opened up to her. Perhaps he was out. Robert could be attending the Rotham's rout. Or at the Beckingham musical, like the rest of her family. She had pleaded to feeling under the weather. Her father had accepted it, but with a dry comment that she was turning into an invalid, his analytical gaze noting the guilty flush staining her cheeks. But it was the only way Kitty could meet Robert, and talk to him plainly, without fear of interruption.

A door to the left opened from the antechamber, and the man in question stepped out, looking dishevelled but relaxed in his shirtsleeves, his hair sticking out at odd angles.

"I will see the lady, Johnson, you may go."

He held open a door wider and ushered Katherine inside, and it closed behind her. She breathed a sigh of relief to be out of sight of prying eyes.

"Thank you for seeing me," she began, lifting the cloying veil off her face. She hated that thing, but it was a necessity.

He crossed his arms over his chest and snapped, "Damn it, Katherine, are

you dead set on ruin, no matter what the cost?”

The attack surprised Kitty, stealing her breath, and she took an instinctive step back. “No one knows I am here, and at any rate, what do I have to lose?”

Robert released a harsh laugh. “Your common sense, followed by your reputation in short order, my dear.”

Then, appearing to remember himself, Robert inhaled sharply and took a step back, running a hand through his hair, the end behind his ear curling haphazardly, and she smiled at the familiar sight. But when he turned back to face her, his stern expression made that smile fade.

He gestured to a chair, and she took a seat and settled her skirts before he was also seated. “What can I do for you, Miss Thorpe?”

She fought the urge to shift uneasily, the weight of his too-knowing gaze brought to bear on her, but she treated him with the same directness in turn.

“I want your assurance that you don’t intend to go through with this ridiculous farce of a marriage.”

Silence reigned between them, and it was hardly comforting.

His long, elegant fingers steepled as he surveyed her over them. Kitty stared back, unflinching.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, Miss Thorpe, but a notice has been posted, and the wedding will take place as agreed on the first of December, by common licence.”

She flinched at the cold, formal use of her name.

“You are insane,” she snapped, climbing to her feet to pace. It was beyond bearing. Robert also stood, the chair scraping against the floor and clasped his hands behind his back.

“One other matter... Would you prefer to reside in town at Preston House, or I have a modest country estate—”

“You are thinking of travelling in winter?” God, the roads would be rutted to hell, and she would have her teeth shaken loose before journey end. Her thoughts must have been showing on her face as Robert quickly forestalled further concerns.

“Harkham Hall is just a few miles outside London,” he interjected.

Kitty let out a bitter chuckle. She understood now, already he was banishing her to the country, ashamed of the wife who was foisted upon him. What was that saying again? Out of sight, out of mind? This wasn’t going to plan at all, but then nothing had gone to plan since she had started this misbegotten enterprise of another season. “You have planned for everything,

it seems.”

Robert’s brows lowered, but the scowl was more of a puzzled mein rather than ferocious.

“With the exception that I don’t want to marry you!” Kitty snapped, her emotions boiling over.

“It was not what I intended either, Katherine, but there is no other choice but to proceed down the only path left open to us.”

She flinched at his harshness and proper tone. He couldn’t have made it clearer: Robert was marrying her because honour demanded he did his duty, not for any sentimental notions.

Her temper sparked. “Of course, you have arranged everything to your liking. You want me to jump to, with an ‘Aye, Captain’ or ‘Nay, Captain’. I am not one of your sailors, and you are not giving orders from your quarterdeck,” she spat. The pain of knowing she was unwanted was only surpassed by the knowledge she had unwittingly trapped Robert. It felt like her chest was being pried apart and Kitty fought to maintain her composure.

Robert’s gaze went skywards. “Lord save me from stubborn women,” he muttered and braced his hands on the corners of his desk.

His dark, soulful eyes drilled into her, and the air went out of the room as his presence swelled.

“Mark me well, Katherine, the combined duty of our families will propel you down that aisle and you will make your vows before man and God,” he bit out.

Kitty lifted her chin in the face of his words, and a shiver raced down her spine like a finger moving over the keys of the piano forte. His face hardened into a stern, unyielding cast. Kitty had to fight not to retreat. His anger thrummed between them. She would be married to a man she loved who didn’t love her in return. The realisation stopped her dead. She loved him, had never stopped loving him. Had tried to distort that tender emotion to hate.

“Are you well, Kitten, you have turned pale?”

She swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat. “Quite well, Captain Vaughn.”

The empty, bleak future opened up in front of her, and she shook her head. There was no way out. She could fight him, she could withstand the pressure from her family, but with their forces combined it would be a losing battle. All other avenues closed, Kitty accepted the reality of her situation. It wasn’t just a bad dream, it didn’t evaporate when the sun rose to banish the

darkness. It was her new reality.

She closed her eyes, and a stronger wave of nausea hit her. “I shouldn’t have come. I apologise for inconveniencing you, Captain Vaughn. I will see myself out.”

She turned for the door, the only thing on her mind to escape and mourn for what might have once been between them. Now she was to be an unedifying duty, to be borne and endured.

A gentle hand on her arm halted her.

“Katherine, you are as pale as a sheet and shaking. Please allow me to see you home.”

The concern in his voice almost overset her. Almost.

“I am not your wife yet, Captain, I am still at liberty to ignore your commands no matter how well-meaning,” she said, proud when she could calmly meet his eyes and jerked her arm free, sailing through the door with her head held high.

The wedding was a strained and quiet affair with the odd whisper plaguing Katherine’s progress to stand beside him, in front of the minister, but from her lack of reaction and poise, one would have thought she was deaf to them. Robert clenched his jaw. If anyone dared say one word against her in his presence, he would treat them to a full broadside in short order. It was only as she drew closer he saw the dark smudges under her wide eyes. She looked washed-out and wan, barely speaking a word more than the required wedding vows.

“Miss Katherine Georgianna Thorpe, wilt thou take this man...”

The tempo of the blood pounding in Robert’s ears increased, and he found himself holding his breath.

“I do.”

The words were so softly spoken, he had to strain to hear. No one else would have detected the slight catch to her voice, but he did. Over the first hurdle, the tension in his shoulder’s eased, and the remainder of the ceremony was completed without incident. He wanted to comfort her, tell her all would be well, but didn’t know how to breach the impenetrable wall she had surrounded herself with.

After a suitable wedding breakfast, the bride and groom quietly slipped away, into a carriage that would take them to Harkham Hall.

He handed his new wife of a few hours into the carriage, and she

remained unusually quiet. It unnerved him. She released his hand like his touch scalded her and immediately settled in the farthest corner. The carriage jerked forward into motion, and Robert pasted on a strained smile.

Katherine's face was partially averted. He took his time to study this new wife of his, so familiar and yet so different. He stretched his feet out in front of him, crossing his legs at the ankles. She was every inch the composed lady, if not for the occasional tell-tale fidget of fiddling the ring he'd placed on her finger.

Still, he needed to at least strive to make conversation. "Your family appeared pleased with the ceremony." How inane his stilted attempt sounded.

Kitty's shoulders tensed but her gaze remained fixed out of the window, and he strove for a patience that he was not known for.

"Of course they would be, they are happy I'm no longer an embarrassment to them. I'm your problem now."

"Feeling sorry for yourself, Katherine?"

"Yes."

Her blunt but honest rebuttal took him by surprise but shouldn't have done.

Was being wed to him such a burden that she could not even pretend happiness? An old insecurity raised its ugly head before he could temper his response. "Still hankering after that title?"

She twisted violently towards him, and he was shocked at the tears glittering in her eyes.

"Let us get one thing straight, *husband*." The words were pushed through gritted teeth, her clenched fist shaking. "I have never desired a title. I am more concerned I have tied myself to a man who has made his lack of regard for my person and morals plain at every opportunity, who my family has treated ill, I'm ashamed to admit. But for better or for worse, I am yours to do with as you please."

Her eyes kindling sapphire flames, she stared up at him with an intensity that took his breath away and silenced him. Fringed by long, dark lashes, they stood out in stark contrast with her pale complexion. The mask was gone, and the emotions he found there were raw and unfiltered. And his stomach knotted with what he was seeing. Fear.

"I have experienced the lash of your tongue, Captain, in our skirmishes, and I worry at the anger you still hold against me."

Robert blinked, instantly regretting his callous words. He couldn't have

been more thunderstruck if she had proceeded to dance a jig while balancing a tea tray on her head in front of the Prince Regent.

What he had mistaken as a fit of petulance was actually fear. His conscience writhed, and he was forced to reflect on his own behaviour, and it did not paint a pretty picture. He should be flogged at the gratings for some of the cruel things he had not only thought but said to her face. He'd practically had to bully the poor girl to the altar, even if his intentions had been honourable. If it had been Preston, no doubt he could have achieved the same result but with persuasion and style. Robert couldn't blame her, and though she might no longer love him, the fickle emotion having perished in the inferno of their passionate youth, theirs could be a strong marriage, built on respect and liking and desire. But that part would have to wait until she had become accustomed to the idea.

“Katherine—”

The carriage wheel hit a deep rut and bucked Katherine from her seat. Robert caught her before she hit the floor. With a grunt, he hefted her upwards and pulled her next to him on the seat. But her eyes captured his absolute attention, so expressive, but secrets still lurked behind those blue depths. The usual unruly curl broke free from her coiffure, and he brushed it behind her ear. It was telling when she didn't move away. Perhaps there was hope for them after all.

Up close, he could see the smudges under her eyes. “Have you been sleeping, Kitty?”

She made to push away from him, but he held her, inspiration striking.

“I'd wager not,” he coaxed. “Why don't you rest awhile?”

“But,” she started to argue and made a move to lift herself again.

The reins on Robert's temper were fast fraying. Even when he was trying to be selfless she'd argue. And believe him, having her warm little body snuggled into his side when he could not act upon it was going to be a kind of torture, specifically designed in the realm of Hades.

He fixed her with a look he usually reserved for cocksure junior officers.

“Rest,” he ordered sternly.

For a moment, he didn't think she would acquiesce, but slowly, her eyes never leaving his face, she lowered her head to the hollow of his shoulder, and he secured her to his side.

“You have no reason to fear me, Katherine. We will talk after dinner. Would that put your mind at ease?”

“Yes, thank you.”

In no time at all, the stiff line of her body eased and her breathing evened out. Forget tired, the poor girl was exhausted and wound tighter than a spinning top. He held her closer, loving the feel and weight of her in his arms again. The sweet scent of lavender teased his nose, and the silken hair tickled his cheek. Unable to help himself, he turned his head and pressed a chaste kiss to her brow. She shifted, sighing sleepily, and his cravat suddenly became a noose. His loins stirred, and he bit the inside of his cheek, stifling an agonised groan. There would be none of that. After so many misunderstandings, they were now bound for life, and they could either be miserable together or strive to carve out something more.

“Kitty.”

The warm pillow called to her, and Kitty curled closer, burying her face and avoiding the cold nipping at her nose and cheeks.

“Kitty, we are arriving, you need to wake up, dearest.”

Forcing open eyes that felt like they had been pasted shut, Kitty blinked, clearing away the cobwebs. A firm jaw and warm sensual lips that kicked up at the corner came into focus. She scrubbed the back of her hand over her face.

“I apologise, you must have been most uncomfortable the entire journey.” She righted herself, and tried to regain her bearings. “Do I look like a complete fright?”

A molten gaze raked over her. Robert lazed in his corner, and an answering warmth coiled within her.

“Deliciously tousled actually.”

Kitty’s cheeks heated. “You are hopeless.” She sniffed but was secretly charmed by his appraisal, though torn by her reaction. Should she be pleased?

They tumbled down the drive, curving round the bend to reveal a modest country house, by some standards. It had a smart brick facade, the windows gleaming in the bright winter sunshine. The carriage came to a stop, and Robert helped her down with a guiding hand on the small of her back. They moved towards the assembled staff. Kitty ran an approving eye over them. Smartly turned out, they looked the part, shining like recently minted pennies, no doubt anxious to meet the new owner of Harkham Hall.

Pushing away her melancholy, Kitty forced her lips into what she hoped was a warm, tentative smile.

The butler stepped forward. An anxious air coiled about him despite his aloof, competent demeanour. “Captain Vaughn, I hope you have had a pleasant journey. My name is Crosby. We have your rooms ready.”

Robert cleared his throat. “Thank you for your forethought, Crosby. I would like to present my wife, Mrs Vaughn.”

Not a muscle moved on Crosby’s face, and Kitty sensed they were being judged. She tilted her chin up a notch, determined not to be found wanting. First impressions were important, with servants being either a great help or hindrance to a new mistress

“Ma’am.” He bowed. “On behalf of the staff, may we wish you every happiness.”

“Thank you, Crosby, please pass on my thanks for their kind thoughts.”

They made their way down the assembly line, meeting the thinly veiled curiosity of the staff, and she fixed a smile firmly in place. She was introduced to Mrs Mellor, the housekeeper, with a trim figure and a kind, open face. If the house was a reflection of her tidy appearance, they would get along famously.

Together, they got through the ordeal and turned to more practical things.

“What time have you prepared dinner for, Mrs Allen?” Kitty asked.

“The meal will be ready for half past five, Mrs Vaughn,” the cook, a chatterbox of a woman, replied before rethinking. “But I can push it back if you would prefer, ma’am.”

Barely enough time to change, but Kitty was beginning to vaguely hear the first pangs of hunger from not consuming anything all day but a piece of dry toast. She was quick to reassure her—it didn’t do to upset a cook. “That will be perfect, thank you, Mrs Allen.”

Robert leaned down and put his lips near her ear. “I will see you at three bells, Katherine.”

His breath fluttered the curls on her nape, and a stab desire shot through her, his voice and touch hinting at an intimacy that they would soon be expected to share.

Kitty shook the feelings away and shot him an askance look over her shoulder. “Three bells?”

Robert tugged at his neckcloth, and for some reason, the sight charmed her.

“Apologies, force of habit, it is a navy term for half past five.”

Robert didn’t offer anything more and, marshalling her thoughts, Kitty

put her best foot forward. “Mrs Mellor, would you kindly show me to my chamber. It has been a rather exciting day.”

“This way, Mrs Vaughn.”

She led the way up a staircase, and Kitty stepped through the portal. It was a large, airy room, the furniture made from a light rosewood, and Spillers, her ladies’ maid, was already in the process of packing away her garments.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs Vaughn?” the housekeeper asked, hovering with an anxious air to please her new mistress.

“No, I have all I need, Mrs Mellor, thank you.”

The door clicked shut, and Kitty was left alone with her thoughts and studiously ignored the connecting door that would lead to the master bedroom.

A fire in the grate cast the furniture in a cheery glow and welcomed her farther into the chamber, as did the comforting presence of Spillers. She peeled off her outer garments and tossed the bonnet onto the seat of the bay window.

“Did you have a good journey down, Spillers?”

“Oh, yes, Miss Kit—” Spillers broke off with a giggle. “My apologies. I should say Mrs Vaughn. I was most comfortable.”

The name still sounded foreign to Kitty’s own ears, and she fought a grimace.

“And have you been suitably situated?” Kitty asked, peering through the frosted glass at the manicured gardens at the front of the house.

Spillers launched into how the staff had been most welcoming and that Mrs Mellor ran a tight ship. Kitty nodded absently before jerking herself out of her thoughts.

“Spillers, has the blue satin been pressed?”

“Yes, Miss Kitty, it was done yesterday.”

“Excellent, I will wear it for dinner. Look sharp, we need to be ready for half past the hour.”

“It’s country hours, Miss Kitty, it will take some getting used to.” Spillers sniffed, not hiding her thoughts on country living, having resided most of her life in London. Despite her sombre mood Kitty found herself fighting a smile.

“Yes, it will,” Kitty murmured and gave herself over to Spillers’ expert ministrations.

Kitty rushed into the dining room with unladylike haste and a flush on her cheeks. She knew how punctual Robert liked to be. She blamed it on his navy background.

She skittered to a halt as he turned from the window where he had obviously been nursing his claret. "Apologies for keeping you waiting, I got lost." In fact, she'd had to find a passing footman to point her in the right direction or else go from room to room, hoping to stumble across the correct one.

Robert stared at her, his gaze running up and down the length of her body in the most peculiar way. Feeling quite on the spot and conscious of his intense scrutiny, she smoothed her gown.

"Is there something wrong with my appearance, sir?"

Robert cleared his throat and jolted into action. "You are most becoming in that gown, Katherine. Are you ready to be seated?" He gave her a strained smile and proffered her his arm.

At that moment, a low rumble came from her belly, and mortification consumed her, but she carried on. "Yes, thank you."

Robert made no comment, seating her at one end of the table before taking his rightful seat at the head. The length of polished wood yawned between them and reflected the bitter state of her marriage to date.

The meal was a stilted affair. She was aware of the constant keen eyes of the servants. Other than the passing of the odd comment on the excellence of the white soup and beef pie, they kept their own counsel. Kitty breathed a sigh of relief when the apple and cinnamon tart was at last served, though nerves lodged a ball under her ribcage, and she failed to do the delicious meal justice.

"Thank Mrs Allen for the excellent meal, it was quite restorative after the long day." Kitty rested her attention to Robert. "If you will forgive me, I will retire and leave you to your port."

"I will follow you shortly, Katherine."

Now Kitty was waiting, Robert's final words revolving in her head. She had dismissed Spillers after being helped out of her evening dress and was left anxiously pacing in some frivolous lace concoction that Aunt Emmie had insisted on purchasing and packing for her. It was, however, hardly practical for this time of year, and Kitty had covered it with a wrapper. Her dark hair had been brushed out to a glossy shine and tied back with a ribbon. Did

Robert intend to visit her for their talk as he had proposed in the carriage? If he did, what were his expectations? Would he insist on their wedding night? Did she want him to?

Kitty recognised that her runaway thoughts were getting the better of her like they had on the ride over, and she forced a steadying breath. She would not mar this day further with ill-timed animosity. Shame flayed her when she remembered her bitter emotional outburst, but the strain of the day had taken its toll until she had snapped. How their hasty marriage had come about could not be changed, but she wanted to be a good wife to Robert, a wife he deserved, so he had no complaint that she had been foisted upon him. Their marriage would succeed or fail now, based on their own actions going forward.

A light tap at the connecting door startled her out of her maudlin mood.

“Come in.”

Robert appeared in the doorway, clothed in a crimson dressing gown, and she swallowed at the sight of his bare feet poking out from beneath the hem. Somehow, without his clothes he appeared bigger, his presence more pronounced, though she was mystified how he managed it. He lingered at the threshold, appearing unsure as to the next step he should take. “Are you too tired to talk, Katherine?”

Bless him, he was offering her a reprieve, and she was severely tempted to take it, but they needed to find some even footing. “No, I’m not too tired, Robert.”

He gave a clipped nod. “Good.”

He then disappeared from the doorway, and Kitty heard him moving about in the background. Her courage wavered. Perhaps he had changed his mind? Her worry proved ill-founded as he reappeared with a tray carrying a pair of glasses and a steaming jug.

“Would you like a glass of spiced cider?” Robert’s lips twisted wryly. “Mrs Mellor’s own recipe. She insisted it was just the ticket to help calm nervous ladies, whatever she meant by those dubious words. She wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“I would love one, thank you.” Kitty laughed, tickled by the ridiculous image of Robert being waylaid by a snip of a woman and unsure how to disentangle himself.

She drifted to the sofa in front of the fire, tucking her feet under her body, and waited for him to join her. He offered her a glass, and the delicate spices

teased her senses.

“There we go,” he said, taking the seat next to her.

She nervously tapped her fingertips against the glass.

Robert took a sip and hummed in appreciation. “Actually, that is rather good.”

“I apologise for my words earlier in the carriage, it wasn’t very well done by me.”

“You were overwrought. A common occurrence in brides, so I’ve been told. Wedding jitters, I believe they are called—”

Kitty snorted, interrupting him mid-flow. “More like a lack of sleep playing havoc with my temper and you bore the brunt of it.”

He captured her hand. “You were worried about your future, and after our prior skirmishes, I cannot blame you.”

Katherine opened her mouth to interject. The blame was as much hers as it was his, but Robert forestalled her by holding up his hand.

“No, allow me to say my piece. I know that this marriage did not come about how you would wish it.”

Katherine didn’t even come anywhere close to stifling a wince. No, she knew he didn’t desire the marriage.

“But I promise you, you will never want for anything, and I will strive to be a good husband.”

Robert fulfilling his duty was never in doubt. She was sure he would be the most indulgent of husbands, and she would have everything but his affection, his love. It left a bitter taste in her mouth, and she reached for the cider to wash it away. The warmth slid down her throat and bloomed in her belly, and she had a little more. Sweet with a hint of tartness, it really was very good.

“I will not press you for my conjugal rights until you are ready,” he rushed out and drained the last of his cider.

Kitty was dumbfounded, but the overriding emotion was disappointment. She wanted Robert. To be his wife in truth, and if he could fulfil his duty, she could do hers.

“I’m sure you are very tired. I will leave you now.”

“Robert, wait.” Kitty placed her hand on her sleeve to halt him as he made to stand, and the flesh jumped at her touch. Fustian! She was nervous, her fingers were cold and shaky. But it was good nerves, mingled with anticipation, swirling throughout her like eddies. “I want to be a good wife to

you, too. I'm no cowering schoolroom miss, and though—"

She was babbling and cursed her wayward tongue, but Robert's rapt attention encouraged her to go on.

"I want us to start our marriage the right way and have good memories of our wedding day."

"Are you sure, Katherine?" he asked huskily, his thumb rubbing over the delicate skin of her knuckles. "Are you *absolutely* sure?"

Kitty stopped dancing around the truth and seized it with both hands. "I'm sure. We are married and we desire each other, and if nothing else we can have this, just for us."

"Very well." He broke contact and poured another glass of cider, frowning.

An energy Kitty struggled to identify throbbed from him. She fidgeted, the doubts circling her, shouting louder and louder. Didn't he want her after all? She didn't know what to do. This was so different from last time, where they had been swept away by the exuberance of youthful passion.

"Robert, I-I haven't...that is, I don't know what to do next."

Warmth entered his eyes, turning them into molten pools, and he cupped her elbows, running his hands up her arms, leaving a trail of goosepimples in their wake.

"It's all right, Kitten." He paused by the bed and held out his hand.

Kitty gulped. The very large big bed. He was still offering her a way out. She followed his actions, finishing the last of her cider, and stood, the softness of her nightclothes brushing against her leg, allowing that warm happy glow to fill her up. In a beautiful moment of absolute trust, she placed her hand in his. Robert drew her unresistingly into the shelter of his body. Kitty's gaze was fixed on the dark chest hair peeking out of the top of his dressing gown. Robert's physicality had never caused her to fear. What scared her was what happened when the passion burnt off and there were only ashes left. And she became an unwanted inconvenience.

Her heart clenched. Tolerated.

A finger curled under her chin and tilted her chin upwards, and she found Robert studying her intently.

"Where did you go?"

She wasn't ready to share her thoughts yet, to lay herself bare to him, so she pretended to misunderstand his meaning. "I'm right in front of you?"

Robert raised his brows, and Kitty fought the urge to squirm.

“Hmmm, is that right? You’re hiding from me, Katherine.” His eyes narrowed. “I don’t like it.”

He lightly grasped the edge of her nightrail, giving it a light tug. “I want to see all of you. Will you let me, Katherine?”

There was absolutely no mistaking his meaning, but there was something *more* than the face-value interpretation of the words. Her heart rate increased, but she found her courage and placed her palm over the patch of bare skin on his upper chest.

Robert’s nostrils flared, and his embrace tightened. A thrill trilled through her at her power as a woman, and if there was ever any doubt of Robert’s desire for her, it was cast out at the feel of his arousal pressing into her stomach.

The knowledge made her bold, and she quipped, “Only if I can see you in return.”

Robert let out a bark of laughter. “You only have to ask, my dear.”

Kitty forced herself not to react to the endearment. He meant to be kind, and she pasted on a smile. The fabric was pushed from his broad shoulders and slid sensuously from his body to pool at his feet, and Kitty forgot how to breathe. He was all lean muscle and sinew. Patches of skin that were bronzed had been kissed by the sun and paled at specific junctures where clothing would usually lie. She kept her eyes trained on his face, not looking below his waist.

Robert cocked his head, and Kitty understood his silent question. The wrapper fell away, and her ears echoed with Robert’s sharp inhalation. Her fingers trembling, she reached for the edge of her gown. Oh, for goodness sake, one would think this was the first time experiencing the marriage act. But where before lay ignorance, now she knew, and somehow, that made their action more deliberate. No, meaningful. She knew exactly what it would mean to welcome Robert into her bed. In a decided motion, she tore it off over her head, hissing as the cold air danced upon her exposed flesh. His large hands cupped her shoulders, hot to the touch. They moved over her flanks, his strong, dexterous fingers tracing trails of fire, and her nipples hardened to aching points that begged to be touched.

Robert’s eyes devoured her hungrily. “I can’t tell you how much I have longed for this, Kitty,” he murmured, and his hands grasped her derriere.

Wanton desire shot through her, her knees threatening to give way.

“You are so beautiful.”

He lowered his head and kissed her, different to before. What had been hard and frenzied was now... Kitty's mind scrambled for a word. Coaxing. He pulled back slightly, and there was barely a gap between them.

"I can practically hear the cogs turning in that busy mind of yours, Kitty." His words teased her lips. "Stop thinking and just *feel*. Kiss me, Kitten."

Kitty stood on her tiptoes and fused her mouth to his and, duelling with his tongue, she moaned into his mouth. His hand reached out to take the weight of her bosom, and he flicked his thumbs over the overly sensitised nipple, the other over her hip, lightly brushing between her thighs. He stroked, and his fingers slid between her damp folds, readying her for possession. Kitty inhaled sharply. Her legs gave, and they tumbled back onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

Robert rose on his arms above her, their differences becoming more pronounced. They were hip to hip and chest to chest. Her body was soft and curved while Robert's was hard with sharp angles, the crisp hair covering his body rasping against her skin. He made her feel delicate and feminine. With great care, he entered her, and Kitty braced herself for the piercing pain. She blinked. There was none—not this time.

Robert shuddered, caging her body with heated flesh, and held still. She frowned, so still in fact, she worried he had forgotten the next step. Experimentally, she wiggled, becoming used to the feel of his body.

Robert released a tortured groan. "Gods, Kitten, are you determined to unman me?"

Kitty froze, mortified. "I'm...I'm sorry," she stuttered and tried to shift away from him.

His eyes widened, and in a blink of an eye, he clamped her hips. "No, not like that, sweetheart. You feel good, too good." Desperation coloured his words and broke through her hurt pride. "I want this to be good for you, too."

A deep blush covered his cheekbones. His words touched her, and little sparks of hope stirred. Kitty ruthlessly pushed them aside. There was no need to overthink this. Tonight was theirs. She pressed a searing kiss to his lips, her hands tangling in his hair. "Then show me how it can be good."

He kissed the tip of her nose. She hadn't thought her nose particularly kissable before. But he didn't stop there, he kissed a heated trail. Her cheeks, her throat, and over her breast, breaking off only long enough to torment a lone nipple with his teeth and tongue.

Kitty groaned, and her hips surged upwards.

The sensations dimmed, and she breathed heavily. "Do that again."

"Do what?" Robert asked, pure devilry dancing in his eyes. "Do this?"

He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and her eyes drifted shut, flickers of pleasure arrowing straight to her lower belly.

He slanted her a calculating look and whispered in her ear, "Or this?"

Robert's hips drew back, and Kitty opened her mouth to protest when he surged back and drove all cognisant thought from her mind. She curled her fingers into his shoulders.

"Both," she gasped.

He grinned down at her, a smudge of white in the darkness. "As my lady commands."

A haze descended, and the bliss built in a crescendo of sensual moans. Fears and doubts were flung away, and nothing existed beyond reaching the pinnacle that lay elusively out of reach. Both of them strained, reaching for the same goal. Robert's hand drifted to where their bodies were joined, the pad of his thumb snaking over a small button of flesh.

Kitty's body snapped taut, her legs encircling his waist, pulling him closer. She kneaded his shoulders and muscles and threw her hips up against him.

"Let go, Kitten," Robert urged through gritted teeth, thrusting faster.

Her body was tightening, climbing higher and higher.

Robert's thumb moved with frantic urgency. "Now, Kitty!"

Her back bowed, and the dam broke. She screamed her climax into the hollow of his shoulder, the release verging on pain, pleasure running through her, rampant like a wildfire. Every muscle in her body clenched tight, and she clung to him in the eye of the storm.

A husky groan signalled his climax, and he went rigid above her. They collapsed, replete and spent in a tangle of exhausted limbs.

By gradual degrees, awareness settled over Kitty, a hand slowly stroking her flank, and the lean masculine body stretched out the length of her back. She couldn't move a muscle.

"And so I bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate, conformable as other household Kates."

Kitty frowned, puzzling over his words, and then turned over in his arms to face him. His eyes were closed, his countenance relaxed, but the corners of his mouth kicked upwards, practically radiating masculine satisfaction.

"Did you just call me a shrew?" she huffed, recognising the mangled

quote from Shakespeare.

A rich, masculine chuckle reverberated in his chest, and something in her belly flipped at the sound.

“I wouldn’t dare.” Robert leaned down, and she arched to receive his kiss and hummed with pleasure.

He brushed the chaotic mane of hair off her face, the tender motion warming her. “I want you to be happy, Katherine.” His eyes burnt with vulnerability. Their rediscovered intimacy thrummed between them like it was a living, breathing thing. “Do you think you can be happy in our marriage?”

A cold chill washed over her, and she chose her next words very carefully. “I think that we have as much chance of making our marriage a success as anyone else.” To have a successful marriage, all they needed was mutual respect and liking, and if they were fortunate, desire and affection.

Kitty settled back into her pillow. Love never came into the equation, and she would be foolish to wish for more.

Chapter 9

Kitty slowly stirred from her slumber. It was a warm and comfortable nest, and she was drifting between that delicious limbo of awareness and sleep. She rolled, her hand searching for Robert only to be met by cold, empty air. Then reality crashed back in. She and Robert had settled into a polite routine, and apart from mealtimes, their paths rarely crossed until he came to her at night, and that emptiness gnawed at her each day.

As she had suspected upon arrival, Miss Mellor kept a tight ship, and the household ran like clockwork. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Kitty was run off her feet with Christmas preparations. So little time to do everything that was expected of her: the boxes for Saint Stephen's Day to gift the staff and tenants and securing a haunch of venison for Christmas Day itself. She'd only had a few days' grace before callers had started to arrive. They had been invited to several parties, and Robert had dutifully escorted her, and she had dressed hoping to gain his notice, in one of her new gowns that had a lower neckline than she was strictly comfortable with. A dutiful if somewhat distracted, "You look lovely, dear," had been her reward.

It was the twentieth of December, the day her family had been expected to arrive, however, all but Aunt Emmie had chosen to stay in London. A heavy stone sat on Kitty's chest at the thought of her first Christmas without them. Disappointment settled in her limbs, and she flopped back against the down pillows.

Well, she was damned if she was going to be melancholy today.

She kicked off the covers and instantly regretted it at the rush of frigid air. She rubbed her arms, diamond glints of snow dancing upon the frosted windows panes, the fine dusting during the night giving the impression that God had been playing with a giant sieve and flour. She glanced at the ominous grey sky, heavy with snow and unchanged for the last few days. If the weather broke, it might prevent her from venturing out to collect evergreens they would need to bring colour to the house. Another task to be completed sooner rather than later.

She shivered and dressed for riding. Madame had come through in the end and made her a habit that was both a thing of beauty and practical. The

midnight-blue velvet had a soft and luxurious touch, and the high collar edged with gold embroidery helped keep out the cold. It was a pity there was no one to see it. Instead of cutting a dash in Hyde Park, it would see its debut at a sleepy country estate.

Robert had been avoiding her, and she saw no reason to inform him of her plans, a scarf wrapped tightly around her neck, something Madame would have a fit at if she saw her creation so maligned. Grabbing a slice of toast and jam from the breakfast tray, she forced it down as she made her way to the stable, ignoring the surprised looks of the footmen.

“Good morning, Higgins,” she said cheerfully upon entering the stables, inhaling the familiar scents of hay, leather, and horse. “How are you today?”

“I am well, ma’am,” the head groom responded, doffing his cap, kindly eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Is there a suitable animal to ride, something faster than a slug?” She chuckled.

Higgins rubbed his chin. “Um...”

His gaze darted over her shoulder to the main house, and Kitty fought the urge to mimic the action.

“Would a spirited mare suit your purpose, ma’am? She’s in need of a good ride.”

Kitty’s mouth curved in a smile. “That sounds ideal.”

“I’ll bring her round to the main house for you, ma’am.” He indicated.

Katherine had already begun to shake her head. “No need, I will wait here.”

A look of pure puzzlement swept over his face, but it was quickly gone. It was not his place to comment on the strange goings-on of the big house or upon his master’s guests.

“Very well, ma’am,” he agreed, then moved off to ready the animal.

Kitty spent her time visiting with the other horses, stroking their velvety noses and offering the odd sugar cube that she had hidden in her pocket, to the recipient’s appreciative whinny.

“’Ere we are, miss.”

Katherine twisted to see Higgins leading a dappled grey mare, her haunches the colour of thunderclouds, a stripe gracing her forehead, and three half socks. She was as pretty as a picture.

“Oooh,” Kitty breathed softly, “she is a beauty.”

She reached forward to stroke the stripe streaking down her velvety

muzzle, but the mare skittered, pawing the cobbles.

“She’s a might lively, ma’am,” the groom commented, casting a dubious eye on the restive mare. “Are you sure you don’t wish for a quieter mount?”

“She will suit my needs well enough. Please take her round to the mounting block,” Katherine directed. “I wish to ride alone this morning.”

The man gaped at her. “But...but it is set to snow, ma’am.”

Kitty’s gaze flicked to the heavy grey sky on the horizon, but the patch of blue on the left beckoned her like a siren’s call. “Perhaps not, if looks fair enough.”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am, but my knee has been giving me trouble all morning, just like it always does before the weather turns bad.”

Kitty offered him a kind smile. “I’m sure I will be quite fine. If the weather does worsen, I’ll make for home post-haste.”

With his brow stilled furrowed, Higgins scratched his head. “If you insist, ma’am.”

She gave a resolute nod. “I do.”

Mounted, the mare skittered sideways, tugging at the reins to get her head down. Thankfully, Kitty was wise to such tricks, and after a brief tour up and down the courtyard, the horse settled. She touched her heels to the mare’s flanks, and the animal eagerly responded, moving at a smart trot out of the courtyard. The frigid air tasted fresh and slapped Kitty in the face. For one moment, she thought to retreat and curl up with a good book with a cup of chocolate and a roaring fire. But she wasn’t so spineless and it was so freeing to be up on a horse again, it mattered not that she was alone, and it gave her the freedom to explore.

She rubbed her cheek against the muffler, taking comfort from the soft woollen garment, and plunged onwards, determined to tour the park before the weather closed in on them and the snow hid the potential obstacles and pitfalls.

Clear of the house, she pulled up and leaned down to pat her mount’s neck. She whispered softly under her breath, “What do you say, girl, are you happy to be out of that stable and ready for a good run?”

The mare nickered in agreement. A wide grin split Kitty’s face, and she tightened her grip on the reins and urged the mare into a gallop, her carefree laughter whipped away by the wind.

Robert sat at his desk, twirling his pen between his thumb and forefinger,

deep in thought, stunned when he tensed for the roll and swell of the tide and it didn't come. And he was reminded that he was not at his desk aboard the *Defiance*. He'd lost his way in the stack of letters he was attempting to read. A short list of the different estates for sale finally caught his interest, but his mind wasn't attending—a pair of laughing blue eyes fringed with thick, black lashes kept intruding. That woman was a siren.

Standing, he slowly rounded the desk and leaned down to stoke the fire. Perhaps he should ask for Kitty's opinion. Always being a sensible type of woman, she might be able to provide a new perspective. There was a noise coming from the hall, and a bitter draught swept through, targeting the house's gaps and cracks. He shivered and made his way to the door.

"Preston, how are you?" Robert greeted his cousin cheerfully, surprised by the genuine affection he felt upon seeing the man.

Preston knocked the snow from his hat and shoulders before offering his greatcoat to the waiting footman. "Glad to be out of this damned weather," he responded, "I'm thankful that we were only a few miles out when the weather closed in."

Robert took his cousin's offered hand—it was a solid lump of ice—and fought a wince from passing over his features. "Damn, you are frozen. Come by the fire and thaw yourself."

Preston snorted. "I never thought to see you become a nursemaid." He was led into the warmed room and made a beeline for the fire, holding his hands out with a grateful sigh. "Are the Thorpes joining us as well? They will have trouble getting through in this weather."

Robert was fast to allay his concern. "Lady Mowbray arrived shortly before you but preferred to thaw out in the comfort of her room. Unfortunately, Lady Thorpe fears it would harm her younger daughter's chances to depart from the social whirl, so they have decided to reside in the capital."

Looked like he hadn't been all that successful in keeping that edge out of his voice after all. "And how did your bride take the news?"

"Gracefully," Robert said shortly, running a hand through his hair and leaving it sticking up at angles.

"But..." Preston gestured with his brandy glass.

Robert's eyes narrowed. Blast his eyes, the man missed nothing.

"But she misses them."

"And how does marriage suit you?"

“We are still finding our way. Do you have the package I commissioned?” Robert hedged; it didn’t feel right sharing the difficulties of his marriage with Preston, cousin or not. It was none of Katherine’s making either. There was an awkwardness between them that neither of them knew how to mend. He hoped time would remedy this.

“I have it.” Preston reached under his frock coat and produced a small square parcel wrapped in brown paper, handing it over to Robert.

“Thank you,” he said and slid it into a desk drawer, locking it.

“A gift for your bride?” Preston added slyly.

Robert shot him a fulminating glare then turned to more important business. “What of the other matter?”

Preston’s face hardened, his amber gaze morphing into that of a predator. “That has been satisfactorily concluded. Between us, we bought a considerable amount of Lansdowne’s debt. If he so much as looks in Katherine’s direction, we will ruin him.”

“Good,” Robert said darkly. He stared into the fire. That was at least something; he could put Katherine at ease. She would no longer have to fear that bastard’s attentions.

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Robert called, unable to smirk at Preston’s wince. He hadn’t quite mastered his volume or wrapped his head around the fact he no longer had to be heard above the wind and roar of cannon.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Captain Vaughn.” The head groom entered.

Robert struggled to remember his name. It began with ‘H’, didn’t it?

He was twisting his cap in his hands. “It is Mrs Vaughn...”

Robert’s head jerked sharply at his wife’s name. Had she had enough and finally decided to return to London? He found himself holding his breath, waiting for the groom to speak. “What is it?”

“She went out this morning, my lord, wishing to collect evergreens.”

“Women,” Preston muttered. “Never found one who had any sense.”

Robert shot him a glare, and Preston held up his hands in surrender.

“Carry on, Higgins.”

The cap was a wrinkled rag at this point. “She’s not back yet, my lord.”

Robert blinked. “Not back? What do you mean, not back? Didn’t she take a groom with her?”

The unfortunate man grimaced. “No, she said she wished to ride alone.”

Robert’s gaze darted to the window. The flurries were falling thick and

fast, the grass was no longer visible, and small piles were forming. The silly pea goose was out in this weather? Swearing violently under his breath, Robert jumped to his feet. "Saddle a horse immediately!"

Preston was shifted from his position by the fire. "Let me come with you."

Robert didn't waste time arguing or trying to change his mind. "Fine. Higgins, you know this land. Where would she go for evergreens, and what path would she take?"

Kitty shivered, wet and miserable, and her teeth chattered incessantly, threatening to shake loose. It was just her luck, the foul weather and a husband who would never love her. This was the latest in a long list of events that hadn't gone her way, despite her best intentions.

The wind howled, gripping her hood and attempting to rip it off her head. Kitty tugged her muffler closer, but it did nothing to shield her from the biting wind. She was chilled to the bone and bruised where she had tumbled onto the frozen ground. She'd pushed the unknown animal harder than she should. Free of its rider, the mare had taken off in the direction of the house and was probably back in her nice dry box. And, oh, how Kitty envied her. The snow stuck to the velvet, the long train, and the thick fabric was waterlogged and weighing her down. It made walking back hard going. The snow flurried and stung her eyes. Determinedly placing one foot in front of the other, she headed in the direction she thought the house to be. Kitty held her hand over her eyes, and hope clutched at her chest.

There was a rider up ahead.

Hopping up and down, she shouted, "Over here!" She desperately waved her arms.

The rider saw her and wheeled about. She almost sagged with relief. Water dripped from her hat and chin, her lip trembling. This was perfectly awful. A lone frigid drop made its way down the back of her habit, and she shuddered. Most unpleasant. She couldn't make out the rider's face through the sheets of snow.

"Katherine, what in the devil's name were you thinking?"

It was Robert, but what in good heavens was he doing on a horse? He loathed the creatures. She opened her mouth to ask just that, but he wasn't finished.

"Get on!" he ordered, shouting to make himself heard, his hand reaching

down.

Kitty grasped his wrist as tightly as her numb fingers would allow, and he pulled her bodily up in front of him. “Hold on!” was all the warning she received before the horse jolted into motion.

Her hands searched for purchase to keep from tumbling upon the ground. She wrapped them around his waist and gripped him tight. The lights from the house came into view, warmly twinkling like they were sharing a great joke. The jest was most certainly on her. The rain had stopped, but she was soaked through to the skin, her hair loose and threaded with mulch and leaves. She was an absolute fright. She could just imagine what her mother would say, and a sense of nonsensical hysterical laughter bubbled in her throat. God, she would have rung such a peal over her head.

“I don’t see anything humorous about this situation, wife.”

The words were muffled, snatched away by the wind. Kitty closed her eyes and leaned her head back against his shoulder. She seemed to do nothing but cause him trouble.

He growled a curse, its vehemence lifting her eyebrows.

“Don’t worry, Katherine, I’ll soon have you warm.”

Of course he would. If Robert said he would do something, he’d do it, and he was the sort of man who would always take care of his wife, even an unwanted one.

The hooves struck the cobbles, and Robert called for a groom to come and take the blasted animal. He slipped down, and Kitty went to follow suit.

She tried to move and found she couldn’t, her muscles frozen stiff and refusing to bend.

He opened his arms, and she gratefully tumbled into them, colliding with the solid weight of his chest. Damn and blast. She couldn’t feel her feet, wincing when she wriggled her toes. It was like smoking-hot needles were being slid into them.

He carried her up the steps.

“I can walk, Robert. Put me down!” She was much too heavy for him to carry.

The man must have cloth ears because he just held her tighter.

“Robert, you are overreacting, this isn’t a Gothic novel.”

When Robert didn’t slow, Kitty mentally threw up her hands. The man was impossible.

He kicked the door open to her suite, then back-heeled it shut.

“What in the devil were you thinking of, Kitten?” Robert barked, raw fury brightening his eyes. “Do you want to catch your death?”

Kitty blinked up at her towering, displeased husband, droplets of water trembling on the brim of her bonnet.

“I-t w-o-u-l-d certainly r-rid you of the i-inconvenience of being m-married to me,” she shot back, though her chattering teeth ruined the sting of her waspish comment.

“Don’t say that.” Robert’s jaw clenched, and he cupped her cheeks, his skin branding her frozen flesh with his heat, pure unadulterated emotion shining in his eyes. “Don’t you *ever* say that.”

Shock pounded through Kitty. The usually calm and controlled Captain Vaughn was not given to passionate outbursts. They stood staring at each other, the only sound the fire popping in the grate, the water from her sodden clothes dripping onto the floor.

“Christ, we need to get you out of those clothes,” he muttered, spinning her around and attacking the row of small buttons with a vengeance, cursing women’s fashion all the while. The last button came free, and the water-logged fabric slithered to the floor.

Kitty gave up and surrendered herself to his overzealous ministrations, though she had never seen him like this. The man was not content until the fire was stoked to a roaring blaze and she was tucked up in bed, sweating under a ludicrously high pile of blankets. She was more likely to expire from heat exhaustion rather than from any cold-related illness.

To appease her irritating and irrational husband, she stayed in bed the rest of the day, her ankle wrapped in cold cloths and easing the swelling. Robert was most attentive and kept her company, but enough was enough. Already his cousin, a viscount, would think her a poor hostess. And this was one duty where Katherine was determined no one would find fault with her. With that thought in mind, she kicked off the suffocating blankets, levered herself up, and eased upright from the bed, sore and aching after her fall. She gingerly shifted her weight onto her feet.

“Just what are you doing out of bed, madam?”

She jumped and in the moment forgot her injured ankle. Lightning-hot pain streaked through the joint, and a breath hissed through her teeth. Robert stood at the entrance of their connecting door, his shirtsleeves rolled up and a thunderous look on his face.

“Rising to dress,” she replied mutinously. She began her arduous journey

of limping to the vanity, fighting to keep from grimacing. “There is nothing wrong with me to say that I have to spend all day in bed. Goodness knows what your cousin thinks of me when I haven’t even greeted him.”

“Kitty, stop being difficult,” he cajoled, like he was trying to talk round a child.

She ignored him and had almost succeeded in making it to her destination. Robert sighed and scooped her up before depositing her gently back upon the covers, undoing all her hard work and leaving her with a throbbing ankle to boot.

“Preston fully understands why you are indisposed. It does not reflect poorly on you to look after your health.” His arms folded across his chest, he cocked an eyebrow as if daring her to move from the spot he’d placed her.

Despite how infuriated he made her, Kitty couldn’t help but admire his impressive figure. But she wasn’t giving up and stubbornly dug her proverbial heels in. “We have guests, and I will not have it said that I am a poor hostess.”

Robert pinched the bridge of his nose, appearing in pain. “Katherine,” he started in his most reasonable tone, if somewhat strained.

But she cut him off with an impatient wave of her hand. “No, Robert, I am getting up and dressing for dinner.” She emphasised her point with a jerky nod.

Robert paced. “I said no, Katherine.”

He put a lot of strength behind that ‘no’. The man was perfectly serious, and Kitty wanted to box his ears.

“Fine,” she bit out, clenching her hands into fists in the coverlet. “You can put me to bed but you can’t keep me here.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed and lit by black fire. He leaned down until they were nose to nose. “I could just tie you to the bed, and there’d be an end to it,” he snapped.

And that tightening in Kitty’s belly shocked her. She wasn’t opposed to the idea, and the atmosphere in the room charged. Robert offered her a slow, wolfish grin, and the tips of her fingers tingled. And he stalked closer, the movements sleek and determined. She could feel the heat coming from his body.

“Does the thought intrigue you, Kitten?”

It felt like he was peering right through her, deep down into her soul. Kitty nibbled her bottom lip. The idea...fascinated her. It shouldn’t do, should

it?

“I don’t know.” That was her voice? That soft breathy whisper?

He gave her a kindly if amused smile and brushed his thumbs over her knuckles, and he let her off the hook. “It’s abominable for me to tease you, Kitten. Perhaps we can practice my seaman’s knots another time.”

Kitty released a breath, caught between relief and strange, abject disappointment.

“And you are certain you are well enough to be up this evening?” Robert asked, uncertainty still colouring his words.

“Of course I am, I’m made of stronger stuff than that.”

“If you begin to feel overly tired, I want you to retire.”

She opened her mouth to argue. He cut her off with a finger to her lips. The slight roughness of his skin made her all the more aware of the satiny softness her own.

“The only acceptable response, Kitten, is ‘Aye, Captain’. Otherwise, I will seriously consider practicing my seaman’s knots.” He shot her a scowl that let her know he was perfectly serious and folded his arms across his chest. “Those are my terms.”

Kitty glared at him mutinously. The strong planes of his face were unyielding. The rotter would actually do it.

She capitulated in the face of a will more stubborn than hers and sighed. “Aye, Captain.”

Robert flashed her a grin. “Thank you, Kitty. Now, do you need any other assistance than your maid?” he asked, walking across to tug on the bell rope.

“No, Spillers is more than up to the task.”

“I will leave you to get ready then, though if you have need, please summon me.”

“Katherine, my dear, is that husband of yours not taking proper care of you?” Aunt Emmie clucked in sympathy when Kitty hobbled into view.

Kitty resisted the urge to slap a hand over her mouth. Said husband was watching her every move with that golden, eagle-eyed gaze of his.

“Robert, takes very good care of me,” Kitty replied with an edge, not prepared to let Robert be maligned. “I had a disagreement with an unfamiliar horse and came off the worst for it.”

“I should have that blasted animal shot,” Robert grumbled from his vigil by the mantelpiece, but he settled when Kitty glared at him.

“I was but teasing, Kitty.” Aunt Emmie sniffed.

“Apologies, Aunt, my sense of humour has been sorely tested after today’s trials.”

“No, of course not, but no harm done.”

Katherine accepted her embrace.

Aunt Emmie drew back, her brow puckered. “Dear me, you do feel a might warm.”

Kitty shot a glance over at Robert to see if he had caught the words, and upon seeing him engaged in conversation with his cousin, she relaxed.

She released a long-suffering sigh. “Yes, from being confined in bed all afternoon with every blanket in the entire household piled on top of me. But don’t let Robert hear you or he will bundle me back into bed in a heartbeat.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before moving through to the dining room.

All in all, it was a pleasant evening, passed in deep conversation and lively debate, the highlight being when the viscount had tried to get a rise out of the dowager baroness. Aunt Emmie had treated him to her notorious gorgon gaze and traded hit for hit, until the viscount was forced to beat a hasty retreat, much to everyone’s combined mirth.

Preston sat back in his seat, his features wreathed in absolute bafflement. “What just happened?”

Robert’s dark, rich chuckle echoed. “A schooner tried to face down a ship of the line. I’ll leave you to figure out who was the schooner.”

Aunt Emmie cracked a smile.

However, towards the end of dinner, Kitty’s limbs felt weighted down, and she was developing a sensitive head that she feared would bloom into a megrim. She was sure it was fate punishing her for all the times she had lied about feeling unwell. She waited to make her escape until she and Aunt Emmie left the gentlemen to their port and begged her forgiveness for not joining her for tea in the salon.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Emmie, but I’m afraid the day’s events are catching up with me and I must retire.” Even as Kitty forced out the words, she couldn’t help the sinking feeling in her stomach. She was turning out to be a miserable hostess.

“Don’t worry about me, Kitty, I don’t need a chaperone at my age. Get yourself off to bed, you look quite done in.”

Relieved of her duty, Kitty sought the comforting softness of her bed, her

head barely having touched the duck down pillow before she was fast asleep.

Chapter 10

On soft feet, Robert entered Kitty's chamber through their connecting door. He'd been concerned throughout the meal when she was unusually quiet. He had been conflicted when he learnt she had retired early, glad she had kept her word, but it proved she was feeling worse than she had let on earlier. Driven by an unknown urge, he had to ensure her well-being before seeking his own bed.

The covers on the bed rustled restlessly, and he froze, cursing himself for disturbing her. "Kitty, it's just me," he said softly.

No response. Robert released a breath and retraced his steps in a hasty retreat when a low, painful moan made him rethink his actions.

"Kitty?" he whispered again uncertainly, a sense of foreboding growing. Another whimper and cry and, holding his candle aloft, he moved forward. The light cascaded upon her face, and it felt like a hand had reached inside his chest, taken hold of his heart, and squeezed.

Her skin was pale, and she was drenched in sweat. He put a hand up to her brow just below her limp curls. She was burning up.

He grasped her shoulder and lightly shook, hoping to rouse her. "Katherine, darling, wake up."

Her eyes fluttered open. Red-rimmed and cloudy, they focused on his face.

"Katherine, it's me, Robert."

"Robert?" she slurred.

He held his breath, waiting for a spark of recognition. There was none. Her body slumped back down, that single action consuming her strength. Fear gripping him in a chokehold, he grasped the bell rope and gave it a vicious tug. Someone had to be able to do something, know how to care for her, or a local doctor.

Robert's prayers were not answered. The continuing storms had cut them off, and it was too dangerous to send anyone out in this weather with a clear conscience. If he thought it would make a difference, he would offer to go himself, but unfamiliar with the lay of the land, it would be unlikely if he

made it through and that he would be able to drag a doctor back.

Thankfully, Mrs Mellor and the previous owner had a well-stocked still room, and Lady Mowbray was proving to be eminently capable. The night bled away to day, not that a hint of sunshine penetrated the snow-darkened sky. A heavy atmosphere surrounded the house, watching and waiting, while Katherine fought for every breath.

A man of action, he was reduced to keeping a helpless vigil in a chair at Kitty's bedside. He would rather face an enemy frigate's broadside than this. Give him something that was in his control, where he could plot his own course. The door clicked open, and Lady Mowbray's concerned face peered round the doorway.

"How is she?" she murmured.

Robert stabbed his hands through his hair, wishing he could give her the answer they both longed to hear. Instead, he was forced to say, "There is no change."

"You've been by her side all day, you need to get some rest."

Robert gazed down at Kitty lying restless in her large bed, her lashes dark smudges against her pale cheeks. He had never seen her this delicate and frail. "No, I'm not leaving her." Wild horses could not drag him away from Kitty's side.

The baroness pursed her lips, and a softness entered her face. "You really care for Katherine, don't you?"

That compassionate look started to enter into the realms of pity, and Robert rose from his seat, stretching the kinks out of his neck. "Most ardently. I will do everything in my power to see her out of danger. Please, Baroness Mowbray, I will call you if there is any change."

Lady Mowbray gave a reluctant nod, her stern demeanour reminiscent of a schoolmarm, and in other circumstances, Robert would have found it highly amusing.

"Very well, Captain Vaughn. But remember, you are no good to Katherine if you also become ill as well."

The conversation with Lady Mowbray stayed with him a long time, until Kitty's restlessness seized his attention. "Do remember how we met? You were staying with your aunt in the country, and I was ashore, awaiting my new orders after my recent commission," Robert said, bathing her brow and face in cool water.

Kitty appeared to settle at the sound of his voice and, thus encouraged,

Robert kept talking in a low murmur.

“You were so quiet at first, but it made the other young ladies appear foolish in comparison. But gradually your wit and playful good humour began to shine through. You captured my attention completely, and it wasn’t long until you claimed my heart as well.” He took her limp hand and held it against his scarred cheek.

“I have loved you since that moment and have never stopped, though through my anger I tried hard to smother that tender emotion.” He sucked in a shuddering breath. “I should have fought harder for you and not given way to hurt pride. Even at our wedding I did not tell you that finally having you for my bride made me the happiest of men. That it had been my intention to court you since the masquerade.”

Unmanly tears filled his eyes.

“Don’t leave me, Kitten,” he whispered, voice cracking. “Not when we have just found each other once more. I promise I will master my foolish pride and it will never come between us again.” He clutched her hands tighter, desperate words tumbling over his lips. “I swear to you, just get well, and everything will be all right.”

Robert placed their linked hands on her chest, taking a small measure of reassurance from each rise and fall, Kitty’s heartbeat steady but strong.

Kitty’s rest was disturbed by a shaft of light striking her directly in the face. She scrunched her face up and tried to turn over and found her limbs leaden and aching, forcing out a moan.

“Kitty, I’m here. Can you open your eyes?”

Robert? What was he doing here? She tried to open her eyes but found them crusted shut. What was wrong with her? The room came into focus, and she blinked.

“Robert?” There was no way this dishevelled man was her usually immaculate husband.

His dark hair stuck up at odd angles, and he was dressed in very wrinkled shirtsleeves and appeared tired.

Robert’s hopeful face collapsed, and his eyes snapped closed. “Thank the Lord.” Then they were open and alert and trained solely on her. “You worried me, Kitten, how are you feeling?” Kitty scrubbed a hand over her face. Just what was going on?

“Thirsty and tired,” she croaked.

Robert supported her body into an upright position and pressed a glass of lemonade to her lips. It tasted like ambrosia from the gods, and she drank it greedily. Her thirst quenched and her befuddled mind clearing, a million questions peppered her mind. “What day is it?” she settled upon asking.

“It’s Christmas Day, sweeting.”

Kitty started. “Christmas? But what...? How...?”

Robert fussed with her coverlet, tucking it securely around her. “You’ve had a fever for several days and have been very, very ill.”

Her eyes pricked with tears. “I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble, it is not much of a first Christmas together.”

Robert’s face turned horrified. “Shhh, don’t distress yourself, don’t cry, Kitty.” He cupped her face, and his thumbs swiped away the few tears that had managed to escape. “All that matters is that you will recover and we will have many more together.”

There was one other thing nagging at the back of Kitty’s mind, so unbelievable she would have thought it was a dream, but Robert was acting like she was the most precious thing in the world. He was being tender and treating her like a delicate crystal vase. He’d called her sweeting and, holding that indisputable fact close to her heart, she bolstered her courage.

“Did you mean what you said, Robert?”

He settled back in the chair that was pulled next to the bed, his expression decidedly guarded. “What did I say?”

She ducked her head and focused on the pattern of the coverlet just in front of her. If she didn’t have to look at him, it somehow made it easier. If she was mistaken, she wouldn’t have to see the rejection and pity on his face.

“I could hear you, talking to me through the thick grey fog.” She sucked in a shuddering breath and, awash with vulnerability asked, “Did you mean it when you said you love me?”

His face blanched white, and he took her hand. “Katherine...”

That tender hope she had been nursing withered.

“Yes, Katherine, I love you most ardently.”

She sat forward and clutched his hand, tethering him to her. “You do?”

“Yes, but I promise I won’t pressure you to return the sentiments, when you don’t feel the same.”

Kitty frowned. “Feel the same?” The meaning of his words struck. “Oh! You stupid man, of course I feel the same! I rejected the few marriage proposals I had and refused to cultivate others because every empty-headed

idiot appeared a buffoon compared to you.” Her energy spent, she collapsed back against the pillows. “You sapskull,” she muttered, running out of steam.

“You love me? Truly?” Robert said in disbelief, slowly sinking into the chair pulled up to her bedside. “Even after all the terrible things I said?”

Kitty shot him a slitted glare. “Even after the unforgivable way my family has treated you?”

Robert captured the hand lying in her lap and raised it to his lips, his stubble rasping over her skin. The open sign of affection warmed Kitty and surpassed any medicine that a doctor could prescribe.

“We could have spared ourselves so much heartache if we had only been truthful with each other from the start. I’m afraid I’ve been a sore trial for you, my love,” Robert admitted ruefully. “But I will do better.”

Kitty focused her flagging strength and squeezed Robert’s hand. “We will both do better.”

He offered her a lopsided smile, the tender look melting away any lingering doubt that this was too good to be true.

“No more secrets,” Robert vowed.

“No more secrets.” Kitty whispered, her strength fading.

“Rest now, darling,” he murmured as she lost the fight to keep her eyes open. “Regain your strength.”

Later that day, Kitty lay awake and propped up against the plump pillows, refreshed if exhausted from her bath. Her lips curled ruefully. Robert had been fit to be tied, but she’d finally managed to convince him they both needed to bathe, and he could help her so he could be sure she wouldn’t overdo it. It was a good thing, too, as the feel of her sweat-matted hair made her scalp itch terribly.

The door opened, and she smiled. Robert could barely stand to take his eyes off her.

“Feel up to company or would you like me to leave you to rest?”

“I’d enjoy a short visit. I have a feeling I’m going to be spending a while in this bed.”

Robert’s jawline tensed, his visage taking on a stubborn mien and he stopped by her bedside. “Until the doctor decrees you well enough, Katherine.”

“You are going to be insufferable,” she said, smiling to take the bite out of her words. “But I suppose it is better than your seaman’s knots.”

Robert gave a throaty chuckle. “I have a feeling when you are fully recovered, I may have to resort to those knots.”

He pulled a black square box from his pocket and held it up.

“I have a gift for you. I intended it as a wedding present, but it took longer than I anticipated.”

He placed it on her lap.

Her fingers stiff and tired, Kitty fiddled with the catch and flipped the lid back. She sucked in a breath. “Robert, it is too much!”

She gazed in disbelief at the delicate diamond-and-sapphire parure, blinded by the dazzling beauty. A single piece would have cost a fortune. The necklace was made of fine ropes of small diamonds that hugged and connected the larger sapphires, and there were a pair of matching bracelets and two combs dotted with seed pearls. It was a king’s ransom.

“Sapphires to match your eyes,” he said gruffly. “Diamonds because I could not treasure you more and I don’t care who knows it. Do you like them?”

“They’re beautiful,” she whispered and ran an admiring finger over the cold smoothness of the most prominent sapphire, then turned to make a shamefaced admission. “But I have not a fitting gift for you.”

Robert smiled and sat on the edge of bed, wrapping an arm about her, and Kitty nestled close to his side.

“You gave me a priceless gift when you chose to put aside your fears to give us a wedding night, and I have received the best gift of all. My wife delivered safely from danger.”

Epilogue

Harkham Hall
December 3, 1816

Kitty snuggled into Robert's side, her head resting on his shoulder, enjoying the simple contact of his hand caressing her hip. They were curled up before the fireplace, watching the embers chase up the chimney, sipping Mrs Mellor's delicious cider. They had arrived at Harkham Hall several days ahead of their expected guests. With being a stone's throw away from London, it had become the ideal country escape for the Christmas season.

"We have invitations to dinner parties at Mr and Mrs Bartley's and Mr and Mrs Hoskins' before our family members arrive."

"If it would please you, we will attend both, but—" Robert shifted so he could see her face and fixed her with his stern gaze. "I don't want you to overtire yourself."

Kitty rolled her eyes. Even after a year since her fever, Robert was still protective of her.

"As if you would allow that to happen," she murmured and lightly scratched his chest and tilted her face up in an unspoken request that he was more than willing to oblige. He tasted of sweet, crisp apple and cinnamon, delicious and intoxicating.

"Don't try to distract me, my love," he growled against Kitty's lips, nibbling and licking.

She shivered with pleasure.

"I've noticed how fatigued you've been recently and I intend to be the most demanding and protective of husbands until you will wish me to the Devil."

"Mmm-hmm." Kitty twisted to her knees, and with Robert's steadying hands on her hips, seated herself astride his lap. She wasn't in any doubt that he was enjoying their game. "And how do you intend to manage that, pray tell?" She nuzzled him just under his jaw, smiling when she was rewarded with a primitive masculine sound deep in his throat, and she wanted to hear it again.

Robert's mouth kicked up at one side, his gaze hungry. "I have my methods."

She slanted him a distinctly saucy look through her lashes and teased the edge of his neckcloth.

"Perhaps we should retire early and see how effective your methods are?"

"In a moment, I just want to hold you a while longer."

She snuggled closer, revelling in the feel of his fingers gliding through her hair and over her back. She wiggled, and his arousal stirred.

Robert sucked in breath. "Minx," he accused her with fondness.

Kitty's lips curled in a secret smile against his coat. She couldn't wait to give Robert his Christmas present this year, and this would be the one secret she was sure he would forgive her. The news that next Christmas, there would be an addition to their family.

About Jane Burrelli

When J Burrelli realised that the world was not hiring for a ‘sarcastic but benign Supreme Ruler of the Universe’, she decided to put her vivid imagination to good use and create her own world.

Affectionately dubbed the 'sex author' by her good friends, Jane can often be found crafting her saucy tales in her local coffee shop, fuelled by copious amounts of vanilla tea.

She also writes her very, very naughty titles under the name, Jane Burrelli.

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The Rogue's Secret

by Stacy Reid and Giselle Marks



Chapter 1

“Farrant, where else can we look? I think we must have turned the house completely upside down,” Lord Rupert Rogers muttered, exasperated. “You’ve been with the family since you were a boy. Surely you must have some idea where Great-Uncle Frederick might have hidden it? Or at least a clue to where it might be?”

The butler shuffled over from the fireplace, a frown creasing his already wrinkled forehead. “I am sorry, my lord, but I thought there might be some indication in his papers, but I read every scrap of paper in his bureau, desk, and even in the locked deed box. We pulled all the books down in the library, and there was nothing in them or behind them. We’ve been through all of your late great-uncle’s possessions but I am at a loss, Sir.”

The room had been thoroughly searched and yielded no result. A quick scan showed the library had been mostly returned to rights, except for the motes of dust that had been disturbed in their frenetic search. At least the books were now back on the shelves if not in their correct order. Rupert’s great-uncle had become a recluse over his later years and had not wanted to be disturbed by the household staff, so he had let most of them go. The housekeeping had been somewhat neglected as a result.

Rupert straightened from crouching before the bottom drawer of the large oak desk in his library and rubbed the back of his neck. “It is not your fault, Farrant, but from the scrawled note he gave his lawyer with the will, I thought we would turn something up. Could not make head nor tail of it, some sort of riddle in verse form. If the poem did not scan so well, I would have assumed he had been senile...”

His butler, perhaps sensing a drink might calm his master, went over to the mantle and poured brandy in a glass and handed it to Rupert who took it and swallowed down its content. The warmth spreading through his body did relax him some, and he padded over to a large armchair by the windows and sprawled negligently in the window seat.

A contemplative look entered Farrant’s rheumy blue eyes. “His lordship was totally in his right mind, right up to his last moments. Always was very canny was your uncle. There must be a hint to where it is in his letter. We

have not searched the attic, and I don't think anyone has been up there for years."

Peering out the windows in the gardens, Rupert murmured, "That is an idea, we will search it tomorrow together. We must find it because I'd rather shoot myself than marry the Chisholm heiress that my aunt keeps insisting I must do to save the family lands and fortune."

Rupert's close friends often teased him, for he had said more than once that he wanted to hold any lady he married in high esteem. He was not afraid to speak of the more tender emotions and boldly did so whenever he thought of a future wife. While he was willing to do many things to save the estate entrusted to him, it left a bitter taste in his mouth and a heavy weight against his heart at the thought of marrying someone solely for their money. To his mind, a healthy physical attraction, genuine affection, and respect were the foundation needed for a marriage.

Rupert sighed. "I am sure I must be missing something in Uncle Frederick's turgid verse, but truthfully I can't figure it out...Why a sonnet? And Dash it, Uncle Frederick was never a pious canting hypocrite, I'll read it again. He didn't go Methody towards the end, did he?"

His butler grimaced. "No, my lord, gave old Parson Prestley a flea in his ear when he suggested hearing his confession so he could make his peace with the Lord above."

"I ain't no versifier, but this makes no sense to me..." Rupert declared fishing the crumpled piece of paper out, then in his mellifluous tones recited,

*"So Daring Deeds of heroes gladly tell
Brave battling Neptune's briny sway expound
My Rogue, I will always wish you well
Fabulous Beast ascending Mordant hound
Will ever lead you onwards to your goal
Ages old colours fade yet seek within
Beneath martial courage lies treasure whole
A prayer to atone from forlorn sin
A quest of import in heavenly land
Uncover riches select bonny bride
Then perhaps fortune will be close to hand
Giving you all I own, I depart with pride
To mouldering bones now I must travel*

Leaving you a riddle to unravel.”

His butler seemed well pleased with Rupert's recitation of the poem. Rupert sighed, reading it for the third time still stirred no clues to where he might find the fortune of buccaneer booty his uncle Frederick had been reputed to have hoarded away.

The late baron had not been a believer in banks, and so little funds had been located by the family solicitor when he had dealt with the will and handed over the deeds to the estate and lands. The tenanted farms did bring in an income, but it would barely maintain the house and pay his bills. It would not provide sufficiently for a wife and offspring, nor would it do the improvements on his tenants' homes that Rupert could see were much needed.

“Does it give you any ideas, Farrant?”

His butler's forehead creased in an apologetic frown. “No, sorry my Lord, I am not much good at riddles, though you read it beautifully if I may say so, Sir.”

Rupert shrugged his shoulders in disappointment and stared through the mullioned window once more. The older man coughed and poured his lord another glass of brandy, which Rupert absent-mindedly took, taking a quick mouthful.

What were you thinking Uncle Frederick, why not just tell me outright where this treasure is?

Farrant who had been fond of the old man and fonder still of the young Rupert had often told him the tale that he had been nicknamed ‘Rogue’ by Uncle Frederick from when Rupert was first breeched and proved to be an imp of mischief, that his father had sworn had been sent straight from the fires of hell. Uncle Frederick had laughed and encouraged his misbehaviour and so had the servants at Ellesmere Manor. Rupert had adored his great-uncle and loved spending every summer away from school there.

If he could not find the treasure, he might be forced to marry Lady Euphenia Chisholm. The very idea sent darts of dread shooting through his entire body. Euphenia Chisholm, she was both a termagant and had a tongue like a wailing banshee, which did not go help with a face that might look well on a carthorse, but certainly not one with a good pedigree.

He must have muttered something aloud for Farrant said, “No, my lord, I do not think Lady Euphenia would suit at all. A fine figure of a man like

yourself would be wasted on the likes of her. If I might say, I think Lady Grenville has more bats in her head than the house has in the attic.”

Rupert smiled without humour at the apt description of his aunt. “Told her that myself, Farrant. Even the most hardened fortune hunter would blanch at the thought of marrying Euphenia Chisholm. She is an utter harpie... I say, who is that?” He leaned forward. “I saw a flash of red in the garden and thought it must be a bullfinch, but there is a female climbing the wall. Fine ankles, too! Farrant, who is that piece of perfection?”

The female now brushing down her clothes was indeed a beauty; she wore a red hooded redingcote which revealed strawberry blonde curls and a heart-shaped face with a very kissable cupid-bowed mouth. He could not see at the distance whether her eyes were blue or green, but he would guess they were a clear cerulean blue.

“Lady Verity Hansard, I did tell you that you shouldn’t have the walled garden locked, the locals do not like it, my Lord. The locals like to come and go as they please.”

Rupert waved a hand in dismissal. “It is because they are used to coming and going as they please, that I locked the gate. It seems like every bucolic and his lass uses the garden for their trysts. I wouldn’t mind so much if they would make less noise about it, but they were going at it hammer and tongs, and it was hard to sleep. How did Uncle Frederick put up with it all these years?”

“He was a little deaf, but he liked young people to be, er happy in their pleasures.”

Curiosity stirred in Rupert, and he stood, moving even closer to the windows for a better view. “So what is a young lady, doing climbing the wall to my closed garden?”

“I would assume she is going to cut mistletoe, my Lord... she does so every year with the late Baron’s permission,” Farrant said stiffly.

Rupert followed the small figure in red with his eyes while he spoke, “I think I should introduce myself to this Lady Verity, don’t you? Why does she have to come to the garden for mistletoe? Is there none growing locally that is easier to access?”

“No, it is relatively rare around these parts. Benson prunes it vigorously from the apple trees in the orchard, but Uncle Fred would not hear of the old apple tree in the garden being touched, so mistletoe flourishes there.”

Rupert was already striding out the library door. Farrant followed on his

heels as he opened the door just down the corridor to the walled garden. It was a chill December afternoon, but the sun was trying to shine through a cloudy sky. Rupert marched towards the old fruit trees by the ancient orangery that had come with the original manor house before the new façade and building had been created a century ago.

There, an old apple tree had long been planted. It was really too near to the orangery as its roots would have gone deep to grow that high. Rupert had many memories of climbing in that tree, which had, at one point, sported a small platform to which a pair of energetic boys could scramble up to consume a packed luncheon. Both that platform and a knotted swinging rope he and his childhood friend Percival Humber had used, had long been taken down.

Once he had children of his own, Rupert would ensure to build them something similar. A bench had been pulled beneath its branches, and there Rupert espied a fetching form in a red redingcote clambering on one arm of the bench precariously reaching up into the branches. As he neared, a small dog barked as if in warning. The dog sounded an aggressive threat rather than just yapping annoyingly.

Rupert approved of its loyalty and desire to protect his mistress. His gaze, however, was more preoccupied with the vision he had before him. The lady's rear view was very satisfying, a rounded rump and neat figure as she reached up on tiptoes to cut a sprig of white berried mistletoe.

Then as the dog barked again, her half-booted feet, slipped and she tried to regain her footing. Rupert rushed forward in time for a very comely bundle to fall into his open arms. The weight of her in his embrace was delightfully pleasant. He smiled down at her shocked face, as one hand tried to cling onto the mistletoe sprig and the other was attached to a pair of large scissors.

Her pretty loveliness stuck his heart forcibly and quite unexpectedly. Rupert found himself enjoying his beautiful burden a little too much, and she was holding the mistletoe above them... An imp of mischief took over and he leaned down and claimed her cherry ripe lips with a ravaging and definitely indiscreet kiss.

The soft feel of her mouth set his heart quickly pounding. The visceral reaction startled him, but he did not lift his head. She tasted sweet and luscious, and he deepened the kiss allowing his tongue to roam along the crease of her mouth. Clearly shocked, her lips parted on a gasp allowing him access, and he plunged within and was enjoying himself enormously. Rupert

couldn't recall ever feeling such pleasure from a kiss. He was sharply brought to his senses as the lady wriggled within his arms, dropping both scissors and twig. He set her down and before he could speak, a sharp crack of a slap connected with his cheek. Rupert could feel a large red mark blooming as he gently lowered his squirming load to her feet.

"How dare you abuse me so?" The lady retorted angrily, but her cheeks were flushed, and there was a look of amusement in her eyes and just a touch of arousal.

His heart was still racing too fast for such a relatively chaste kiss and he struggled for equanimity. "You were holding the mistletoe above our heads, oh so exquisite trespasser. I thought it was a local tradition to always kiss a beautiful woman beneath mistletoe. Perhaps not the best way to affect an introduction, my lady."

He moved back a few steps. "Rupert Rogers, newly baron of this estate, at your service," he said smiling as he made a flamboyant bow in the style of his cavalier namesake, Prince Rupert with great aplomb.

Her eyes widened and her cheeks reddened. "A most inappropriate introduction, my lord."

"Will you permit me the pleasure of your name?"

She cast a glance at his approaching butler. "It is Lady Verity, though I suspect you are very well aware of it."

At his silence and admiring stare, she clutched the skirts of her gown almost nervously. "Why is the garden door locked, it is usually left open? I have permission, *had* permission from the late Baron to pick mistletoe but I could not get in and had to leave Rufus outside."

The dog barked in reply to his name. Rupert could see that he was a spaniel, a ruby red in colour of the type favoured by King Charles the second and he was peering through the ornamental wrought iron gate which of course, Rupert had ordered to be locked. Rupert picked up the lady's basket which she had laid on the bench. It already had a few meagre sprigs within in and placed the new sprig in the basket.

"I think I can reach better clusters fairly easily, but perhaps we should relieve Rufus of his durance vile, to quote Rabbie Burns, Ah, Farrant could you open the gate and let Master Rufus in, please?"

"Yes, of course, my lord," the old retainer said, pulling a large and slightly rusty key from a large ring.

He toddled over to the gate and with a turn of the key let the gate creak

open only to be greeted by a very exuberant and somewhat muddy spaniel, who dashed to his mistress' side.

“Down Rufus, and sit as you can see, his lordship although unorthodox in his welcome, is not an enemy.”

That much was clear to the dog as he wagged his tail over to Rupert and allowed him to ruffle his velvety ears.

Chapter 2

He kissed me.

That single thought knocked around Verity's head as she valiantly tried to appear worldly and unaffected by the rogue's behaviour. It would not do for him to realize how much his kiss affected her, and it most certainly would not do if he knew how much her heart still pounded, and her hands holding the pieces of mistletoe sprigs trembled. She was acquainted with the behaviour of rogues and rakes and it was clear the baron belonged in that category.

What upset her the most was her reaction to his boldness. Verity's skin felt sensitized, her lips tingled, and a very odd yet warmly pleasant sensation lingered inside her body. Quite different to the sensations previously roused by her fiancé's tender embraces. Verity frowned, wondering if this Lord Rupert had felt a similar connection? She peeked at him as he stooped to ruffle the top of Rufus' head. Her loyal dog sniffed and trotted over to her.

Good boy.

The baron rose and reached for the branch which had eluded her height earlier. She had to admit that he was a fine figure of a man as he agilely stretched to reach more mistletoe. Although somewhat dishevelled, the new baron's lean muscular form was a tailor's dream and topped with a mischievous visage which, if not perfectly classical, had a pair of dazzling twinkling hazel eyes. His light brown hair was streaked with blond where the sun had bleached it naturally, which accented his deeply tanned skin.

The new baron walked over. Verity tried not to ogle and appear like a gauche country bumpkin. He was terribly handsome, his posture confident, and a bit roguish.

"I am not certain Rufus likes me," he said with a charming curve of his mouth.

"He tends to be wary of those who take liberties," she said with a challenging lift of her brow.

"Ah...the kiss."

A flush ran along her cheeks, but she lifted her chin. "Yes, your inappropriate introduction." And the one she had slapped him so soundly for.

"Should I apologize for it then?"

“Would you be sincere, my lord?” And that very much mattered to her, sincerity in a gentleman.

His lovely eyes danced with humour and an unknown emotion she could not identify. “No,” he murmured, his eyes scanning her face.

“As expected of a rogue,” she said with a sniff.

“I am ever honest, my lady.”

“Are you?”

“Hmm, and something tells me you would value truthfulness. The tilt of your chin, perhaps? It has a very decided and piquant shape.”

Verity refused to smile at his attempts at charm. “I do value honesty, not that it should excuse your wicked behaviour.”

He placed a hand over his heart. “Then I can confess I’ve never gotten such pleasure and delight from a kiss before.”

She audibly gasped. *The shameless scoundrel!*

“I’ve never tasted lips so soft and sweet, so—”

“My lord! Say no more!” Her entire body felt alive with feelings she never previously felt. Verity was not sure if she should be appalled by this scoundrel’s behaviour or be thrilled. Her heart stuttered and with a sense of stunned alarm she acknowledged that she was terribly attracted to him. Since the death of her fiancé four years ago, Verity hadn’t indulged in any sort of flirtation.

“Should I really not talk about how delightfully plump your lips *oomph!*”

He choked as she grabbed a fistful of leaves from the shrubbery and stuffed them into his mouth.

He spat it out and glared at her. “I prefer my vegetables cooked, my lady!”

Laughter lurked in his tone, and he stared at her as if uncertain what to think of the lady. Verity did not know what to make of herself either at this moment! She felt as if she wanted to cross wits with him, a singularly foolish desire for a man like him truly did not desire simple ladies like her in possession of a secret no one could ever know.

Even this morning her mamma had remarked that she was a spinster at four and twenty, and Verity should accept the proposal of Reverend Ambridge, who had offered his hand to her in marriage for the second time this year. Her mother had dismissed her protests that her heart had been broken with Richard’s death, and it was far too soon to consider accepting another man as a prospective husband.

And Verity had refused for her honour would not allow her to enter a union when she knew she had been irrevocably compromised. When she had politely been trying to make her refusal sting less, the young man had taken her pause as an invitation and tried to kiss her. That memory had her closing her eyes and puffing out a small breath of annoyance. She had been saved from his embrace by Rufus trying to nip the vicar's derriere, which had dampened his ardour.

"You do not like my teasing," Lord Rupert gently said, pressing a hand over his chest as if he were contrite.

His penetrating gaze searched her face. "You seem decidedly out of sorts. If I have ruined your peace, I must, of course, most sincerely apologize."

"I..." Unequivocally flustered, she faltered, her thoughts searching for words and found nothing. "I must return home; my mother is visiting me for luncheon, and I am already late."

"Is that an invitation?" he asked with such a hopeful expression she lightly laughed.

"It was not."

"Ah, such a pity. That is another thing I would have delighted in. Then we could converse and get to know each other."

Verity loathed to admit it, but he was charming her. "I bid you a good day, my lord." She lifted the basket and dipped into a small curtsy before walking away, her faithful companion trotting by her heel. Verity could feel his stare lingering on her back as she slipped through the small gates and hurried along the lane leading to the modest cottage her brother had leased to her.

"What did you think of the new baron, Rufus?"

Her dog barked quite enthusiastically, pulling a laugh from her. "I agree with you! Very bold and improper *but* dashing and handsome and charming."

Another yip from her dog and Rufus continued wagging his tail.

They trotted together through the picturesque countryside until a moderately-sized house loomed ahead of them. A sense of peace filled her at seeing her home and thinking of the inviting fire awaiting her in the drawing room. After Richard's death, she had been very ill, crying herself to sleep. Her mother had pushed for her to re-enter society and find a new prospective husband, but Verity had refused. Then, following her father's death three years ago, she had begged her brother, the new earl, to be allowed to live alone as she was now of age.

There had been months of heated exchanges between herself, her weeping mother, and her brother, but Verity had held firm. She had a small inheritance from her maternal grandfather, which allowed her some independence. Verity had suggested moving to Bath or Brighton, but they had compromised on her renting this small house on one of her family's estates. It was a neat property and not as luxurious as her previous homes as she was only able to keep a few servants to run her home, but it suited her.

Verity had moved in straight away with her former governess, Mary Herriot. They were mostly happy except from when her mother descended on her to try and drag her back to town with husband-hunting in mind. Her mother was convinced that her beauty alone would find her a suitable husband despite her small dowry and mature years.

But she didn't require a husband. The man she had loved and gifted her heart and body to, had died. He hadn't needed to fight in the war, but Richard had been determined to prove that he was more than a second son waiting to come into his inheritance. The memory of how passionate he had been about heading to war brought a lump to her throat. He hadn't returned with glory and accolades as he'd hoped.

You died, Richard. And since then, she had become so incredibly determined in protecting her heart and her independence.

Entering the yard, she spied her friend, Mary, in the gardens on her knees, uncaring that she dirtied her gown.

"Mary," Verity said, hurrying over to her. "I got several springs of mistletoe."

Her former governess was still such a beautiful woman at three and forty. Her dark blue eyes glowed their welcome, and her dark hair without any gray was caught in a loose chignon. Without a hat covering her from the rays of the winter sun, a shine of sweat glistened on her rosy cheeks.

"From Ellesmere Manor?"

Verity nodded with a pleased smile.

"I thought the gate was locked," Mary said with some exasperation. "Do not tell me you followed through with your plan and climbed it!"

Verity chuckled. "That I did, and I was caught."

There must have been something in her tone for Mary arched a brow and asked, "Did you meet the new lord of the manor?"

Verity's silly heart skipped. "I did."

Mary paused in the act of lowering the small shovel.

“My dear Verity, you are blushing, was he *that* handsome? His Uncle Frederick was also a fine specimen.”

“Oh, Mary,” she said, lowering the basket to the verdant grass and untying the strings of her bonnet. “It is the sun.”

Mary’s eyes squinted thoughtfully, but she made no reply but resumed her digging underneath some holly bush. “The Vicar came by again earlier,” she said. “You cannot live with me forever, Verity. He is most devoted to you and I believe his sentiments are sincere.”

Verity looked away as a young maid ran on the small lawn with Rufus, tossing him twigs he brought back to her.

“Sometimes I do wish for marriage and children, but the Vicar...I do not think I could accept him; he is so humourless and puritanical. I just do not think we would be a good match.”

Verity had mourned after Richard’s death, knowing she and Richard had come together because of love the night before he had been called away. She was not ashamed of giving herself to her affianced husband, her parents had not known but might have guessed. When she had learned of his death, she had been four months with child, but she had lost the baby as a result of her distress. Her mother and brother had been in London as Verity had insisted on remaining home. Mary had realised what was happening and had sworn the local midwife to secrecy. Verity had recovered but her heart had been shattered with knowing she had lost her little baby girl as well as her much loved Richard, and their plans for a future together.

Enduring such pain had taken months to recover.

Her parents had not mentioned her illness, nor had Richard’s parents.

“And what did you tell the vicar?”

“After he lectured me on the unsuitability of my living alone with only you and servants. I said that it was not his concern since I have not consented to marry him,” she said softly.

Her friend sighed, dropped the trowel, and tugged off her garden gloves to reveal elegantly manicured fingers. “And the Vicar is the kind of man who would expect you to be untouched and assure himself of your grace.”

Verity had been privy to many of the youthful Vicar’s sermons on the dreadful woes of fornicating before marriage. She had listened to with amusement because of their ridiculous prudishness.

Since Richard’s death, she had avoided most social events, even those more modest country ones. However, it was expected that she would attend

church, and even there, she had attracted male attention. She had received three proposals while she had been in full mourning for her fiancé. She had given up counting how many there had been since.

None of her suitors had been fully up to her mother's expectations nor had she been interested in marrying any of them. Verity doubted any of them would have been prepared to accept 'a soiled dove,' which meant a wedding night with any man was not to be anticipated. It would only bring sorrow and discord, which was no way to start a marriage.

Verity did not believe it was possible to marry without love, and she did not think she would ever possess the courage to risk her heart again. Loving another was a wonderful experience but suffering the loss of that love was unbearable.

Chapter 3

Rupert had thought of only two things since watching Verity strolled along the lane from his home. Her elegant form stepping along with the exuberant, playful Rufus. He had hoped she would look back, but she had not, and he feared that she was dismissing him as an ill-mannered oaf. He acknowledged that he had been too familiar and presumptuous. Rupert refused to regret kissing her since he wanted to kiss her again and do a lot more. He was convinced underneath her respectable exquisite exterior, she would be a sensual, voluptuous delight. There was fire beneath her loveliness, and he dwelt on imagining some very indecent scenes with her spread for his delectation on his bed.

His thoughts had been carnal and delicious, but they had meant that he had slept poorly as every time he fell briefly asleep, he was discovering her charms in a most improper manner. His wayward dreams of her seduction had not concentrated only on her charms but had moved onto more domestic tableaux with her at his side, surrounded by their children, Rufus, more dogs and even a couple of cats.

Rupert had laughed himself awake at that fancy, only to realise that he never had seriously considered marriage and children as something to be desired in the next few years. He'd always thought at least ten more years as a bachelor, unless he met someone he *had* to marry. Even giving himself a sharp talking to had failed to destroy the warmth he felt in the concept of besotted marital bliss with Verity at his side and especially in his bed.

The other thought that had obsessed his mind was the meaning of the riddle sonnet. He had cursed his late great-uncle Frederick and his enigma.

“I think I could accept there was so little money and just knuckle down to try and make the estate come around, with so little income if my great-uncle had not hinted so often that there was a treasure. This poem just feels like he is teasing me with something out of my reach...” He had told Farrant after insisting he joined him in a glass of brandy as if they were co-conspirators of a similar rank.

The old man had protested that it was not fitting, but finally consented and had sat perched on the edge of a chair, sipping a glass of the former

baron's best brandy with his new master.

Farrant shuffled and coughed as the fiery liquid reached his throat; he was not used to drinking spirits, like the nobility. "I understand, my lord."

"Found a folio of his poetry though. Poetry is not my taste, but I think some of it was rather good. I read through every line, but none of it relates to the treasure, and from the fading of the ink, I think they were all written when he was a young man. If we ever find the treasure, I should publish a discreet edition of his verse. Perhaps leaving out some of the er, love poetry." Rupert stood and refilled his glass, topping up Farrant's, who protested once more.

"I'm not used to strong spirits, my lord. The late baron would have been most displeased if I had been stealing his brandy."

"I doubt it, he was a fairly lax employer and would have probably appreciated your companionship as much as I do."

"The late baron would not have thought so. He always kept the proper distance between master and servant, and we thought that was right. However, I think he would be proud if you published his poetry, sir. If I may say so, sir, that is not getting us any further to finding the treasure, and from what you were saying about the estate's finances you will need it, especially if your thoughts are leaning towards young Lady Verity."

Rupert stood surprised at his underling's perspicacity. He laughed because he should have expected it. The servants always knew their masters' business before society caught up.

"I have only just met Lady Verity, and I do not think she was that impressed with my address, Farrant. However, she is a lady, so I would have to offer marriage, but you are right, Lady Verity might make marriage worth considering. Tomorrow is another day and perhaps we might come up with some idea as to where the treasure is. Why could he not have just left me a map? No, you do not need to answer that, finish your brandy, I'm for bed. Let's hope we come up with something soon."

He had headed for his bed, but had found it hard to settle, his thoughts of Lady Verity and their kiss, tangled up with his bewilderment with the riddle his great-uncle had left him. His lascivious dreams of Verity had inflamed what he considered an unnatural celibacy while he cleared up Frederick's affairs. His body definitely thought he had been without a woman too long, and the woman he wanted was Lady Verity. So when he left his bed, feeling both unrested and frustrated, Lady Verity was the first thought on his mind.

Perhaps this was what his Uncle Frederick meant when he had told

Rupert that when he met the lady his heart would eventually yearn for; the knowledge would be immediate. While he believed in love and the sweetest of sentiments, it was impossible to know with only one meeting if a lady was destined to be his as Uncle Frederick maintained. Rupert had always thought it romantic claptrap, but now he was not so certain.

The riddle and treasure hunt would have to wait; he would call upon her at the first respectable opportunity.



* * *

The following day bloomed fair and Verity rose early and headed out to their small garden to pick holly, ivy, and some evergreen branches to decorate the house. It was early to be placing festive decorations but it was a piece of rebellion on her part in defying tradition in her own home. Her brother referred to it as a cottage, but it had formerly been the smaller estate's dower house. Her mother preferred to remain in the townhouse or in the stately home within their main estate but her brother, Simon, had been trying to persuade her to remove to the dower house when he married his fiancée in June of the following year. Her mother was reluctant and was herself considering relocating to Bath and had invited Verity to join her. Verity had declined the invitation knowing that her mother would continue her attempts to find her a husband.

The family were not extremely wealthy; her father's dabbling in change, gambling, and his lavish lifestyle had left her brother some serious debts. However, he was a practical and intelligent young man and had dealt sternly with their mother's more major extravagancies. His careful husbandry and diligent study of the family's accounts were now bringing the estates back into profit. With continued careful investment, he would produce a comfortable income for himself and any future offspring.

Verity herself had a dowry of five thousand pounds if she should choose to marry and an income of eight hundred pounds a year from her maternal grandfather's bequest. It was enough to live a quiet life in independent retirement but would not fund a life of any kind in London society or any

travels. She did not miss town life but would have liked a little extra to buy a few new gowns and a more fashionable bonnet.

Verity also wanted to provide her servants with a much-needed raise and to set aside an allowance for Mary. Her former governess insisted it was enough that she lived under Verity's largesse, and she did not need an allowance, but Verity disagreed. Mary should have some measure of independence in her spending and receive some money to save for any future endeavours. Perhaps she might even consider marriage herself; she was still a very good-looking woman. She could not expect children of her own, but perhaps a widower with children would think her suitable.

Verity sighed; she had cut enough greenery to decorate the house for Christmas. There was no point in dreaming of pretty gowns. No more point than dreaming of a handsome young baron with a twinkle in his merry eyes.

Verity headed back into the house and started arranging the greenery, tying them up with some pretty ribbons she had discovered. It took some hours, and finally, she took a step back to admire her handiwork. She was not really satisfied, but it was the best she could do without buying new ribbons.

"It looks wonderful, so bright and colourful," Mary declared. "I've just asked Sarah to make a pot of tea. Come and relax and have a cup, my dear."

"I think it looks a bit tacky, I wish I could afford to buy fresh ribbons so they could all be matching, but I am a little short of money having bought presents for Christmas for my mother and brother," Verity said, taking off her apron and brushing down her serviceable dress.

She moved over to the fire and raked it up, adding a few logs to the blaze. Then she sat down in an armchair by the small table they used for having tea. She was feeling unsettled and fidgeted a bit with her hair, but it seemed to still be in place despite her endeavours.

"The decorations look absolutely wonderful, dear. You seemed slightly discomposed..." Mary stopped as Sarah entered with a tea tray, laden with porcelain cups, a rather ugly silver teapot and matching milk jug, together with some plates containing slices of Sarah's home-made fruit cake.

"Oh, thank you, Sarah, that will be all," Verity insisted as their housekeeper began to arrange the plates and obviously intended to pour tea for them.

Sarah bobbed a small curtsy and then withdrew, shutting the drawing room door behind her. They could hear her in the hall, calling the maid Annie.

“Annie, fetch a broom and sweep up the leaves on the floor and make the hall presentable in case there are visitors. My lady, the dowager countess might make a call.”

They could not really hear Annie’s mumbled reply, but the noises of her bustling to tidy after Verity’s self-appointed task reached them.

“I sincerely hope my mother will not visit today,” Verity said, sipping the tea Mary had handed her. “Her last visit really overstretched my nerves and my patience. I nearly lost my temper with her, I am afraid.”

Mary wrinkled her nose. “Your mother is a very astute lady and would notice your discomposure, so perhaps that is for the best. Her ladyship would soon be asking searching questions as to whether it was the young vicar or the handsome new baron who was bringing such a fetching blush to your cheeks.”

Ignoring that suggestive dig about the baron, Verity directed the conversation somewhere safer. They chatted for a little and enjoyed the fruit cake, but then heard a horse trotting up the path to their home.

“I wonder, whoever that can be? The vicar comes in his gig and your mother always travels in her carriage.” Mary rose and peeked through the bay window, “Oh yes, the new baron is exceptionally handsome, and he is turning on his charm to Sarah, who has gone to the door. She is blushing and giggling like a young girl...”

Verity’s heart lurched. “It is the new baron?”

“Yes.”

“How can you be so certain; you haven’t met the man!”

“I am fascinated by your breathlessness and your flushed features,” Mary said, arching an elegant brow. “But if not the baron, then we have another landowner new to our society and he has come to call.”

Verity stood, not liking how anxious she felt. Hurrying to the windows, she peeked outside. It was indeed the baron! Why had he come? “Oh, dear! I must look a mess,” Verity said, going to the mirror to check her hair and dress.

“You look beautiful as always, dear. The baron is not going to care about what you are wearing. He has come uninvited and must take us as we...”

Verity pressed a hand over her pounding heart. “Do not say that Mary, he was, er, rather forward in his first meeting with me...”

Her friend’s eyes widened, and her mouth formed a small O of wonder. “How forward?”

“You need not answer, your blushes and bright eyes explain a lot, Verity, now compose yourself, that will be Sarah at the door to announce him...” Mary said as the door was knocked on and opened.

“My lady, Lord Rupert Rogers asks if he can call. I did not know whether to say if you are at home to visitors, ma’am,” Sarah or more correctly, Mrs. Cutler said.

“Yes, please admit my lord, although we were not expecting visitors, we will be pleased to receive our neighbour,” Mary jumped in to say, evidently fearing that Verity would get flustered and refuse him.

Verity glared at her friend, who pointedly did not look her way. Taking a deep, steady breath, she relaxed in the armchair and prepared to greet their uninvited neighbour. *There was nothing to be nervous about*, she gently reassured herself. This visit wasn’t a *beau* coming to pay a call to a lady he was most interested in, and Verity certainly wasn’t interested in a gentleman like the baron.

If only the patter of her heart did not mock her most stringently.

Chapter 4

The housekeeper who answered his knock on the front door of the dwelling Farrant had directed Rupert to was properly correct, but more than prepared to deny his entry, should Lady Verity not wish to be disturbed.

She had curtsied when he offered his card, saying, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, milord. I will see if Lady Verity and Miss Herriot are receiving visitors.”

“I am already acquainted with Lady Verity. I am sure she will allow me a few minutes as a courtesy visit...” He said, smiling, few females could resist his smile, and he made good use of it.

She tittered a little when he passed a small compliment on the quality of her fine cap. However, she left him on the doorstep, clutching the roses he had cut, from his great-uncle’s hothouse, as it seemed appropriate to bring flowers even this deep into advent.

Rupert was relieved and trying not to disarray his cravat, when the housekeeper returned, smiling. “My lady and Miss Herriot will receive you, milord, please come this way. May I take your hat? We do not have a butler, I’m afraid.”

He handed her his hat, gloves, and riding crop, putting down the flowers while he shrugged off his many caped riding coat. He smiled again. At least her ladyship had agreed to see him.

That was a good sign indeed. Rupert allowed the housekeeper to direct him to a tidy drawing room, where Lady Verity and another lady awaited his presence. Lady Verity appeared a fetching picture in a blue merino gown with Andalusian sleeves, a shawl in a riot of golds and blues covered the dress’ dropped shoulders. The gown reflected the blue of her eyes. Her strawberry blonde hair was upswept in a riot of curls and her eyes appeared bright and direct. Still to him Lady Verity seemed a bit nervous.

Perhaps another good sign?

She surged to her feet to dip into a polite curtsy. “My lord, how...kind of you to call. Allow me to introduce my friend and companion, Miss Mary Herriot. Mary, this is Lord Rupert Rogers, the new baron of Ellesmere Hall.”

Miss Herriot was a most handsome woman as well but clearly older than

Lady Verity. She stood and curtsied, gracing him with a warm smile. Introductions and a few polite sallies out of the way, Rupert sat on the sofa opposite Lady Verity. Miss Herriot discreetly went to sit by the window, her fingers darting with skill as she worked on a piece of needlepoint.

The lady who had stolen into his dreams last night stared at him with an air of curious expectations. Unexpectedly Rupert chuckled.

“Are you to share your humour, my lord?”

“It occurred to me just now that I am abominably nervous.”

Her lush lips parted, and she gave him a quick smile. “It is surprising to hear a man of your evident self-assurance say so.”

“It is even *more* shocking to feel it.”

“Then I am gratified by your honesty!”

He gathered that she was charmed by his admission and he had no notion how to react to it. Rupert had lovers before, but he had never sat before a lady he desired to court. It truly worried him that he could be this flustered, but he did a credible job of hiding it.

“Forgive my directness, but why did you call?”

“No need to ask for any pardon, I like your bluntness.”

Her mouth softened into a small smile. “And was it my directness that urged you to call upon me?”

“Amongst other things.”

Her gaze lowered to the roses in his hand. Mercy. He’d almost forgotten that he had them. When her gaze lifted to him, there was a touch of something in her eyes he could not decipher.

“These are for you, Lady Verity.”

“Thank you, they are beautiful,” she murmured, taking the bright red roses and lifting them to her nose.

She stood and strolled over to a vase on the mantle that already held a few white lilies and added the roses. Upon returning, he fancied that she sat a bit closer to him. At the soft hollow in her throat, he could see the mad flutter of her pulse. Lady Verity was very much aware of him, and that knowledge had him relaxing more against the cushions.

She artfully prepared tea and handed him a cup, which he accepted. Their fingers brushed, and she snatched back her hand as if she had been burned.

Rupert angled his head and studied her. She was decidedly skittish around him, and he realized he would have to be incredibly careful with his pursuit. He did not wish to scare her, but to draw her close to him so he might learn

everything he could about her, and perhaps allow her to assuage any curiosity she might also possess about himself.

Suddenly he felt inspired to ask, "Are you very good with puzzles, Lady Verity?"

Her brows slightly creased. "Puzzles?"

"Mysteries...and treasure hunting?"

"I am considerably intrigued," she said. "To what are you referring?"

"There is a treasure...a fortune in my home or on my property. I must find it, perhaps I could invite you to help me?"

"To help you find this treasure?" she asked a bit sceptically.

"Yes," he said, giving her a most charming smile.

She did not sigh with longing or giggle and bat her lashes as other ladies did in the past when he turned this smile on them. No, Lady Verity seemed amused with his efforts, and he was oddly charmed by the devilry glinting in her eyes.

"I can see you believe this to be true, my lord. But a fortune is hidden on your estate? How eccentric."

"I have the poem my uncle left me...his only clue."

"You would trust me to see this? What if I should try to find this fortune for myself?"

Amusement curled through him. "I am a good judge of character."

She arched a brow, almost playfully. "And what have you therefore, discerned about me?"

It was madness that tempted him to reach out and stroke the back of his fingers over her cheek. Her eyes widened, and her chest lifted on a ragged breath, but she did not pull away from his bold caress.

"That you are soft, sweet and kind," he murmured, "and you are no thief, but a woman of wit and intelligence."

Her gaze cut to where Miss Herriot had sat, and he lowered his hand. Miss Herriot had left the room, and neither of them had been aware.

Lady Verity delicately cleared her throat. "Where is the poem?" she murmured huskily.

Rupert reached into his pocket, astonished to note his fingers slightly trembled.

"May I read it?" she asked, pushing a loose tendril behind her ears.

He spread it on the small table before them, and their heads dipped closely together. Rupert closed his eyes briefly, inhaling her sweet scent into

his lungs. Hell, she roused in him a desperate need to haul her into his arms and kiss her without thoughts of consequences or another fiery slap.

*“So Daring Deeds of heroes gladly tell
Brave battling Neptune’s briny sway expound
My Rogue, I will always wish you well...”*

“My Rogue...is that you?”

“A sobriquet courtesy of Uncle Frederick, the author of this maddening poem.”

“A fitting name, for after our first meeting, I lamented you were a right rogue!” she said with a light and very charming laugh.

“Ah, so you thought of me afterwards,” replied Rupert drolly, “I am pleased you did not cast me from your thoughts to the depths of hell.”

She cast him a quick side-eye glance of amusement before returning her attention to the wrinkled paper.

He hid a secret smile as she continued reading,

*“Fabulous Beast ascending Mordant hound
Will ever lead you onwards to your goal
Ages old colours fade yet seek within
Beneath martial courage lies treasure whole”*

“That is interesting. The treasures lie beneath martial courage. That might be the most important line of the verse. Where have you looked?”

“My good man Farrant and I have searched the attic and there was nothing. Apart from the servants’ quarters, we have turned the house upside down. There were no clues and definitely no treasure apart from the family silver and heirlooms. Not even any family jewels.”

*“A prayer to atone from forlorn sin
A quest of import in heavenly land
Uncover riches select bonny bride
Then perhaps fortune will be close to hand
Giving you all I own I depart with pride
To mouldering bones now I must travel*

Leaving you a riddle to unravel.”

“How fascinating,” she said softly. “And do you really believe there is a treasure to be found? A fortune?”

“My uncle was eccentric, but he wouldn’t lead me on a merry chase like this. So, there is *something*. I understand from his stories that he spent an, er... interesting, early life, and travelled extensively.”

Her eyes searched his expression for a bit. “I gather it is important for you to find it.”

“Very.”

“You’ll not elaborate?”

“I thought you liked mysteries.”

She flashed him a quick smile at his provocation. Fighting the temptation to lean forward and capture her lips with his, Rupert stood and made his way over to the small set of windows overlooking a well-tended but simple garden. He heard the swish of her skirts as she moved to stand beside him.

“I have a very inquisitive spirit, and I do enjoy mysteries,” she said softly.

“Does that mean you accept my invitation?”

Silence fell and they just stood there staring out the gardens.

“Lady Verity?”

“Yes?”

“I also mean to pursue you most seriously.”

Her breath audibly hitched.

“I...I would encourage you *not* to do so.”

Those softly spoken words were like a kick in his chest. “My intentions are solely honourable.”

He turned and looked down at her. She looked...dispossessed of all composure, her cheeks flushed a bright red, and her eyes were wide with apprehension. He had asked Farrant about her family, and apparently, there was no attachment between the lady and another. However, Farrant had suggested that the vicar was making his pursuit of the lady a trifle obvious. Though Rupert had also learned of a fiancé who died a few years ago in the war. Was she still in love with the man? But then he recalled the sweet manner in how she had responded to his kisses, the eager press of her slim body to his, and her soft moans of surrender.

“I’ve alarmed you.”

Her hand fluttered to her throat, the gesture one of delicacy he would not

have expected to associate with her. From their very first meeting, he had sensed her strength.

“We’ve only just met,” she said on a choked whisper. “You cannot know that you wish to court me. You are preposterous, my lord!”

“Why do you seem so frightened by the notion?”

Her chest lifted on a rapid breath, and her eyes were wide with vulnerability and unfathomable emotions, but she made no reply. Her eyes lowered to his mouth before she quickly looked away. It struck him then, quite forcibly, that Lady Verity was very much was attracted to him, and it rattled her.

“Do you like me as well?” he asked warmly.

She scoffed. “We are barely acquainted!”

“That does not answer my question, and please recall you are a lady who values truthfulness.”

He didn’t like pinning her on the spot in such a manner, but he was hoping for a sign that he would not pursue her in vain. Rupert did not believe in bestowing his attention to a lady who might be discomfited by it.

“Do you like me?” he repeated softly. “Should you say no, I promise I will not bother you with my unwanted courtship, though I would also treasure a friendship.”

She marched away, only to falter in the centre of the room. Lady Verity seemed to struggle with herself, and Rupert said nothing or made any more movement towards her. After a few moments, she whirled around to face him. Such emotions flashed across her lovely features—irritation, desire, fear, and such sweet hope.

That hope had warmth rushing through his entire body.

With one word, she could silence him forever on matters of courtship, but she did not deny liking him. Rupert smiled. “I want you to know that when I steal a kiss from you, or when I ask you to play chess with me or to take long walks in the gardens is not because I am playing the rogue.”

She pressed a hand over her heart, which he suspected pounded fiercely, for his reacted in a similar manner. “I cannot credit you would so boldly state your intentions.”

“Would you have preferred fawning and flattery coined in vagueness?”

“Of course not,” she said softly. “Such behaviour would not have been the mark of a gentleman with honour.”

“Precisely, my lady,” he said. Never did he want her to mistake his

attentions as that of a rake.

“It is just...we have only met,” she said so faintly he almost missed it.

“Can a gentleman not know upon that first meeting that he has met a lady he finds worthy of courtship? Can he not know it by the way his heart reacts, especially as it does so in a way he has *never* before experienced? Can he not know it because he recalls over and over the lovely way she laughed and that charming way she wrinkles her nose?”

In her eyes, he saw her deep awareness of him as a man, but also a wariness that stirred a tender ache inside of Rupert. It was clear to him Lady Verity was alarmed by her attraction to him, and that made him aware she might have never felt such visceral feelings before.

“Yes,” she said, a soft smile about her mouth. “It is entirely possible. But with such roguish warnings of illicit kisses, I daresay it would be foolish of me to accompany you on a search for any treasures!”

Yet she did not sound frightened, more challenging.

He smiled at her. “Yet, I suspect you will help me.”

She waited a few beats before answering, “Perhaps. We would have to conduct another search of your home carefully reading the poem.”

“Ah, yes...will you take your Miss Herriot with you?”

Lady Verity’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “I am four and twenty, my lord, I do not need to be chaperoned. I am a woman of independence and good sense.”

His heart tripped. Dear God, he hoped she was not *too* sensible. “I thank you!” he said with a flourish and a quick bow.

She tapped her chin with a finger. “Of course, for a twenty percent assistance fee.”

He mockingly stumbled as if distressingly alarmed. “La, twenty percent! Ten percent, I say!”

“Yet I believe seventeen percent to be most reasonable,” she countered with an elegant shrug of her shoulder. “I shall not move from that figure.”

He cast her an amused glance. “Fifteen percent!”

“I accept,” she murmured, pushing out her hand as if to suggest they shook on it.

Instead, he lowered his head and pressed a brief kiss to the corner of her mouth. Lady Verity gasped, her breath fanning warm against his lips, but did not pull away from him.

He reached up to touch her cheek, a feather-light caress. “And our deal is

sealed, Lady Verity.”

“You *are* a rogue.”

Rupert winked. “Only a little bit, I promise.”

She stepped away from him with a light laugh. Was she nervous or excited? He truly couldn't tell. But he sensed the lady was about to dismiss him, and that he did not want, not yet. “The day is glorious. Will you take a turn with me outside?”

She glanced through the windows to the rolling lawns. “Only for a few minutes.”

A heady relief settled in his gut, and after collecting her shawl and bonnet, they were soon striding across a well-manicured lawn through a fenced-in garden with a fairly barren vegetable plot in the distance.

“I love the outdoors,” she said suddenly. “There is a chill, gray gloom over the lands and I love it. I think my favourite time might be winter.”

A quick glance revealed her face lifted to the sky, a study of delight.

“Why do you enjoy winter?”

“I think it's the snow. I still recall playing in it for hours with my father as a child. It could also be the joy of Christmas. It is a pity not all winters have snow which settles.” She cast him a quick glance from beneath long lashes. “Which season do you enjoy?”

“Spring.”

“My second favourite season,” she said with a soft smile.

“There is just something inexplicable about watching the trees and flowers bloom, little squirrels emerging from their drays. I love their mischief and the flash of their bright red fur. It feels almost like a rebirth, something we are privileged to be a part of.”

“The explosion of colour and airiness after the bleakness of winter mornings.”

Rupert smiled. “Yes, to witness the change always leave me in awe.”

“And besides taking long walks and treasure hunting, what do you enjoy?”

There was such genuine curiosity in her gaze. The awareness sent his pulse running wild, and he almost laughed at his reaction.

“I like to ride, and in the quiet moments I like to paint. Only I am terrible at it. Only last week, I tried to paint the manor's gardens, and Farrant guessed my efforts to be a flock of geese fighting for food on the lake.”

She giggled, the sound so warm and infectious. A few minutes out

walking soon turned into an hour, then a next hour, walking and talking. Rupert found it fascinating but could not later recount precisely what they had discussed. It was one of the best spent days to Rupert's mind, and by the time he bid her good day and departed, there had been a wide smile on her lips and tender longing in her beautiful eyes. He had stayed much longer than was correct for the normal courtesy visit.

And that was all he needed for now.

Chapter 5

Rupert found himself nervous as Farrant announced Lady Verity's arrival at exactly half-past ten. Rupert tugged at his cravat for the fifth time, before placing his hands behind his back in a loose clasp and what he hoped showed a collected composure. While he had declared to the lady his intention to woo her, it would not do to appear too foolishly besotted before he understood her true nature. Or what he continually felt.

"Lady Verity, my lord, you did inform me she was expected, sir," the butler declared in stentorian tones upon entering the large drawing room.

Lady Verity sauntered inside the room, looking delightfully rosy and bright-eyed.

"Yes, of course, Lady Verity, thank you for honouring me with your presence and being so prompt to assist me in resolving my enigma. Farrant, could you arrange tea, please." He bowed over her hand and held it far longer than necessary.

"Yes, of course, my lord," his butler said bowing himself out and closing the door behind him.

"Welcome to Ellesmere Manor, Lady Verity, I gather you know the house quite well?"

He found that he still had hold of her hand and was very reluctant to let it go. Rupert let his thumb stroke over her soft skin and suppressed a thought of stroking other areas of her body—the hollow at her throat down to her décolletage or the dainty shape of her well-turned ankle up to supple thighs.

He was almost irritated by how easily his thoughts turned carnal around her. It felt foreign to his nature. Such reactions didn't come so readily before with any other woman. Fortunately, for him, her formal morning gown was all-covering and obviously designed to suppress any attempts on his part at her seduction. Its stern sage green, buttoned high, with only a thin trim of lace at neck and wrists, while serviceable and modest in the extreme, presented a very pretty picture to him. Rupert was flattered she had not pulled her hand away from his but peered up at him, like a stunned rabbit caught in the light of lampers.

"I was very fond of your great-uncle Frederick. I visited often and

sometimes would read to him. He was sorely missed by everyone. He was a very charming old gentleman, who had a hoard of humorous stories,” she finally stated.

“Hoards are what I am hoping for. Did anything occur to you about the sonnet’s puzzle overnight? I cannot think where to look next.”

“I hope you don’t mind but I talked over the sonnet with Miss Herriot, who is the soul of discretion and she thought it might relate to a shield of some kind. It was the mordant hounds that triggered that idea. She said that heraldic black dogs were called talbots.”

Rupert was aware they were just standing there in the centre of his drawing room, but he did not want to break the intimacy of how closely they stood, or the curious hunger in the gaze peering up at him. “I agree that she was the soul of discretion, leaving us alone so tactfully yesterday. It was a great effort on my part not to sweep you into my arms and kiss you senseless,” he teased, bestowing a chaste kiss upon the back of her hand, while his eyes stated far too clearly that he wanted far more.

The faint pink feathering across her cheeks charmed him.

“You must not flirt with me, my lord, or I will forget to tell you what Mary said...”

A knock on the door, announcing Farrant’s return, interrupted them and she sharply pulled her hand from his. He was disappointed at its loss but realised it would be indiscreet to be found that way by his servant.

“Enter,” he called and stepped away from Lady Verity.

Farrant entered, holding the door open for a young maid bearing a laden tea tray, “Tea, my lord,” he announced, then he cleared his throat, “I apologize, my lord, but I spotted a carriage sweeping up the main drive.”

Rupert frowned. “I’m not expecting any other visitors, Farrant. Do you know who it may be?”

Farrant scowled. “I fear it is Mr. Maurice, sir. I recognised his flashy carriage and dreadful horses. Shall I refuse him? He did not bother to come to the funeral, excused himself saying he was indisposed...”

A jolt of surprise went through Rupert. “Cousin Maurice? What does that little weasel want, I wonder? No, don’t try to answer that question, I suppose I had better do the pretty and find out. He is family, I suppose. You had better let him come in, although I could do without his malodorous person.”

Farrant frowned. “The late baron felt much the same, but towards the end, he refused to receive him pleading his ill health. If I may say, my late lord

called him a vulture rather than a weasel, my lord.”

A very apt description for his cousin who had proven his selfish and greedy nature years ago. “Both seem appropriate, but if he has descended on us, we will suffer his presence. I believe you have met my cousin Maurice, Lady Verity?”

“I have regrettably had the honour of being introduced to him,” she whispered back. “He seemed a man very concerned with his vanity.”

Rupert put his hand in front of his mouth to cover a laugh as Farrant announced a most unwelcome visitor. His cousin Maurice was ostensibly his heir or next in line to the title. He was five years older than Rupert, and he had been the bane of his childhood, a nasty sly bully who had tormented the young Rupert. At least he had bullied him until Rupert had outpaced his growth and strength...

The figure that entered did slightly resemble a vulture and a weasel combined, but despite that, the family resemblance remained, Rupert thought. Maurice’s visage looked like a cruel caricature of his own image. The comparison was not flattering; Rupert knew he himself was a picture of health, Maurice was sallow, and his skin stretched gauntly on his face, giving a pinched effect. He admitted Maurice had the family nose, but it was thinner and had a pronounced hook to the end, rather like a raptor’s beak. Cousin Maurice had eyes the same colour as him, but Maurice’s were smaller, deeper set and had a cold fire within them.

Maurice Rogers made a perfunctory bow and took in the room, finally noticing they were not alone. Verity had walked over to the window and stood with her back to the room.

“Ah, I appeared to have interrupted you, Rupert. I hoped the dignity of your title would have made some dent in your raking. But to bring your ladybird down to Ellesmere to foist on the servants here is beyond acceptable. How dare you bring scandal to the family name ...” Maurice snidely said.

Rupert started to say something finding his hands bunched into fists, as the desire to give the little snot a good drubbing rose fast within him. However, before he managed to get out a word, Lady Verity stepped in.

“Mr. Rogers, I demand an apology immediately for that slander. I call on my neighbour to welcome him to the area and discuss some business only to be defamed by a slight acquaintance who appears to be a serious bore,” she said coldly, looking down her very pretty nose at the newcomer.

“Lady Verity? I am sorry I did not expect to find a decent, genteel lady,

such as you alone with Rupert. It is not at all respectable for you to be alone with a man of his reputation,” Maurice declared.

Outrage flashed in her eyes. “That is not an apology, how dare you suggest that I have behaved incorrectly? Nor is it your business to censor my behaviour, I am of age, and you were never my guardian or parent,” she said, pointing a neat finger at Maurice’s chest and poking it at him, forcing him to step back to the door.

Rupert admired her fierceness. She was unique and remarkably invigorating.

“You owe the lady an apology, Maurice, and it had better be damn good. Or I will beat you around the garden again ... until you are just a bloody pulp,” Rupert said icily.

Maurice visibly blanched, Rupert could see that he was quivering like a blanchmanger but felt no pity for him. How dare the little vermin enter his home and then start throwing slurs at Lady Verity?

“I, am ... I am most humbly sorry. I would ... never suggest that ... you, Lady Verity were anything but the most perfect lady... Please accept my ... most abject apologies,” the panicking Maurice declared, looking decidedly flushed.

“Is that sufficient, my lady? This maw-worm had no justification for forcing his filthy calumnies on you. I suppose he will do for sparring practice. If he were any kind of gentleman, I would challenge him for sullyng your honour, but as it is only my obnoxious cousin Maurice, I will happily plant him a facer or two to express my displeasure,” he said, turning towards Verity, who was determinedly attempting not to look amused. Rupert was proud that she sternly stared Maurice down.

“It was not much of an apology, but I suppose it will do...” she said.

Rupert admired how much poise she maintained in the awkward situation.

“Pity, I would enjoy a little exercise. I think under the circumstances that you should go now, Maurice,” Rupert insisted.

“But, I had business to discuss, you can’t just throw me out like that...” Maurice snapped, apparently shocked at how quickly his visit had gone to the blazes in a hand-basket.

“I believe I can, Maurice, you see, Ellesmere is my home. Farrant...”

The door opened quickly, suggesting that his butler had been listening at the door.

“Yes, my lord? How can I be of assistance?”

“Mr. Rogers is leaving. Would you please show him out immediately?” Maurice was hurried out, his head down but with a vicious look in his eyes.

Rupert turned to her. “I am sorry about that, Lady Verity.”

“His conduct was not your fault, my lord. I do wonder what he wanted,” she said.

Rupert raked his fingers through his hair, recalling that mean look in his cousin’s eyes. “Nothing good, as it was Maurice, I am sure. Are you all right, he did not distress you?”

There were angry voices and the sound of the front door being slammed.

Her lips curved. “I am not upset. I was struggling not to laugh because he looked so shocked to be brought to task. I do not think Mr. Maurice Rogers is a nice man, and his eyes were looking daggers at you. I should watch your back, my lord.”

“Oh, Maurice painted a target on it when I was just a boy. He was a nasty bully until I outgrew him. I’m not sure what he can do to me now, but I will deal with it...”

“The man was disgustingly offensive. I am sorry but after that little scene, if he crosses my path in future, I will give him the cut direct and turn my back on him. I am sorry as I know he is your family, but I will see that he is not received by my family and ask them to spread the word that he is persona non grata. However, you should not be using sporting cant in front of me.”

“My sincere apologies for my improper words in the heat of the moment, I stand rebuked,” Rupert bowed to her looking contrite, he flashed her his best puppy dog eyes, which she giggled at.

“Stop trying to turn me up sweet, my lord,” she said but there was no sting in her words.

“I would like to convince you that my suit is serious, but regrettably, I could do with finding Frederick’s treasure first to shower you with jewels and put the estate in good order. Returning to the unfortunate subject of Maurice, I would be happy to cut him too, but for now, he is my heir. I can’t really stop him inheriting unless I have heirs of my own. It would create a scandal. I am trying to be respectable,” he said ruefully. “Now, where were we before we so rudely interrupted? Ah, yes, we were going to have tea!”

Rupert reached over and placed a hand on the side of the teapot. “And the tea is cold and stewed. Farrant?”

“Yes, my lord,” his butler declared entering.

“Did you see Maurice off the premises?”

“Of course, sir. He went muttering and threatening about how your lordship could not treat him this way.”

“Did he say anything of any note? He never got to explain his reason for calling. His first words to me were to utter an insult to Lady Verity. I suppose you heard?”

Farrant tried to look shocked at this assertion but failed miserably. “Yes, my lord, you could not have done anything else, he went beyond the pale. I could not repeat word for word what Mr. Maurice said on his way out. There were a number of terms he used to describe you that are not fit for a lady’s ears.” Farrant paused.

“Quite, Farrant. But did he explain why he called, we are not exactly friends?”

“He said something about buying up your debts and making an offer for the estate, my lord. I am sorry, sir.”

“Yes, that is the sort of thing Maurice would do. Looks like we need to find that treasure quickly. The tea is cold; could we have a fresh pot, please? Then Lady Verity and I will put our heads together to try and unravel this Gordian knot of a puzzle.”

Fresh tea was fetched, and they sat while Verity poured. They consumed pastries with some fresh baked bread and jam while sitting opposite of each other, with the tea table acting as chaperone between them. Rupert watched her mouth as she delicately licked the crumbs off her mouth, wishing it had been his mouth, instead of his cook’s excellent confections. As such thoughts would lead to others that would quickly disarray his tailoring, he tried to get back to the subject of treasure hunting.

“Lady Verity, you were telling me about Miss Herriot’s ideas on talbots?”

“Yes, Mary thought the fabulous beast part might be a dragon, griffin, cockatrice, or something heraldic of that type. She recalled seeing a shield somewhere, some years back with a griffin at the top over three black dogs. It is not your family crest, but she wondered if it might be something she saw in the old chapel...”

“I don’t recall seeing it, but it is some years since I last visited the old chapel, which is part of the old abbey ruins. The chapel is the only building still really standing because my great-great-grandfather had it repaired and used it for some years. Great-uncle Frederick did not use it much because it is damp, draughty and made his bones ache. He would take the carriage to the

new parish church, which is more comfortable rather than walk over a mile to the abbey ruins.” He glanced through the windows, where the garden was being lashed by a deluge of sleeting rain.

“I would have suggested taking a stroll there together, but the weather has changed, and we would both be soaked. It is not an easy path to climb when the weather is this inclement, it is over a mile, and the path will be very overgrown and slippery.”

“Perhaps we could go tomorrow if the weather is fine?” she suggested.

“I will look forward to it, but for now perhaps we should explore the house further to see if Farrant and myself missed anything and you could tell me a little about yourself while we wait for the weather to clear...”

Knowing that Verity had walked from her house and had entered through the walled garden, which was now left unlocked. He was anticipating spending some time getting to know her and that prospect was even more attractive than actually discovering any treasure...

Damn silly of him to be thinking so when the treasure was so important.

He would of course offer to send her home in his carriage, or escort her home, should the freezing rain decide to let up. It did not look likely that it would stop soon, and he prayed that it would continue for some considerable time.

Chapter 6

Verity took a discreet peek at Rupert as he went through a few boxes they had dragged from the attic. Though he and his man Farrant already searched through the items, he hadn't groused or complained that she wasted time going over them again.

He is patient. And she liked that about him immensely. Over an hour had passed, and their search through the tomes, scrolls, and books which had been hidden away revealed no clues and no jewellery or valuables.

"Why do you think your Uncle Frederick did not leave this treasure in his will and with his bankers?" she asked, putting back some leather-bound books which looked incredibly old in a box. Her fingers itched to explore the pages further and Verity hoped she could procure an invitation to explore this library and its books.

"I have no idea, but will ask Farrant if he can give any insight into his late master's thinking."

Rupert who had been sitting on the carpet, glanced up, a shock of hair falling over his forehead and almost into his eyes. His masculine beauty stole her breath again for precious seconds and she glanced away briefly into the fire. It was such reckless madness that she was here with him in this exceptionally large manor and alone in the palatial library. And it was more than that he had truly promised fifteen percent of whatever trove they found. That money would help her greatly and allow her a financial freedom which had only been thought of in her wildest imaginations.

He had claimed he wanted to woo her...that he might steal kisses again and yet she hadn't been able to resist the desire to help him. Worse, she hadn't been able to deny that she liked him. It had felt so improbable. She hadn't been able to answer him for in truth she did not understand her alarming reaction to him, especially that it went beyond a physical feeling.

It had been more than that; she wanted to know this man and understand the complicated feelings he aroused in her.

Not even with her dear Richard had she felt such a strong physical attraction, or such an immediate sense of liking, of comfort. It had taken months of wooing from Richard before she had fallen for him, but her very

first meeting with Lord Rupert had sent her pulse skittering, filled her belly with butterflies, and made her sleep restless.

A part of her which had been hidden away for a long time, the part that still dreamed of a man to call her own, children, and happiness had cracked open at that very first kiss. It sounded silly whenever she reflected on it; however, it was still an irrevocable truth.

And that curiosity had pushed her to join him in this treasure hunt, even when she thought it unlikely a man of his stature and honour would ever accept a bride who had already discarded her chastity. And despite feeling such fright at the thought of opening her heart to love and the pain of loss again.

“You are staring at me, Lady Verity, and with such a look,” he said tenderly. “I believe I would give you half of the treasure to know what you are thinking now.”

She smiled. “I am staring because I am awaiting your answer.”

His mouth twitched. “It is a question I’ve asked myself numerous times. Perhaps Uncle Frederick wanted to torment me or give me a challenge or perhaps he had sensed how bored I was with my usual pursuits. I wish he had left me more than the sonnet, so I might have understood his reasoning.”

There was an ache in his voice that had Verity staring at him. “You miss him.”

A lopsided grin appeared on his face. “Every day. He understood me better than most.”

A knock sounded before she could probe more, and the housekeeper entered with a tea trolley and some small sandwiches and cakes. They fell silent while she arranged their repast on a small walnut table by the fire. Verity stood, admiring the extensive bookshelves which seemed to stretch from floor to ceiling. She studied the shelves farthest away from the bank of windows realising they were much shorter than the others. She padded over, examining it, and with a jolt of excitement she whirled around.

“What is it?” Rupert asked her, dropping the miniature portrait he was holding and surging to his feet.

“I think this bookcase might hide a secret lair,” she cried excitedly.

His face creased in astonishment before he chuckled. “A lair?”

“Yes. Push your hand behind the shelf right here,” she said, grabbing his hand and urging him over. “Do you feel the ridges? I think...I think it might be the spine of a door, surely.”

He frowned, feeling along the edge of something behind the bulk of the bookshelf. "I feel it," he muttered. "What in God's name?"

They faced the bookshelf together, peering at every book and its spine.

"Farrant and I did not consider a secret entrance. The manor is old, and I visited Uncle Frederick often, and he never once mentioned secret chambers!"

"If this is designed like any of those in the gothic romances I read, we only have to find the lever that would control the mechanism to open the door. Normally it is disguised as a book."

"Well, Uncle Frederick was always terribly original," Lord Rupert said drily. "It is unlikely he would follow anything that appears in a gothic romance."

Verity laughed and started to pull at the books on the highest shelf. She wasn't tall enough to reach, and before she could grab a stool, warm hands settled on her hips.

"I'll lift you," he murmured, his breath wafting against the tendril of hair curling on her forehead.

A weak-kneed feeling assailed Verity, and her heart fluttered like wild birds in her chest. This close, she smelled his warm male fragrance. He made her body come alive, but never before felt hunger crawled through her body, and she trembled in his embrace. *What madness is this?* Considerably disconcerted, she said, a bit breathlessly, "There is a stool. I can stand atop it, my lord, there is no need to lift me."

His foot lashed out and kicked away the stool. "What stool?"

Verity giggled. "You are outrageous!" and how warm he made her feel, and with a sense of shock, Verity admitted how cold she had been inside.

Then he lifted her with such effortless ease and muscular grace. She tested each book, and a sigh of disappointment left her when they yielded no result. On the third row they found some success, and Verity and Lord Rupert shared a shocked but excited glance when with a groan, the door swung open.

The brightly colored nature of the room startled her, for she had been expecting something dark and gothic. This was more exotic, giving hints of far off lands and sumptuous luxury. It was a small room but comfortably furnished with three small sofas with several cushions, a carpet, and a table with an assortment of paraphernalia atop it, all in bright, vibrant colours with clashing oriental patterns. High in the ceiling, rain pattered against glass windows and even in this room they could hear the rumble of thunder.

“There is nothing suspicious about this room to need to keep it hidden,” Verity said.

Lord Rupert slowly walked about the chamber, trailing his fingers over the sofa's padded arm, to the decanter on the table. “I think this was a place Uncle Frederick could disappear inside whenever he needed, perhaps whenever he felt the outside world, and other people, pressing in on him. I am amazed I never noticed the windows of it outside and failed to ascertain its existence.”

Rupert plucked what looked like a miniature treasure chest off the table and flicked open the latch. He sucked in a sharp breath, and she hurried over to his side and peered into the chest.

“It is exquisite,” she said, staring at the glittering red ruby nestled in the small box.

“I was beginning to doubt its existence,” Lord Rupert said gruffly, “but this might be a piece of the treasure.”

A careful search of the small but cosy room revealed the ruby to be the only example of treasure. However, there was a small bookcase, which seemed to contain scrolls and books in strange languages.

“I have no idea if these are of value or not, but I suspect they could be...”

Lord Rupert lowered himself into the sofa, staring at the ruby. It was hard for her to decipher his contemplative expression.

“Does finding this here fit with anything from the sonnet?” she asked, sitting beside him.

“No. But now I am wondering if there are many hidden passages and rooms like this in the manor.”

Verity frowned. “I do not think he scattered the treasure about the manor and the grounds. His sonnet implied it was in one place. Perhaps this ruby is here because it had some meaning to him?”

Lord Rupert scrubbed a hand over his face. “I hope it did not, for I intend to sell it for a pretty sum for it right away. I will send my man to see it done. I do believe I might get at least a thousand pounds for it.”

“That is a goodly sum!”

“It is, and it will allow me to do some significant repairs to my tenants’ homes and clean their ditches before Christmas. Many widows lost their husbands and sons in the war are struggling to survive. This will allow me to ensure their larders are filled comfortably for a few months at least.”

There it was again, that rush of sensation that filled her with warmth.

He glanced up and the frown between his brows disappeared. "You are staring again, Lady Verity."

"You are incredibly thoughtful and kind," she said huskily, that sweet warmth filling her chest and expanding throughout her body.

His eyes widened slightly. "I do nothing extraordinary."

"You do not seem flush in the pockets, yet your first thoughts upon finding a small fortune were for others. I...I find that admirable."

Holding her regard, he closed the box and rested it on the table.

"I...thank you, Verity, but I do not want you to think me completely selfless. I plan to purchase something for myself as well."

"Such as?"

"A shawl and a hairpin for my mother."

She smiled at him. "That is also for someone else."

He scowled at her.

"Does it bother you that I might think you are kind, my lord?"

He grinned as if he saw the silliness of it. "I just did not want you to think me perfect and or too saintly, then end up one day disappointing your expectations. Heavy is the crown of sainthood."

"I would not dare think a right rogue such as yourself could be too good."

They shared a small chuckle between them before they fell into silence.

Verity was painfully aware they were just staring at each other, and how remarkably intimate their position was.

"Does your mother intend to live here with you?"

"No," he murmured. "We have the most charming cottage in Hampshire. My father died a few years ago, and home is where she feels closest to him. All their memories are there, and she will not leave him. We have promised to visit each other often."

"It was a love match."

"A most beautiful one," he said gruffly, his gaze intent on her. "Tell me, Lady Verity, what do you like to do? The other day we spoke for so long. I still recall your funny tale of the butcher chasing the pig down Buckland Dinham High Street, of a lady called Mrs. Blanchard being sweet on Dr. Wint, and of Mary's dreams. You spoke little of yourself."

And though their walk had been lovely, and she enjoyed every moment, Verity had been deliberate in her evasiveness. "I...there is not much to tell," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Are you afraid to tell me?"

Her heart gave a violent jolt, and it took several moments before she said, "I enjoy reading immensely and taking long walks in the woods."

"Do you read often?"

She nodded. "Every day. In those pages, I find an escape that is just wonderful."

"And what is it that you run from?"

Her heart gave another powerful lurch. "I...I am not running from anything. I read because I find stories beautiful and complex, and thrilling. My senses are captivated for a few hours, and the world becomes a place where..."

"Where you do not feel lonely?"

Yes. But she did not dare say it aloud. Verity was dismayed by the feeling stirring in her heart. She'd convinced herself she needed nothing more from life, yet with a few questions an ache of unfulfilled need rose inside like a gathering storm.

He shifted perilously closer. "Tell me, Lady Verity, what captivates you when you are not reading?"

"I also garden," she whispered, suddenly embarrassed by the emptiness of her life. As quickly as the feeling consumed her, she pushed fiercely pushed it aside. Verity would not let this man, who was bound to be a fleeting presence, allow her to feel any sort of regret over an existence she had chosen for herself.

"Is there anything you wish for, but it appears far from your reach?"

Her throat went tight at the look in his eyes, which said that he wanted to give her whatever unattainable desire she owned. *A man to call my own...a lover, a husband, at least three children. A love that was kind and passionate and one that would endure many years together.* Her heart ached terribly, and did she not say all of that, but replied, "Riding as well. When you had mentioned you love riding, I wanted to tell you it was another delight we share," she admitted candidly, a smile in her voice. "I used to ride regularly, but that is a pleasure I've not had in some time. We...I am not able to keep a stable."

"I shall get you a horse and we will ride in the mornings together."

"You are outrageous! I couldn't accept such a gift!"

He smiled. "No, but I am falling in love."

Verity gasped and felt herself flush with warmth. "You *are* outrageous!"

She stood, smoothing down the front of her gown, unable to meet his

eyes. “I think it is time I return home,” she said a bit breathlessly. “I will return tomorrow. The verses of the sonnet implied that the grounds—”

Her words faltered when he stood and with just one step, he was right before her. It took such courage to lift her face to his because he could discern the powerful need quaking through her.

He cupped her cheeks. “Do not shy away from me.”

“Rupert!”

“Yes, Verity?”

She fought to gather her composure at their proximity and lost. Her fingers trembled, and her heart raced. “Rupert, I—”

Her lashes fluttered close when he lifted her face to his.

“Open your eyes,” he said, his tone a bit uneven.

She complied, noting the flush against his elegant jawline and the glitter of need in his eyes.

“I am going to kiss you.”

And by telling her, he gave her an avenue for retreat, but she could do nothing but stare up at him helplessly.

“And I *am* going to marry you.”

She laughed, and it came out a breathless and alarmed sound.

He dipped his head and caught her mouth with his in a passionate kiss. Verity did not pull away but lifted her hands to twine them around the nape of his neck, kissing him back with chaotic need pulsing through her. His mouth urged her to part her lips, and when she did, he touched his tongue to hers.

Verity moaned and shivered in his arms.

Her whole body turned liquid, her breasts swelling inside her gown, a pulse of heat rushing to that secret place between her thighs. All from a kiss. A sob rose in her throat, and he swallowed it, ravishing her mouth with devastating expertise. His hands did not stay idle, one held her to him and the other roamed slowly over her, cupping, touching, moulding from her throat to her breasts and her buttocks. And he never released her mouth from his wonderful kisses. And she did not want him to. Verity wanted to live in the moment, to bask in the passion, to revel in the joy of feeling so alive when she had felt empty for so long.

They tumbled to the sofa and their lips parted briefly.

His eyes were dark with arousal and a tenderness that had her heart stuttering. She wanted to protest that they hardly knew each other, but that

assessment felt so wrong. There was a sense of knowing beating inside her heart, a feeling of belonging, and it was with this man poised above her, staring down at Verity as if she were the treasure he had been searching for all along.

She pulled him down to her and brushed her lips against his, and he pressed her back against the cushions and kissed her breathless. He cupped one of her breasts through her gown, rolling and squeezing her achingly sensitive nipple, sending piercing shards of pleasure travelling straight to her core. Verity arched into his embrace, a fever of need burning in her veins and sweeping aside all thoughts of modesty and proper behaviour.

She was so lost in passion, it was with a sense of dazed arousal she became aware that her day dress had been pushed to her mid-thighs and Rupert was on his knees before her, staring at her womanly centre, his expression a grimace of desire.

Her entire body blushed a bright red. Though she had known intimacy with the first man she had loved, it had not been like this. Lord Rupert stripped her of defences and roused a decidedly wanton side of her, Verity hadn't known she possessed. Coupling wasn't always done in the dark as she had assumed. It wasn't always sweet and tender. It was this—so raw and provocative, so passionate.

His body dipped, and his tongue stroked that sensitive place at the back of her knee before he sucked the spot. Then he went up with his mouth licking and nibbling, creating a trail of fire. She stared down at him in stark shock.

He wouldn't!

“My lord...I...Rupert!” she gasped.

Then he did, Lord Rupert placed a kiss against her aching sex. Verity collapsed against the sofa, slapping a hand over her mouth to contain the wild cries he was ripping from her with his very wicked and skilful tongue.

Verity's heart was pounding so hard inside her chest she couldn't get breath into her lungs. The hot, moist flick of his tongue against her tender sex made her whimper, and she clutched his shoulders. Nothing had ever felt that good, nothing had ever felt so necessary.

Something raw and primal tightened inside of her, so tight she felt as if she would snap in two. Her skin felt sensitized, and the piercing delight his tongue evoked had her trembling, breathless little cries coming from Verity. Her entire body jerked upward; a muffled cry wrenched from her throat at the astonishing pleasure speared upward and blossomed through her entire body.

She burst apart on a wild cry, her fingers tearing at the cushions as Verity felt such shuddering bliss.

Her dress was gently lowered, and Lord Rupert's forehead rested on her knees. She could feel his struggle for control, and she admired him even more for it, for with a blush, Verity admitted she had lost all sense of herself.

He came up beside her and gathered her into his arms. Verity went, a lump forming in her throat. It astonished her the remarkable intimacy she had allowed and that she did not feel ashamed.

What did he think of her incredibly wanton responses?

There was a deep part of her that felt uncertain. Only a week ago, he hadn't been in her life, and everything had meandered along the same expected path, even if her life had felt bereft of true contentment. She should dismiss all thoughts of the new baron and their mutual flirtation, there could be no future in it. She must dismiss her impossible hopes of marriage and children, especially with so eligible a rake as the young baron.

But what if his vow to marry her was genuine? And this...this was not a flirtation and seduction game for him? Did she even believe he could be this callous or was she simply scared it might be real? Because for so long she had hoped...

"I can see the doubt in your eyes," Rupert said, peering at her, his expression sombre. "I would not have dared taken you in my arms like that without the most serious of intentions."

Verity flushed and tucked a wisp of damp hair behind her ears. "I..."

"What is it? You look almost terrified."

Had he sensed her sudden and inexplicable unease? She was so used to composing her emotions even Mary sometimes complained about not able to discern Verity's moods.

She laughed shakily. "Perhaps I am."

"I fear I startled you with my unchecked passions," he answered truthfully.

"I wasn't frightened," she whispered, resting her head on his shoulder. "And if I were rattled, it wasn't because of you." *I terrified myself.* "I am more afraid of what all this means. I am a bit unsure of your certainty in marrying me, and the feelings that are brewing in my heart for you."

Delight lit in his expression. "And what feelings are those?"

"The ones that made me act in such a reckless and wanton manner just now!"

She glanced away from him, taking the time to regain her composure. When she looked back at Rupert, his expression was carefully contained, yet his gaze was tender and a bit resolute. Her mouth parted to tell him about Richard and the kind of love they shared, but the words would not come.

Rupert gently took her into his arms, and she did not resist.

“We might have to search the chapel and the grounds tomorrow,” he murmured. “The rain is showing no signs of easing.”

She nodded and snuggled into the warmth of his embrace even more. “I will be here.”

“Do you promise it?”

Her fingers trembled in the light grasp of his. “You doubt my word?”

He made no reply but pressed a kiss against her hair. They stayed snuggled together for a very long time, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof and windows.

Chapter 7

The former Ellesmere priory had once been a successful and profitable monastery that thrived until the reformation when it had been deliberately laid to waste. The estate had, in those days, belonged along with considerable further lands to the church. The estate after the monks' expulsion had been gifted to one of Henry the eighth's sycophants. As the priory had been deliberately devastated, he built his manor house on the present site. He considered it a more sheltered and attractive position, less at the vagaries of the weather and closer to the main road to Bath. However, he died without issue, so the estate had changed hands down distant family lines and finally ended up with the Rogers.

Ellesmere Manor had been constructed with much of the stone ransacked from the priory buildings. Wings and a new façade were added during the following centuries. It had managed to become a comfortable, if not particularly ostentatious pile. The original priory building had been built on a stony hill. A quarry had been established, the rock from which had created the priory and subsequently, by default Ellesmere Manor. The quarry had been abandoned in the previous century, and so the path to the chapel was only used regularly by a small flock of sheep and their shepherd.

Rupert and Lady Verity set off on the path to the ruined priory, accompanied only by Rufus on the following morning. Lady Verity had taken the precaution of wearing sturdy half-boots and was warmly wrapped as the day had started frosty and chill. She had worn her most practical and plain bonnet for such a trek.

Verity blushed when Lord Rupert took her arm and led her to the side of the manor house where the path to the ruins began. They hadn't spoken of the wicked way he had made love to her with his mouth yesterday, and he wisely kept silent, not wanting to scare her or ruffle her sensibilities. After Rupert had escorted her home, he had spent last night wondering if he had been too wicked with his seduction. Had he scared her off?

It was clear to him she did not believe he would marry her. Rupert smiled. He felt saddened by her disbelief at his certainty at times, but the idea of not marrying her seemed even stranger. In the wee hours of the morning,

he had methodically plotted a campaign on how to make her fall in love with him.

Daily walks had been at the top of his list. Daily kisses were another given, and he had written down several questions to ask about her likes and dislikes. Then he had turned his mind on what to do if she decided to stop helping him find the treasure. Despite his worry, Lady Verity had returned this morning, her eyes bright with awareness and her cheeks red with her blushes. Whenever he caught her looking at him, she would quickly glance away, and a secret smile would hover on her mouth.

Hiding away his own smile, he squeezed her fingers through her gloves gently. They walked along the path, their gaze sweeping over the untamed beauty of the land. Most of the land around the ruins had been separated from the estate over the centuries but no one appeared to have much wanted the land it occupied as it was not particularly good or easy to farm. The late baron had used it only to graze a few hardy sheep, letting the land return to nature in its own way.

“I used to love this walk as a boy, especially as Maurice hated climbing and preferred more modern romanticized follies disdaining genuine historical ones. So when I was small, I could guarantee some peace from his persecution by coming up here. It has some of my favourite views, I could happily spend all day up there. Once upon a time, there was another road to the priory which headed for Glastonbury, but that too has become disused, so there is no easy way to get there by a carriage. It would be possible to ride down the old road but it means a diversion of some miles by road to reach where it used to join the Yeovil road,” Rupert told her as Rufus scampered ahead of them.

“It is a lovely hike, we can already see all the countryside around, look you can see my house and the estate owned by my brother, in the direction,” she pointed out. “How wonderfully picturesque.”

“Oh, is that your family home? It is a very gracious house,” Rupert said, resting beside her as the hike was steep.

The bonnet shaded her expression from him as he peered down at her. “No, the main Hansard estate is further away nearer to Chippenham in Wiltshire, where I was brought up. This estate was normally intended for the eldest son, but after my father’s death, my brother administers both at least until he has an heir of age to live here.”

She took a few more steps up, staring at her home. “My brother leased me

the house, which is part of the estate, I believe it was previously used by an agent or steward,” she murmured. “When family arguments arose after my fiancé, Richard died, I wanted to live alone to avoid the pressure from my mother to return to society and find a new prospective groom. Unfortunately, she is in residence at present and keeps descending on me and is pressing for me to return to Town for next year’s season.”

Verity was obviously distressed explaining to him her situation. Rupert took her hand between both of his and squeezed it to comfort her.

“It was good of your brother to allow you some independence and stand against your Mother’s determination to get you married off. I understand your desire for independence, but do you not want marriage and children?”

Was it that she was still in love with her dead fiancé, and perhaps couldn’t imagine moving on without him? The thought left Rupert distressed.

Her gaze dropped to his, and the breadth of emotions he spied in her eyes briefly robbed him of breath.

“I would love a husband and children, but only if I could love him in return,” she said softly. “I know you say you want to marry me, but I could never be happy with a man who would be unfaithful to me. So you must be very sure that marriage is what you want because I do not wish to be humiliated by a husband who would have mistresses. You need money to put the estate to rights from the sounds of things, and my dowry is small. My father lost a lot of the family money, one way and another, and although my brother is working hard to restore the family fortunes. I could not expect him to increase my dowry under the present circumstances.”

Rupert’s heart jerked at the turn in their conversation. “I would want to marry you if you came to me penniless. I have never wanted a woman as much as you.”

She laughed a bit at that, seeming as if she did not know if she should be delighted or sceptical.

Rupert stepped scandalously closer to her, inhaling deeply of her unique fragrance of jasmine.

“I have never wanted to marry anyone before, but since the moment I kissed you under the mistletoe, I have dreamt of nothing but you. At my side, with our children, and in my bed. I feel as if my life will be empty and meaningless without you. Do not doubt my sincerity, I am totally in your thrall.”

Once again, she appeared frightened. Verity lifted her fingers encased in

gloves to the corner of his mouth.

“We have not known each other for long, so do not make promises you can’t keep.”

“Verity—”

“No, Rupert. Perhaps tomorrow you will discover your commitment is not as firm as you believe. I would rather you had some time to make sure your feelings are really engaged and that you do not only have physical attraction towards me that will not last.”

He took her hand and pressed it over his heart. “Your physical attractions and sensuality are a distinct distraction to me, but what I feel is more than that, I like you as a person and I think I know myself that I am not going to change my mind. I am not fickle. I will not let you down. However, if we do not get moving again, I will remove that ugly bonnet of yours and kiss you senseless. So it is probably better if we finish the climb because I find you very hard to resist.”

She blushed and took his hand without hesitation.

“Come on, it is not far now,” he pulled her forwards and they ran upwards for the final stretch.

The view from the top of the hill was stupendous, the sky was clear and they could see the panorama all around. They were puffing with exertion after the last dash up the hill, Verity’s face was shining and her bonnet was hanging by its ribbons, her hair ruffled and coming undone in the wind cutting across the hill.

The top of the hill was grassy and he led her towards the ruins. Most of the ruins were only a few small pieces of walls, but the path led towards the chapel which although obviously medieval in construction had been repointed and reroofed with more modern materials at some time in the past. Rufus raced off gambolling around the ruins and decorating some of the ancient stones with some fluid. They laughed as the small red dog scampered, his ears flapping in the breeze. He had left his humans to their own devices.

Rupert headed for a slightly larger piece of ruined architecture, a remaining arch which led into an angle of almost two whole walls which had obviously formed part of the main priory.

In the corner between the two walls was a rustic wooden bench which was where he led her to sit and recover from their arduous climb.

Rupert reached over and untied the tangled ribbons, removing the despised bonnet and placing it carefully on the grass beneath the bench.

“It is breathtakingly beautiful, Rupert,” Verity said with a soft gasp.

The bench was sheltered from the breeze and caught the sun so was warmer than the ambient temperature of wintry weather. Sitting there was a clear view of half the country around, including Ellesmere Manor and her own house.

He shrugged from his long coat and rested it on the thick, verdant grass beside the bench. “You could repose on my coat if the bench is not comfortable.”

Without hesitation, she lowered herself onto his coat, and stared up at the sky. The rays of the sun gleamed over her lovely features and his breath caught in his throat.

“May I come beside you?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

He lowered himself beside, uncaring he was more on the grass than onto his coat.

“Even the clouds are beautiful,” she said. “I see an entire ballroom with lords and ladies dancing.”

“I see a carriage being pulled by a team of four. I think they might be engaged in a race.”

He loved hearing her laugh.

“Rupert?”

“Hmm?”

“I...there are things you do not know about me.”

He kept his attention on the clouds while he turned over her words. “There is a lifetime to get to know them, unless you wish to tell me now.”

She was silent for so long that he turned his head on the grass to watch her.

“You do not have to tell me anything, Verity.”

“I am simply afraid it might change your opinion of me.”

“That, my sweet, is impossible.”

He tugged off his gloves and reached for her hand that was closest to him. Rupert removed her gloves and laced their fingers together. Finally, she turned her head to his. Something flickered in the depths of her eyes, something unknown that he could not touch.

“I like you too,” she confessed so softly, for a wild moment he thought he misheard. “You have been occupying every space in my thoughts.”

“You like me,” he repeated slowly.

“Yes, so very much it scares me. Nothing should feel this profound so soon.”

His fingers tightened on hers and he wanted to shout his happiness but contained himself. “My father knew my mother was for him only two hours after he met her. In his youth Uncle Frederick met a young lady who had lived in the village and he knew right away that his life was with her. She died before they could get married. But we Rogers seem to have that natural instinct which knows when we meet someone that she is the one.”

“Ah, so that is why you are so dashing romantic.”

He grinned. “I’ve known many women...as friends and lovers. Never have I felt this knowing that I have with you.”

A look of wonder suffused her lovely face. “I...I was engaged before.”

“I know.”

“I loved Richard, but it took months, almost a year of courtship for my heart to race upon seeing him.”

And Rupert heard the unspoken words in her soft, confused plea.

“And your heart is racing now,” he said gruffly.

“It pounds...just to know you are holding my hand, that you are so close to me, that you want to marry me...how it thumps and longs for every dream you are promising.”

With a rough groan, he released Verity’s hand, rolled into her, coming above her on his elbow, and cupping her cheek with his other.

“Verity—”

“I am not chaste,” she confessed in a rush, her eyes wide and shocked.

Rupert froze into astonishing stillness.

“I am not chaste,” she repeated. “The night before Richard left to war... we...we...” her throat closed, and she swallowed tightly. “I do not regret it.”

This was said with fierceness and a challenging glare.

“But I understand if you feel that—”

He pressed a kiss against her mouth. Rupert lifted his head. “I am not chaste either, Verity.”

Her eyes went even wider.

“And I am glad you got to celebrate the love you felt for Richard before you lost him forever,” he said gruffly. “There is a memory to cherish that few people ever get to hold onto.”

A wide smile trembled on her lips, and her eyes glistened brightly. “Not many gentlemen would feel as you do.”

“Uncle Frederick often lamented I am one of a kind.”

Verity lifted a hand to his face and tenderly traced a line over his cheek. “Not lament,” she said softly. “I believe your uncle celebrated it.”

She tugged him down to meet her mouth. They kissed deeply and tenderly for long minutes. Rupert’s blood was heated with desire by the time they broke apart, and the fingers he used to push back a few tendrils from her forehead trembled. He would marry this woman, even if it took him months to convince her. The real treasure was right here, in his arms, and he was never letting her go.

Rupert dipped his head and took her mouth with his, coaxing Verity to open her mouth to his ravishment. She returned his kiss with reckless abandon, soft gasps, and breathless moans. Passion flared brightly while the sun beat down on them.

“We have to stop soon,” he murmured in between kisses. “Though this is my land, we are by no means private.”

“Soon,” she said, brushing her mouth across his chin. “Why do you taste so sweet?”

Rupert pressed his lips against the sensitive flesh just behind her left ear. “You are tempting me, woman. You make me weak with longing.”

“It is only fair I affect you in a similar manner, wouldn’t you agree?” she whispered, her voice rich with such want he groaned.

“Will you let me woo you?”

She gently threaded her fingers through his hair and brought his mouth close to hers. “Isn’t that what I am doing now, my lord?”

The sweet, teasing way she said it burrowed into his heart, filling him with delight. Rupert kissed her endlessly, coaxing, exploring, ravishing. There was a distant bell in his mind when he started to peel off her coat and dress to reveal creamy shoulders which he kissed reverently. The harsh, uneven rhythm of their breathing mingled in the air and blended with the whistle of the winds through the trees. They were so lost in passion and each other, it would take an earthquake to pry them apart.

They tugged each other clothes off in between kisses and laughter. At times he didn’t know why they laughed, but it felt right. He felt happy. And he could see the same emotions glowing in her beautiful eyes. Soon they were naked, and her eyes roamed over him.

“You are so lovely, Rupert,” she said with a tender smile.

“It is you who is beautiful, Verity,” he replied, drinking in her sweet, lush

curves splayed decadently before him on his coat. She had such lovely skin, breasts high and firm, rosy nipples, sensually curvaceous hips, and legs that were long, slim. A rough, desperate sound escaped from him.

“My teeth ache from wanting you.” He pulled her to him until the tips of her breasts grazed his chest, and she buried her face against the corded muscles of his throat. Rupert groaned to feel her mouth, wet and heated against his skin. He held himself above her as she kissed his chest and up, nipping at the hollow of his throat.

“I can feel your heartbeat against my tongue,” she said, brushing soft kisses at the corner of his mouth. Her tongue shyly traced the fullness of his lips, and he groaned, shivering in her embrace.

Verity chuckled, a low sound rich in pleasure. “I suspect you desire me as much as I desire you, Rupert.”

She nipped at his bottom lip. The action had arousal surging through hotly him. He craved her taste and touch. Rupert had never wanted any woman this badly, and he feared his need was so great he might disappoint her. He lowered himself over her, and she parted her thighs to cradle his weight.

Their mouths came together in another burning kiss, he couldn't stop touching her, caressing her throat, over her collar and down to her plump breasts. He swiped his thumb over her nipples before capturing the hard pebble between his thumbs and forefingers. Rupert dipped and took in his mouth a nipple that was ripe like a berry. He rolled it between his teeth before sucking. She gasped and arched wildly into his embrace.

His cock stabbed against her thighs, and he almost spent at the sensation. He needed to be in her, but Rupert was desperate for Verity to be ready for him. He trailed his fingers down across her belly to her quim. Rupert delved his fingers between her swollen folds to caress.

“Ah, Verity, my sweet, you are so delightfully wet.” He thrust a long finger into her depth, and she bucked into the intense pleasure. “And tight.”

He rubbed his fingers along her slit, up to her clitoris, which was hard and straining. He stroked that nub of pleasure, and she pulled her mouth from his, panting. He rubbed her clitoris over and over until she gushed against his palm.

“Rupert,” she wailed at the pleasure quaking through her.

But he did not let up, driving her into mindless passion. Confident she was wet enough to take him, he grabbed his manhood and pressed it against

her tender opening. “Verity,” he said gruffly. “Look at me.”

Eyes darkened with arousal collided with his. Then he slowly and inexorably pushed inside her. She was so tight he doubted her claim of experience. Fiery fingers of pleasure danced up his spine, and sweat beaded his brows and shoulder blade.

Verity grasped his shoulder tightly, her nails sinking into his flesh.

“Widen your thighs for me...yes, just like that, open them wider.”

She complied, and he shafted her deeper until he was buried to the hilt.

“Oh!”

He pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “Am I hurting you?”

“I might need a few minutes before you move.”

Rupert held himself still while he kissed her endlessly. He kissed her lips, her neck, and the corners of her mouth, eyes, lips, soft kisses meant to comfort, reassure, and arouse. It wasn’t until she lifted her hips, silently begging for more, did he move. Her hips arched into him, and a needy moan slipped from her and traveled straight to his cock. He slowly glided out of her, his breath hissing between his teeth, until passion ripped any semblance of control he tried to maintain.

He stroked into her deep and sure, over, and over. Her cries echoed around him and down the hill. “Oh, yes, Rupert!” she cried out, her quim clenching around his cock like a hot, tight fist, convulsions wracking her frame.

He slipped his hands under her shoulders, bringing her closer as he moved faster and deeper within her wet, welcoming body. Their bodies moved in exquisite harmony with one another until the pleasure roared through him, and with a hoarse groan, he emptied deep into her shivering body.

It took several moments before he could move to untangle their limbs. Rupert peered down at her.

“Are you—”

His words faltered when Verity laughed. The delighted joy in her voice pulled a smile to his lips. Still, he had to ask, “Did I hurt you?”

“Only a slight discomfort that vanished almost right away. Oh, Rupert, I never imagined loving could be soooo wonderful,” she said breathlessly. “I’ve never felt such bliss before.”

“And that was just the beginning.”

“I cannot credit there is more, surely not!”

Their gazes locked, and something heated and intense passed between them. To Rupert's shock, he felt the faint stirring of arousal once again in his loins. And her eyes were also warm with desire and sensual curiosity.

"Much more that we shall explore together without reservations but on a bed, or a chair, or atop a desk, or on the carpet before the fire."

"Sounds scandalous," she said with a teasing smile and a blush.

He pressed a kiss to her nose. "You do know this means you *must* marry me."

"Hmm," she said, still smiling. "I suppose I *must* give it serious consideration."

It wasn't a no, and for Rupert, that was enough.

"Do you wish for children, my lord," she asked unexpectedly.

"Yes, at least six."

Her gaze flickered up to meet his, disbelieving. "Six?"

"Too many?"

"Two or perhaps three is what I had normally envisioned for myself."

And perhaps for us, lingered unspoken, but it was there in the air between them.

"Then two or three it is," he said tenderly. "Come dear one, we must get to rights before we are happened upon."

And he hurriedly retrieved a handkerchief to clean her so they could get dressed. Which they did with many in between laughs and kisses.

Chapter 8

“It is getting chilly,” Verity gasped, glancing at the sky. “I do hope it will not rain.”

Rupert did up the last button on his jacket, turned her around, and brushed the remaining twigs from her hair

“We will have to hurry and return home soon,” he murmured.

Rupert’s intent had not been seduction. Far from it. But he would not regret how delightful everything had turned out, and he was certain confident he was winning her over.

They were all set to rights, their interlude only viewed by a stoic sheep, who had glanced at them, then wandering off to some other part of the ruins.

She faced him and smiled; the curve of her mouth shy yet tempting. He noted the lush redness of her mouth, which would tell the world she had been thoroughly ravished.

“Are you afraid to fall in love again?”

Her eyes darkened with remembered pain and a breath trembled on her lips. “Yes. It was not easy recovering from such a painful loss. I was even ill for a few weeks.”

“I understand, and I am so sorry you had to go through that.” He tucked a wisp of tendril behind her ears. “And now...are you still afraid?”

A soft smile touched her mouth. “No, far from it. I am filled with hope and dreams I’d long set aside.”

Ripples of relief filled his veins. “Good. I think we should view the chapel now, and then head back down for luncheon. It is so long since I was last inside the building that I suppose I should check it for water damage anyway, though I can’t remember anything like Miss Herriot described as a shield,” he said.

“Yes, we should look, because the treasure will help you get your debts paid and sort out the estate. Although I am of age, my mother and brother are more likely to accept us marrying if you are solvent.”

She replaced the bonnet tying it tightly and tucking in the strands of hair that had escaped from its confines. “Some things never change, and *if* we decide not to marry, my fifteen percent might allow me to travel and perhaps

buy a house in Bath, where Mary could partake in the cultural events that she so enjoys. She is very good and loyal, but I know she would prefer town living where she could go to the theatre and watch the dancing, even if she does not participate herself.”

He kissed her again, angling his head to avoid the brim of her bonnet. “There is no *if*.”

She grinned at him. “I am starting to believe you, my dear, Rupert.”

“We have to find the treasure first. Although, you are the treasure I needed to find most.”

She laughed, and Rupert grabbed Verity’s hand and led her along the path to the old chapel. The doors had been replaced sometime in the last century and were secured by sturdy locks. Rupert produced a loop of five keys of different sizes. The two largest keys turned smoothly in the chapel doors’ locks, and it swung open without creaking.

“I don’t think we should take Rufus into the church with us. I will tie him to that small tree as otherwise, he will follow us in.”

“Good idea Verity, he is a lovely dog, but it seems disrespectful to take him inside,” Rupert agreed.

The chapel was relatively plain, showing few architectural features besides some vaulting to support the now neat slate roof. It was dim inside, the light coming from a large window at the front of the chapel. That window was leaded erratically as if it had once contained stained glass. Over the window’s interior was a metal mesh that was clearly designed to prevent the window from being smashed to enable entry. The window was clearly dirty on the outside as the light was dappled from the tarnishing.

There was a faint smell of incense, still clinging to the atmosphere. The interior was mostly a large rectangle with space for several rows of plain dark wood pews and a cloth-covered altar underneath the large window. On the altar was a beautiful ornate silver cross, but it could have done with some time spent polishing it. There were also two brass candlesticks, still containing about four inches of a candle.

The walls inside were plastered and whitewashed and seemed in good order. There were no apparent patches of damp or puddles on the stone slab floor from a high roof leak. The sidewall on the left had some arrow-slit windows like those in a castle. Too narrow for even a child to enter by, and some previous custodian had them glazed in plain glass.

Behind the altar were two standard flags on poles, bedraggled and blood

stained as if they had fought the battles themselves, not the soldiers who carried them. Rupert examined them, but one was from the local regiment and the other from some Scottish guard regiment.

“I believe this standard once belonged to our local regiment, but the other is from a regiment of the Scots Guards. I do not understand Ellesmere's connection, but there do not seem to be any talbots here. We've drawn another blank.”

“There are a couple of brasses in the floor here of medieval knights, they are rather blurred but they carry shields.” Verity knelt to examine them closer, and Rupert stood carefully so as not to shade the light. “Crusader's cross quartered with some kind of tower or castle on the first. And the second has what looks like crows over a bend and wheat sheaths below. They are nothing like the sonnet.”

To the right of the altar was a small lady chapel. Furnished with a small altar and one prayer seat. There were a few window slits through the outside wall, and the only thing that might be of value was a renaissance style oil painting of the virgin and child which hung behind the altar.

“Great-uncle Frederick bought the Madonna in Italy on his grand tour. Unfortunately, it is not a renowned old master's work, but a rather good modern copy. He apparently thought that the lady chapel needed something indicating its purpose.”

“We could check the sides of the altars as the cloths could be hiding a shield?”

“Feels a bit irreverent, but I suppose someone would change the altar cloths in a normal church.”

“I think if we do it with a prayer in our hearts, it would not be considered sacrilegious.”

The lady chapel altar turned out to only a small wooden table, but the main altar proved to be made of some cream coloured marble. It was carved with ornate gilded baroque curlicues and flourishes surrounding several bible quotes incised and gilded in Latin.

“I can understand why the cloth covers the altar so thoroughly, at least one of Ellesmere's former owners must have had catholic leanings, that would have been dangerous to admit to, although I always suspected that Frederick leant that way.”

“Well, it has been a wasted journey, but at least we have checked everywhere there could be a treasure unless it is under the slabs of the floor,

and I don't want to lift them all in the hopes there might be. I think the sonnet is referring to somewhere specific, not saying take the whole floor up."

Rupert frowned. "Wait, behind the lady chapel, there is another door. I've never been inside there. When I saw the chapel as a boy, there was some kind of curtain or hanging over it. I have three more keys, let's see if one of them unlocks it."

The smallest of the keys was clearly too small for the lock, but the final key looked about right. Rupert inserted it into the lock, and it turned easily. The door opened inwards to reveal a small room which had some shelves to one side.

The outside wall had two narrow arrow-slit windows letting in a little light. On the shelves was a pile of linen, apparently some discarded vestments and faded altar cloths. A large bible, nicely bound in scarlet leather, which was unsurprisingly written in Latin and an oil lamp with a fairly recently made tinderbox beside it. In the centre of the floor was a plain wooden table with absolutely nothing on it.

"Not much is there, I presume it was used as a vestry of sorts. Bible's in Latin, which supports your theory. Oh, what is that under the table? I think a piece of oak has been set into the floor," Rupert pointed out.

Rupert pushed the table to one side of the room to examine the floor more easily.

There was indeed a piece of wood which looked to have come from a very large tree. It was roughly square in shape and clearly hinged to the stone with some brass fixings. At the other side was a brass plate that contained a small keyhole.

"I think this is the lock that the smaller key fits," Rupert said, trying it in the lock. The key turned with a small click. He lifted the edge of the wood slab and carefully folded it back to reveal some worn stone steps going down into pitch-black darkness.

"Now I see what the oil lamp was for, shall we risk exploring what looks like a crypt?"

"Mary never mentioned going in a crypt, but she said it had been when she was a little girl that she remembered seeing it. Her late father was the vicar at that time, so that might explain how she had access to the chapel," Verity said as Rupert attempted to light the lantern. It took a couple of tries, but it lit, and he adjusted it to produce a small pool of light.

"Are you sure you want to come down too? I doubt it will be very nice

down there, it will be musty and full of cobwebs. You could wait in the chapel if you prefer, I would not want you to be scared.”

“So you think me a faint-heart, Rupert Rogers, now I am insulted,” she said in mock anger.

Rupert grinned, “I most humbly apologize, my lady. How can I atone for such a heinous sin?”

“I will think of some forfeit you must pay, perhaps I will make you read me all of Frederick’s love poetry? If you think some nasty spiders and mouldering bones are going to put me off when we might find the treasure, you have another think coming to you...”

Rupert chuckled. “I was fearing something far, far worse than reading you poetry. I had better go first.”

“...without your clothes on...” she drawled in a whisper, so he almost did not hear her. Then she giggled, which made him sure she had really said it.

“If you are naked as well, that would be a pleasure to anticipate, careful this bit is very worn...” he said, turning to steady her. “We have nearly reached the bottom.”

The cold hit them as they reached the stone floor. Rupert held the lamp up high; it showed only part of a deep vaulted crypt, which the lamplight revealed contained several sarcophaguses, carved out of slabs of pale coloured stone. Here, the incense smell was more intense, but there was no real smell of mould or decay.

They moved around the tombs silently inspecting them for clues, most had the top slab incised with some writing, much obscured by age and a little dust. The tomb in the furthest corner was more ornate, and on its lid was a reclining metal statue of some medieval knight in full armour complete with pointed toes and the effect of chain mail. Some small flakes of faded paint clung to the sculpture of a rather stern and ugly man who had worn a full moustache.

They examined the shield depicted at his feet with some satisfaction. It showed what appeared to be a griffon over three large snarling dogs.

“This is it, fabulous beast over mordant hounds,” he said with delight. “Let me try and move the slab to one side so we can peer inside.”

He stripped off his overcoat and coat so as not to split the seams and heaved at the slab, which despite the effort he was clearly exerting moved not a crack.

“It must weigh a ton, there is no way I can budge it. Trust my great-uncle

to give me an impossible task,” he stated after giving up and putting his coats back on for it was chilly in the crypt.

“I don’t think it is impossible, Rupert. Do you see this band of brass that goes around the sarcophagus, under the stone slab the statue is lying upon?” Verity cried, pointing.

“Yes, but I don’t see how it helps. Oh, that is out of place and definitely not medieval...” his eyes followed her finger. “There is another lock, and I have one more key! Here hold up the lamp while I try the last key...”

The key went into the lock and he turned it, and underneath the stone slab, there was a series of clicks. They waited wary of the strange device.

“Step back, in case it is trapped,” Rupert cried, thinking of crossbow bolts and poisons that had been used to trap some chests to deter thieves in the past.

Verity scowled at him. “Don’t be daft Rupert, you were the apple of your great-uncle’s eye. He was always talking about what a little rascal you had been.”

“He did?”

“Yes! He was really rather proud of you. Why would he risk your life? He was an old curmudgeon and a mischief but there was no malice in him. Here...” she said pushing the slab slightly with one hand. The slab slid open, moving to one side to reveal a relatively expensive modern coffin, resting on wooden slats, close to the top of the tomb.

“Interesting contraption to move the lid, that must have cost a heap to have put in, clockwork of some considerable quality. He must have re-coffined the gracious knight because his bones were inconvenient. Under the coffin I can see three brass bound chests. I think we have genuinely found his treasure.”

“We have to move the coffin first, and that will surely be heavy.”

“I doubt it, if it contains only medieval bones, the coffins themselves are normally quite light, it is the “Oh too, solid flesh,” that makes them hard to lift,” he shed his coats again and found the coffin although of good solid wood was within his capabilities to carry. “Sorry, Sir Whoever you were to disturb your peace once more but thank you for guarding the treasure...” He said, lifting the coffin down and placing it on the stone floor.

Rupert moved the thick wooden slats and placed them beside the coffin. Verity was peering inside at the chests, as Rupert unbuckled the straps of the first one.

Nervously, he pushed the lid open to reveal it was full of small canvas bags, but one had split open, slightly showing a gold glint. He reached in and drew out a couple of large golden coins.

“They’re not guineas or gold doubloons, I think the writing might be Arabic or something, but if they are pure gold, your fifteen percent of just what is in this chest is worth more than Lady Euphenia Chisholm’s dowry. My mother’s sister Lady Grenville was insisting I marry her. So now, we are both rich, you can marry anyone you want, will you take me as husband even though it looks like I am now stinking rich and can thumb my nose at the likes of Maurice?”

“I will think about it, are you certain you would not prefer Euphenia? Her family is well-connected, and she must have many good qualities to recommend her,” she teased.

“I can’t think of one, marriage to her would be a fate worse than death. We should look inside the other chests, but there is no way I can carry that down the path. I will have to borrow a heavy horse and cart and come up the old road.”

He re-strapped the chest and started opening the second. The lid opened to reveal it filled with smaller bags, which were a different shape. He lifted a couple out and untied one, spilling some of the contents into his hand, large glistening red stones shone out.

“Rubies, I wonder if all the bags contain the same? If so, this chest is worth far more than the first.” However, the second bag contained sparkling white stones, mostly of the size of one of his fingernails.

“I raise my reckoning because these are rare diamonds. I will put them back for now, but I will need a jeweller to ascertain their worth. I will have to get proper estimates so I can pay your share out accurately,” he smiled, feeling relieved that his problems were solved.

I am glad you found the treasure,” she said.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Verity.”

The smile she sent him darted through his heart and left him feeling energized.

“There is one more chest, I wonder what is in that?”

He reached over and opened the ultimate chest, the lid was harder to open and creaked as he lifted it. There were no bags in this one, instead there was a pile of elegant boxes of varying sizes.

Verity gasped. “There are jewellery boxes, you have found the family

jewels.”

“I did not really believe there were any...” He lifted out three boxes of different sizes, the first revealed an emerald and diamond set, with necklace, bracelets and earbobs. The next, a more delicate necklace and earrings of sapphires set in intricate filigree gold. The third box revealed three rows of rings, fifteen in total.

“Oh, how pretty!”

“I think our courtship has gone on long enough,” he said, kneeling on the cold stone floor. “Will you please marry me?” he said, holding out the ring tray.

Her eyes were wide and sparkling, her cheeks flushed. “I think I had better marry you, now stop being an idiot and get off that cold floor, you will give yourself an ague...”

Rupert chuckled. “I want to kiss you again but first you must choose a ring as a promise of our engagement. I will put the banns up straight away, then we can marry in the New Year.”

“Everyone will think there is something very havey-cavey about us marrying so fast,” she said as he had pulled her tightly to him and was bruising her mouth with his kisses.

“But perhaps, it had better be sooner than later. I think I will have the green stone one,” she said, easing out of his arms and trying it on her finger. “See fits perfectly, so now we are really engaged, my lord. If you put up the banns and announcement in the papers, then there will be no going back for you. Although I am of age, I suppose you will have to ask my brother, for propriety’s sake as well.”

Chapter 9

Rupert replaced the wooden slats and then carefully returned the coffin. He said a brief prayer for the long-dead knight, “Rest in peace, good Sir, and keep watch over Frederick’s treasure.”

Verity’s heart warmed at his thoughtfulness and his honour. It should be impossible, but she realised she had fallen in love with this man who had recently made love with her in the open. Such reckless boldness on her part but she did not regret it at all.

Rupert turned to Verity. “I’m not sure if I should cross myself or something, as I am sure old Sir Rattlebones was catholic, but I was brought up as Church of England, so I hope that will do.”

“I think the main thing is that you paid respect,” Verity replied with a smile. “We had best head back up as I can hear Rufus barking outside the church.”

“Yes it sounds as if he is setting up a howl. I’ll just lock up as we go.”

He slid the sarcophagus’ lid back and locked it in place. They climbed the worn stone stairs to the vestry. Rupert closed the trapdoor and replaced the table over it, putting back the oil lamp in the same place on the shelves. They left the vestry and again locked the door, Rufus was now whining pitifully through the open door to the chapel. Verity rushed over to her dog and untied him, and he made a fuss of her as Rupert secured the chapel door.

The three of them set off together back down the hill; it was easier going down than it had been going up. They chatted together as Rufus pulled on his lead, and eventually Verity gave up trying to persuade him to heel and released him. Rufus headed off down the path ahead of them, stopping when they got out of sight, the dog would wait for them until they caught up.

They stopped halfway to admire the view again, and Rupert took the opportunity to steal another brief kiss. Verity giggled, so happy she wanted to hug him. They continued onwards hand in hand as they neared Ellesmere Manor.

“Did you see that?” Rupert asked, slowing.

Verity frowned. “What?”

“I noticed movement in bushes below them, where there is no reason for

anyone to be.”

On the heels of that pronouncement, there was a flash and crash of a musket. Shock blasted through Verity when Rupert pushed her behind him.

“What is it?” she cried, her heart racing with fright.

“Come,” he said, grabbing her hand. “I need to get you to safety.”

Safety?

“There is a shooter,” he said before she could demand an explanation. They hurried down the path and, as they turned, were out of sight of the mysterious shooter. She grabbed his arm and he flinched with a soft groan. It was then she noted the blood on his jacket. A dark tide of fear washed over her senses and she swayed.

“You’re shot, Rupert! Are you all right?”

“I think so,” he said, examining the holes in his coat. “Seems to be only a flesh wound and as there are two holes in my coat, so it looks like the ball went straight through. I don’t think he can hit us here, but we need to get down as quick as possible, before he changes position.”

Rufus barked once and raced off down the path to the bottom but had then set off in the direction of the bushes barking loudly.

It hit her with the force of a runaway carriage that he could have been killed just now. A weak, awful feeling assailed her, and she had to bite into her bottom lip to steady herself against the fear of loss bubbling inside her heart. *You could have died...before we even started to know each other, you could have died.* And once again, she would have been left in the ashes of her pain and torment. And possibly another child, considering what they had done earlier. Verity wanted to weep. “Who would do such a thing, Rupert? Have you got enemies?”

“Maurice or one of his cronies, but probably Maurice himself because he was always a lousy shot,” Rupert said through clenched teeth.

“You’ve gone pale,” she said, clutching at him.

“The wound, even if relatively minor, stings and hurts like the devil. It does not seem to be bleeding much, but it is most unpleasant.”

“Rupert...he could have killed you,” she said faintly.

“But he did not,” he said firmly. “And I will ensure it stays that way. Now hurry.”

They kept moving when they heard voices shouting, with the accompaniment of Rufus barking.

Verity saw a number of Rupert’s servants and groundsmen clustered

around as they reached the bottom. A couple of the grooms armed with pitchforks appeared from the shrubbery looking hot and flustered.

“We heard a shot, my lord. Are you all right, your sleeve is torn, are you wounded?” Farrant asked his master, looking worried.

“Slightly, did you catch sight of him, Seth?” Rupert said, turning to the grooms.

“Not that well, my lord, we could not grab hold of him, he had a horse and escaped, but it looked like that sly cove, Farrant slung out yesterday. The dog bit his leg though, but he shook him off.”

Dear heavens, the bounder who shot Rupert was really that nasty cousin of his. How did he dare to do something so terrible? Verity held Rupert’s hand, uncaring what it signalled of their intimacy. Perhaps it was even more for herself than him, for there was still a heavy press of horror inside, even knowing the wound was not fatal. Would his cousin attempt to kill Rupert again? What if she lost him?

“Are you certain it was that man you saw?” Rupert asked.

“I saw him clearly, my lord, it was that Friday-faced nephew of the late Baron, Maurice Rogers, I think his name is. Shabbed off fast but the dog bit deep into the back of his knee, must hurt like the blazes, my lord,” the other groom John Cutler said.

What in God’s name was Maurice thinking?

“Thank you both, please keep a special watch out for him. I will have to get some protection until he is caught. Well done, Rufus, good boy,” Rupert said, reaching down awkwardly to pat the dog.

Rufus spat a piece of bloody cloth out, and Rupert picked it up.

“Could you fetch the doctor and explain that I have a shallow wound from a musket ball,” he said to the grooms, and they pulled their forelocks and hurried off to do their lord’s bidding.

They moved back into the main house, and Rupert sat down on a chair in a drawing room looking shaken. And she understood. It must feel heart-wrenching to know that a family member tried to harm him most foully.

The drawing room was warm as the fire was blazing. Farrant eased his master from his overcoat and then from his coat. Rupert’s shirt sleeve was bloodied but not soaked, which Verity found reassuring.

“Please fetch boiled water, a basin and clean linen to bandage my lord’s arm,” Verity asked one of the senior maids, who bobbed a curtsy and rushed to do her bidding.

The maid brought in hot water and linen strips torn from an old sheet for bandages. Verity rolled up Rupert's sleeve above where the musket ball had scored a runnel of blood across the flesh above his bicep.

"Farrant, do you think you could fetch me some of my lord's brandy and a couple of glasses, please," she asked.

"Do you drink brandy, Verity?" Rupert asked, searching her expression.

"No, my lord, I thought you might like a glass before I wash that wound with the contents of the other glass. You got lucky, I don't think it has even torn the muscle, but I think it will hurt rather a lot to be cleaned."

"Your voice is trembling," he said.

She swallowed. "Are you not scared?"

"And furious that he would do something this despicable."

Her hands shook, and she closed her eyes briefly.

"Verity?"

Her lashes fluttered open. "You'll not lose me, I promise."

Fierce emotions tumbled through her. "How can you make such a promise?"

"Because I see the fright in your eyes, and I know you are recalling losing Richard and the awful pain. I can see you think the same fate might befall our romance. I can see that you are planning to run from me, which frightens me more than Maurice trying to harm me. I do not want to lose you, and I promise I will do everything in my power to ensure that blackguard does not steal my life...and take me from you. We have at least sixty years together and I mean for us to enjoy every one those years."

She slowly swiped away the tears that slipped down her cheek. God, he was right. "You are wrong about something, Rupert."

"And what is that?"

"I had no thought to run from you." She touched his cheek tenderly. "I realized you could have died. Had his aim been truer, you could have been shot in the heart. I could have lost you. Your family...your dear mother, could have lost you. And it made me realize how unexpected loss can be, and it can happen at any time. That does not make me want to run away but run to you, my darling. And hold you and cherish every moment we have together."

"Ah," he said, delighted. "You are falling in love with me too."

"Most desperately, my lord," she confessed, flushing.

"And I promise you it will only grow deeper throughout our marriage."

A throat cleared behind them, and she glanced up to see a beaming

Farrant. Verity laughed and quickly brushed a very improper kiss on Rupert's mouth.

The doctor was not long in arriving, as he had been dealing with a servant at Verity's brother's manor. By that time, Verity had already cleaned Rupert's wound and was considering bandaging it up. He seemed a bit relaxed from the two glasses of brandy he consumed.

A basin of water and soap was brought for the doctor, and he shed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. Verity was relieved to see he was thorough in washing his hands up well above his wrists before he inspected his patient.

"Let me look here, musket ball, was it?"

"Yes, I believe so, I am grateful Maurice is such a poor shot," Rupert informed the older man.

He'd told her that he had known Doctor Barnett since he was a young boy. Dr. Barnett was called when he had got into scrapes, including a broken collar bone when he had been thrown from his pony when he was only eight. Verity fondly wondered if any children they had might be just as boisterous.

"You've cleaned it well, Lady Verity. Surely you don't mean your cousin Maurice, Maurice Rogers? Why would he take a pot shot at you?" the doctor asked.

"I believe he objected to my inheriting the estate and title. Tried to threaten me with my debts but managed to insult Lady Verity first, so I had him thrown out. However, two grooms identified him trying to ride away, and Lady Verity's dog Rufus apparently bit him behind his knee."

The doctor shook his head, disbelieving. "Nasty things, dog bites, will probably get infected if not treated immediately. I assume Maurice does not have permission to shoot over your land?"

"He certainly does not have my permission," Rupert declared with some heat as the doctor poured Basilicum powder onto a pad of linen and pressed it to the wound.

"Then you had better call the local Justice of the Peace, Sir Cuthbert Addison, if Maurice is shooting at people, then he has clearly lost his marbles and should be locked up," the doctor said, wrapping Rupert's arm in neat bandages.

"I think that it should heal well. If there is any heat in it or you run a fever, then send for me, my lord," the doctor said as he finished.

Rupert rolled down his sleeves, re-buttoned them, and was helped into his by Farrant, packing up his ephemera efficiently away. Verity thanked the

doctor, saw him out, and then returned to the drawing room where Farrant helped Rupert into an undamaged coat.

“Thank you, Farrant, can you send one of the grooms to take a note to this Sir Cuthbert and then we will take a light luncheon.”

Rupert sat down at a bureau, drafted a missive to go with the groom, and then handed it to Verity to read. Her heart warmed at how thoughtful he was in involving her, confirming her belief that he wanted a life partner, someone with whom he shared everything.

*Dear Sir Cuthbert Addison,
Justice of the Peace,*

Doctor Bartlett treated a musket ball wound in my arm earlier today. I was fired on while walking down the path from the Priory ruins, accompanied by my bride to be, Lady Verity Hansard. The proposal is very recent and has not yet been notified to the newspapers, so I mention our relationship in confidence. I heard the crack of a musket and received a slight wound to my upper arm. Two of my grooms, Seth Brown and John Cutler, pursued the miscreant, but he escaped on horseback. They identified the man as Maurice Rogers, my cousin, and currently my heir. Lady Verity’s dog bit him behind his knee.

I am not sure how these things go, but I do not wish to risk my bride to be and my own person for this criminal to continue trying to kill me. Could you please visit to take my formal statement and arrange for his arrest?

Yours truly

Rupert Rogers

Baron Ellesmere

John Cutler rode off with the note once Rupert had sealed it. Rupert and Verity had lunch and waited in the library playing chess together until Sir Cuthbert Addison appeared. From the drawing room window, there was a clear view of the main drive and a large old-fashioned carriage accompanied by John Cutler on horseback, drove to the door.

Rupert stood and headed to the entrance, tugging Verity to follow him. Farrant opened the door and a footman who had been riding at the rear of the

carriage jumped down to lower the step and open the carriage door for the magistrate and his clerk to descend.

Sir Cuthbert was a large man, wearing a full wig and a scarlet waistcoat. Verity had known the bluff and jovial justice ever since she had moved to the village. Verity observed a man in his fifties, with high colour in his cheeks and the start of a double chin. He still looked a powerfully strong man but his waistline had filled with years of good living. The clerk who descended behind him was small, thin and dressed in unassuming black.

“Thank you, for coming so quickly, Sir Cuthbert Addison,” Rupert said, offering his hand to shake. “This is Lady Verity Hansard, whom I mentioned in my letter.”

She inclined her head and smiled in greeting at the magistrate who took off his head and bowed.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Lady Verity.”

The magistrate then grasped Rupert’s hand in a firm clasp. “Serious matter, can’t have felons shooting at lords, definitely not done, Lord Rogers. I have already asked my officers to seek out this Maurice Rogers. I was good friends with your great uncle and remember this Maurice, self-important maw-worm, couldn’t even be bothered to come to Lord Frederick’s funeral. Noticed you there, but did not want to intrude as there were so many waiting to talk to you, my lord.”

“I was hoping to put things in order and pay off my debts before I made the usual visits to my neighbours. Sir, please come in, and can I tempt you to a glass of something?”

“Yes, of course, my lord. May I offer my congratulations to you and Lady Verity. A very suitable match, if I may say so. A glass of mulled wine would be appreciated as it is a bit nippy today,” Which was an understatement as snow was now trying fitfully to fall and Rupert feared might settle.

Half an hour later, the clerk had taken both Rupert’s and Verity’s statements. They and Sir Cuthbert were mellow from consuming some excellent mulled wine and seated by a roaring fire. He had taken down John Cutler’s account at Sir Cuthbert’s rambling home some four miles away from Ellesmere.

“Burke, can you interview the butler, I believe his name is Farrant and then seek out this Seth Brown in the stables and get his report too?” the magistrate said.

“Certainly, Sir,” the clerk said before scuttling off.

“Now we can talk without interruption. Burke is trustworthy, but I think what we have to discuss should be kept private,” Sir Cuthbert declared.

“I thought we had covered everything fairly comprehensively. What else is to discuss?” Rupert asked.

“As I said, I was good friends with Lord Frederick, God rest his soul! I may have put two and two together and reached a baker’s dozen, but I came to the conclusion that you must have found his treasure. It is clear until Maurice is captured, you will need some security and if you intend to move the treasure, then you will need some upright men to assist you with moving it.”

Verity gasped, shocked and Rupert coughed as some of the warm wine went down the wrong way.

“Am I to understand that you know where Frederick hid his treasure?” Rupert asked.

“Who else would Frederick get to help him? He did not trust Maurice even as a child and his father was a toad eater, so Freddie wanted it to be safe from their grasping hands. We were much younger then but it was still heavy work. Frederick organised the clockwork fellow and the new coffin, but he would not risk the servants, so he and I did the heavy lifting.”

Rupert chuckled ruefully. “So all I would have had to do was ask you. We’ve been turning the house upside down, searching for a clue, because all he left me was a riddle of a sonnet to tell me where to find it,” he said, exasperated. “Yes, we found it, but I realised I would need help to bring it down to the Manor house and have no idea how much it is worth. So you have advice about security?”

Chapter 10

Verity listened as the magistrate and landowner suggested a way to deal with the security problems Rupert might face. She had been stunned when Sir Cuthbert mentioned the treasure, and Rupert had nearly choked in hearing how easy it could have been to find where it was hidden.

Still, she was extremely glad he had not known for that would have cheated them of the adventure of finding it together.

“My younger brother Major William Addison has a few hundred acres some eight miles from here. When he left the army after Waterloo, he decided to make more of the land, extend the orchards and concentrate on making cider,” Sir Cuthbert said, pausing to take another healthy sip of his wine.

“He employed a number of his former soldiers who were now out of work, with nowhere to go. He is making a go of it, but the apples are picked cider made, and beyond a few maintenance tasks, there is little to do. He has trusted these men with his life and I would trust my brother with my own. Anyway, sometimes they are employed as a group for ‘security’ or protection duties during the winter. I always believed that keeping it in the family is a sensible move, not quite nepotism, but ... oh, well.”

Rupert’s expression was serious when he asked, “And you think this Major William might agree to help me, discreetly?”

“He’ll expect to be paid, but his fees are reasonable, and until Maurice is behind bars, you will not feel safe. I can ask him to call on you, if you wish?”

“Have you any idea of where we can get the treasure assessed for a valuation?” Verity asked Sir Cuthbert.

“As it is winter, I would personally send to S.N. Riviere and sons in Bath. He is a Goldsmith, Jeweller and Watchmaker to His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester. His address in Bath is at 19, Old Bond Street. They are only open between November to March, but have premises in London as well. I should think that either the father or one of the sons would be able to oblige you and could arrange for the gold and jewels to be sold in London for a commission.”

Rupert nodded. “Thank you, that will speed up dealing with the matter.

You have been a great help, and we intend to put the banners up as soon as I have the opportunity to speak to Lord Hansard, Lady Verity's brother. We thought it would be more correct even though she is of age."

Sir Cuthbert smiled and stood. "Well, I have lots to do. I hope we should catch this Maurice creature soon, but until then, take great care not to give him any more opportunities. I'll send a note to my brother, shall I?"

"Yes please, I should be grateful for some security until he is apprehended."

There was a knock on the door and the clerk entered.

"Oh, good, Burke. Finished?"

"Yes Sir, we might as well be off, the horses will be rested by now. I wish you every good luck, my lord and my lady," Sir Cuthbert said, bowing deeply with a flourish before exiting the drawing room.

"I can see why Lord Frederick trusted Sir Cuthbert, he is a good soul and has practical advice," Lady Verity said, thinking back over the conversation.

"Yes, I think I should write to that jeweller at once and then take you and Rufus home. The snow is coming down quite hard now and I would not want for you to get stranded."

"No, it is getting nasty, I would be grateful for a drive in your carriage."

"A decent modern carriage that was one thing that Uncle Frederick did not stint on. From what I can tell from his accounts, it was more that he lost interest in anything that did not personally affect his comfort," Rupert said as he scrawled a note to the jeweller and then sanded and sealed it.

"Farrant," he called, "Can you arrange for the carriage to be brought around and ask Seth Brown and John Cutler to act as footmen. Does Tom Coachman have a musket or blunderbuss?"

"Yes, my lord and there are Lord Frederick's pistols in the side pockets..."

"I never noticed, that is good to know, thank you, Farrant. We'll come out as soon as the carriage is ready."

It was a quiet and tense drive back to Verity's house, but they sat snuggled together and enjoyed the warmth of the hot bricks that Farrant had somehow arranged. She smiled, thinking how shocked but overjoyed Mary would be when she saw the ring. The carriage rumbled into her drive away. "We are here," Verity murmured.

Rupert cupped her cheeks and kissed her slowly, but so deeply and thoroughly.

“I am not sure if I told you, but I am more than halfway in love with you.”

She laughed, for in his eyes, she saw so many emotions and tenderness. “Only halfway? I am close to three quarters.”

He kissed her again discreetly behind the carriage curtains and then let her and Rufus down, walking them to the door.



* * *

When Rupert was sure Verity and Rufus were safely inside their home, he told Tom, the coach-driver to head to an inn, named the George in the nearby town of Frome. That particular inn was a boarding point for the Mail to Bath, so he should be able to catch the driver and have his letter to the jewellers delivered promptly as he knew it should arrive within a couple of hours. He would enjoy a tankard of his host’s best brew while he waited for the Mail to arrive. The Inn looked Georgian in period, although inside it had low blackened beams, but the beer was good and the host was jocund and welcoming.

This was accomplished fairly easily but his grooms watched warily over him while they and Tom drank a pint or two together. He tipped the Mail’s driver a couple of shillings to make sure his letter was delivered with some urgency. Then he climbed back into his carriage and headed back to Ellesmere Manor. No sign of Maurice was seen during his travels and Rupert was relieved to get back inside his own home, and warming again in front of the fire. The snow had not let up and had started to settle so he was pleased to be back.

It was later in the evening and Rupert had finished a fine supper. He was enjoying a glass of brandy and reading a book he had found in the library which was a treatise on the importance of modernising farming methods. He read more than he had ever thought possible about animal breeding, under draining, crop rotation, and soil fertilisation. Rupert thought that they were matters he should study further if he was going to run the manor with its farms.

Not that there were many farms on the estate, the home farm represented the main part of the land and there were two smaller farms that were tenanted. It was not a big enough estate to really keep a house and the staff that it needed. The house was quiet and it was dark outside but he thought he could hear horses, even though he was at the back of the house in the library.

He got up and moved to the front drawing room, and he could now see the horses slowing and coming to a halt in front of the manor. Six men who sat their mounts as if they were well used to them. Rupert wondered at first whether they had been sent by Maurice and was afraid for the servants. He got up and went to the library door, opening it quietly to listen as Farrant went to open the door.

“Major William Addison and friends to see Lord Rogers, I believe he may be expecting me?”

“I’ll see if my lord is receiving, sir,” Farrant said in his most pompous tones. “Please wait here, gentlemen.”

“Farrant, please admit them. I am expecting Major Addison,” Rupert called down the hall to his butler.

“Very good, my lord,” Farrant said, sounding slightly miffed as if his dignity had been disparaged. “Please come this way gentlemen.”

Rupert stood in the corridor and watched the group of men come forward, they walked like soldiers despite their lack of anything resembling uniforms. Their leader appeared to be about forty years of age but otherwise was exactly as Rupert would have imagined Sir Cuthbert would have looked if he was that much younger and kept in trim. Only four men entered, so Rupert assumed that the other two had taken the horses around to the stables.

“Farrant, please organise some more mulled wine and refreshments as it is a cold night for a ride...”

“Certainly, my lord,” the butler remarked, bustling out.

“Gentlemen, please be seated. I understand that Sir Cuthbert informed you of my predicament?” he asked Major Addison, who sat ramrod straight on one of the drawing room’s most uncomfortable chairs. The others seated themselves on a settee across from him in a row, perched on the edge as if somewhat uncomfortable in more genteel environs.

“Yes, my lord. I thought it was better not to wait as the snow seems determined to settle and can then make the roads difficult to travel. May I introduce my companions, former Sergeant O’Neill.” He gestured to a large dark-haired man with a distinct twinkle in his eye. “Corporal Johnson, and

Private Cooper, who have joined me since being retired from the army.”

The door was knocked on, and Rupert bid Farrant to enter.

“My lord, Mrs. Lucia Addison and er, Private Evans, Sir. I will bring the mulled wine and the refreshments, sir.”

“Farrant, wait a minute, can you ask Mrs. Hughes to prepare some rooms for our guests and have fires lit as they will be staying overnight?”

“Of course, my lord.”

“Excuse me, my Lord,” Private Evans interjected, “but I asked John Cutler if I could bunk down with him over the stables, because interference with harness and carriages are something we’ve seen before when on these kinds of jobs...”

“Certainly Private Evans, I apologize ma’am, I did not realise you were one of the group, I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” Rupert said, addressing a stunning black-haired beauty, incongruously dressed in men’s riding clothes.

“No formalities are needed, my Lord. I should have entered with my husband, William,” she said as Rupert bowed correctly over her hand. “However, Ximena, my mare is a temperamental beast and I wanted to see her properly settled,” the lady said, speaking with a distinct Spanish accent.

“I thought it might be a good idea for Lucia to come as my brother mentioned that your fiancée might also be a target. She brought female dress with her, but she is good with pistols, a rifle and a sabre. I thought she might perhaps stay with Lady Verity and accompany her so that she too has some security,”

“That sounds an excellent idea, I will be happy to introduce her to Lady Verity tomorrow and I am sure she will welcome her into her household.”

Farrant knocked and entered again, accompanied by the housekeeper and a maid all bearing trays.

“I presumed to order some supper for our guests as it must have been a cold ride, my lord.”

“You would make a better host than I do, Farrant. I only hope that I will learn to be as astute! Major Addison, his wife, and companions have come to help us with security, while Maurice is still at large,” Rupert informed his retainer. “Mrs. Addison, I hope will be providing security for Lady Verity for the time being, you may explain their presence to the rest of the staff and I trust they will be treated as welcome guests during their stay.”

A table was pulled over and the servants deposited glasses, a steaming

bowl of mulled wine and plates of bread, cheese, cold meats, pork pies, pickles, and some healthy slices of rich fruit cake.

“Thank you, Farrant and Mrs. Hughes, you have thought of everything,” Rupert declared.

“I’ve put Major and Mrs. Addison in the green bedroom, and the other gentlemen can share the Rose and Chinese rooms, sir. Warming pans are in all the beds, and the fires are lit. Hot water is on, should they wish to wash, my lord,” Mrs. Hughes said, bobbing a curtsy. The maid also curtsied, and then the servants departed, leaving them to discuss among themselves and consume a very much appreciated supper.

Chapter 11

The snow had fallen heavily overnight, and morning greeted Rupert with a picturesque view from his bedroom window, glistening pristine white, sparkling swathed the land around, nestling on the trees and bushes in an awe-inspiring display. Rupert felt young again, eager to build snowmen, to slide down slopes on a tea-tray and throw snowballs in mock fight. He smiled, thinking about how Verity would love the sight and want to play in the snow too.

As soon as he had dressed, he went downstairs to breakfast, Major and Mrs. Addison were already seated, but although they were consuming a pot of tea, had not yet dished themselves up any food.

“Good morning, I trust you slept well? Where are the others?” Rupert enquired.

“They’ve already eaten in the kitchen. Evans is in the stables. I sent O’Neill and Johnson out to check any places they think this Maurice might have stayed in the area. As he had a dog bite, he may have summoned a doctor. Obviously not Doctor Barnett, as he would have reported the matter. He is the only doctor for several miles’ distance. However, there are a couple of doctors in Frome and another over towards Mells, so if they do not locate where he has been staying, I asked them to check out the physicians for a man of his description with a dog bite behind his knee,” the Major said.

“Thank you, that is very efficient of you,” Rupert said, helping himself to bacon, eggs and toast. They had risen from the table, and Lucia was considering the choices of jams and fresh rolls, which had also been placed on the buffet. Major Addison selected a pair of kippers, at which Lucia screwed up her nose in mock annoyance.

“You set a fine table, my lord,” he said, organising a second plate with some cold beef and eggs.

“My great-uncle did, the staff just carry on as before. I suppose eventually I will suggest my own preferences, but the cook is good, and I have had no complaints. I will leave that to Lady Verity in future.”

They seated themselves again, although Rupert pulled out Mrs. Addison’s chair for her, beating her husband to the honour.

“Cooper is patrolling the grounds, as he was a poacher before he chose the army in preference to having his neck stretched. He will not be able to track Maurice as the snow will have covered everything. However, if anything is out of place or anyone is where they shouldn’t be, lurking, he can deal with a couple of men on his own. I told him if there were more than two, to watch them carefully, note where they go, then return to report,” William said as he broached the kippers with a look of anticipation on his face.

Lucia ate more delicately, preferring a more continental breakfast to the robust English one the men consumed.

Rupert slathered strawberry preserves onto a toast. “It is too early to disturb Lady Verity, but if I have the carriage arranged for ten thirty, I think it would be acceptable?”

“Yes, that sounds good, I wanted to make myself known to the staff and examine the house and grounds, for security issues. Lucia will make herself comfortable and be ready on time. She is a boon, a wife who can follow the drum without complaint and deal with whatever emergency comes calmly,” he said, beaming at her.

After swallowing the last bite of a toast, Rupert replied, “You are blessed indeed. Lady Verity did not swoon when I was shot and had already cleaned the wound by the time Dr. Barnett arrived, so she is no shrinking violet, either. I was not really bought up to all this and the finances are a bit of a mess at present.” Rupert glanced around to check no servants were present and that the door was firmly shut. “Did your brother discuss the other matter that has to be dealt with, as we have not discussed what I should pay you and your associates?”

“The treasure? Yes, Cuthbert explained. The snow has now stopped and it is looking to be a fine day, but I think we should probably give it a chance to melt a little before we attempt to bring it down to the Manor,” the major declared. “And for pay? I was paid 23 shillings a day when in the army. So perhaps six guineas a day for our services, would seem about right under the special circumstances? Anything we earn as a group is divided equally, although we have been ploughing half into improving the farm. I pay the lads a regular wage and a small share of the profits, but this allows them a little extra in case they decide to take wives or something. So I would pay them out their full share should they choose to leave and go their own ways.”

Rupert thought what the major asked for was more than fair. And even if he wanted more, Rupert would have agreed. The fear he’d seen in Verity’s

eyes he did not want her to feel for a moment, so he would not hesitate to do what was necessary to ensure their protection and security until Maurice was dealt with. “I think we can agree on that. Will the farm be all right in your absence? And if Lady Verity and I should need to travel to Lord Hansard’s estate in Wiltshire over the Christmas festivities, would you be able to accompany us?”

“That would be no problem. Another Sergeant, Jones by name, married our cook and will keep an eye on the place with another former soldier, who lost an arm at Waterloo but likes to be useful.”

“Good, well I have some letters to write, and Lady Verity should read them before they are dispatched, so I will head for the library. If you would like to join me there, Mrs. Addison, I would be grateful for your company.”

He ordered the carriage, and then Rupert settled down to write to his soon to be brother-in-law, and after a few attempts, managed a draft he thought was acceptable.

My Lord,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and I apologize that we have not been formally introduced. However, I wish to inform you that I have requested your sister, Lady Verity, for her hand in marriage. As Lady Verity is of age, I know that your permission is not legally required but I would seek your blessing on our union and trust that my suit will not be found with too much disfavour on your part and that of your family. I am newly come into the Barony of Ellesmere Manor, following the death of my great-uncle Frederick Rogers. I greatly respect and esteem your sister and intend to treat her as my greatest treasure. My assets are sufficient to keep a wife and family in great comfort and our marriage is not dependent on any dowry, my bride might bring with her.

Lady Verity has greatly honoured me by accepting my proposal and we intend to marry as quickly as can be convenient to all concerned. I intend to put the banns up in the local church at St Michael’s and All Angels Church at Buckland Dinham and hope that we can wed in the New Year. Please excuse my haste to be married on the grounds that I am most eager to become her husband and for us to share our lives together.

I would be grateful if you would reply and hope you will honour

our nuptials by giving your sister away in place of her late father.
Yours faithfully,
Rupert Rogers, Baron.

It was not the most erudite of letters, but he thought it sounded respectful enough and stated everything that was needful. Then he drafted a note to the vicar asking for the banns to be put up and a few more notifying the London newspapers of their engagement. The door was knocked on at quarter past ten, and Mrs. Addison entered. She was dressed in a dark grey merino gown, accessorised with a brightly embroidered shawl which Rupert suspected came from her native land of Spain.

“Welcome, I have finished writing, can I tempt you to a glass of sherry, while we wait for the Major?”

She smiled. “That would be lovely, my belongings are already on the carriage so I am ready to leave, my lord.”

He poured them both a glass of fine dark sherry which they sipped.

“Did you meet the Major in Spain, Mrs. Addison?”

“Yes after Salamanca, unfortunately our marriage has not been blessed with children. I hope your marriage with Lady Verity will be blessed in all things...”

They talked for a while keeping an eye on the clock on the mantelpiece. Then Rupert packed up the letters neatly and stood. He opened the door for Mrs. Addison and bowed her through ahead of them. The Major was waiting for them in the entrance hall, already wrapped for winter weather, so Mrs. Addison donned a bonnet and thick cloak, while Rupert was helped into his second-best overcoat, his best having the musket holes in the sleeve. He grabbed his hat, gloves and scarf before helping Mrs. Addison into the awaiting carriage.

Evans sat on the box with Tom Coachman holding a rifle while looking warily for any trouble. Cooper was at the rear of the carriage also armed with a rifle and with a sabre clearly available for use at his side. Rupert realised that the Major was also armed, visibly with both his cavalry sabre and one of the new rifles that were now more available. It was not a make of rifle he recognised, although Rupert admitted to himself he was no expert in such matters, however it looked a very expensive and efficient weapon. Rupert boarded the carriage behind Mrs. Addison, and then her husband followed him in.

Once in the carriage, he realised that Mrs. Addison also had a similar weapon and that both husband and wife were watching for any attack on the carriage as they made the short journey to Lady Verity's home. The snow was only a few inches deep and did not cause the horses any difficulty, travelling over it. The sun was shining down and there were no more clouds in the sky, so Rupert hoped most of the snow would melt so they could retrieve the treasure on the following day.

When the carriage pulled up beside Verity's house entrance, Major Addison got down, gesturing for his wife and Rupert to stay in the carriage. Evans and Cooper both got down and examined the grounds, while Rupert waited. Satisfied, they warily returned and the Major knocked on the door, which was immediately opened by the housekeeper.

"Lord Rogers, Major Addison, and Mrs. Addison to see her ladyship," he announced. He reopened the door to the carriage and his wife jumped down still carrying her rifle, then Rupert descended and they were quickly ushered inside. They were promptly shown to the sitting room where Lady Verity and Mary Herriot were sitting embroidering in front of a blazing fire.

The sight of her sitting so prettily immediately set his heart to race and he grinned wondering if she would always affect him so. He enjoyed, even more, the delight that lit up her blue eyes and the rosy flush on her cheeks.

They stood as the three entered and Rupert bowed over the ladies' hands.

"Lady Verity, may I introduce Major William Addison, who has come to see to my security and his lovely wife Lucia?"

"Honoured to meet you both," Verity said, curtsying and with a warm smile.

"Major Addison, may I introduce Miss Herriot to you and your wife," Rupert continued correctly.

Introductions over, Verity invited them all to sit and requested tea be brought.

"Lady Verity, Major Addison had a suggestion for your safety until Maurice is arrested. He thought that you might welcome Mrs. Addison as a female bodyguard for the duration. Would that be acceptable to you?" Rupert asked, watching every nuance of her expression. "I admit I would prefer you were both under my roof, until he is apprehended, but I think that would shock the old tabbies who love to gossip. although I've written to the vicar to ask for our banns to be read, I suppose it is better to stay apart for propriety's sake."

“There is a guest bedroom and Mrs. Addison would be very welcome to stay, if you think it is necessary.”

“I do think it is a sensible precaution, Lady Verity. I also intend to leave one of my former soldiers here. I understand you do not keep horses yourself, but there is a room for a groom if you wish to do so?” Major Addison asked.

“Yes, the stables are functional and the groom’s quarters are water-tight even if not very luxurious.”

“Then, my man Evans will return tonight with his horse and that of my wife, so that a message can be sent quickly if necessary. If there is no hay or straw, then that can be arranged,” the major said, satisfied that there had been no objections to his plans.

Rupert asked Verity for a private moment. He hid his smirk when she blushed but then seemingly couldn’t stop smiling. They excused themselves and went to a smaller parlour a few doors down. Once the door closed, she whirled toward him and they rushed to each other.

Verity’s laugh puffed against his mouth.

“I missed you,” she breathed.

He kissed her fleetingly, a delicate brush of his lips against hers. “And I missed you. I dreamed of you last night. I do believe I am now eighty percent in love.”

She laughed, hugged him, only to release him like she had been burned. A worried look entered her eyes. “How is your arm? Has Farrant checked that it is not infected?”

“It is fine. It does not even hurt anymore, I promise.”

Rupert kissed her deeply and for long moments before he released her from his embrace.

“I wrote a letter to your brother, the vicar, and the newspapers. Could you read them over, before I have them sent? I am not sure of your brother’s exact address,” Rupert asked, getting out the letters.

Verity read through the one to her brother and laughed. “Yes, by all means, send it to Henry. His letters to me usually say something like, ‘I will be there tomorrow, hope to see you.’”

She read the second one. “The letter to the vicar is absolutely correct, and I can almost see him trying to eat the carpet when he reads it. He...he wanted to marry me, but I refused. And the newspaper notices are nearly correct. I will alter them as it is important to include my father’s first name, which of course, was George.”

She handed him the letters before walking over to a writing table positioned below the window. Verity turned to him, her eyes glowing with such tender emotions. “Rupert,” she said, pressing her hands against his chest. “I admire...I love that you include me in all things. It warms me to know I do not only have your love but also your respect.”

And he was glad that she understood that in her he saw a partner. Rupert dipped slightly and kissed the tip of her nose.

A slow, sensual brilliant smile curved her mouth. “Before we go back outside, I want your kisses... a lot of them!”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she took his mouth with hers, kissing him with a sweet fervour he hadn't expected but one he accepted with wholehearted delight for he wanted to leave her purring with plenty to dream about.

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Chapter 12

Rupert returned home to Ellesmere Manor, leaving Lucia, her baggage, and rifle with Verity. The day continued bright and fair with a light breeze, and the snow melted away, except in small spots beside the road, the night clouded up and stayed fairly warm, so the melt was draining away and did not freeze into black ice. It looked possible that on the following day, he would be able to make the journey with a couple of the Major's men to fetch the treasure and then it would be ready for the jeweller to assess it.

Evans set out after dinner with Ximena on a leading rein for Lady Verity's. The Major's men drifted in to report. Cooper said there were no signs of anyone trespassing and handed over three rabbits to the cook to prepare.

"Old habits die hard, Cooper?" The major guffawed.

"You didn't complain, Sir, when we was on campaign. Always made sure you got your share..."

"I know there are far too many rabbits, Cooper, if you want to catch a few while you are patrolling, you are welcome. But check with cook how many she wants and sell the rest to the butcher's in the village, tell them I gave you permission," Rupert said, smiling at their camaraderie.

"Thank you, my lord, very decent of you," Cooper said saluting, before heading to the kitchens to eat his supper.

O'Neill and Johnson came in separately about half an hour to report. O'Neill had gone west and Johnson east. O'Neill had not found any trace of Maurice. However, Johnson had more to say.

"I found where he'd been staying, and checked out the rooms he'd rented. Not in an inn, but in a lodging house. The landlady, who was a real slattern, swore blind that he had taken the rooms for two weeks, but had skipped out without paying. I examined the rooms. I've stayed in worse hovels, but not much. Left a pair of breeches behind, rolled up behind the bed." Johnson displayed the torn, bloodied breeches with a hole that matched the piece of material Rufus had ripped out.

"She said he was limping but had dressed like a gentleman and was in a real rage. I thought she would be correct about his rage as her own language

was as bad as the lowest trooper at him not paying his full tab. I asked around, but although some of them had seen him with another man, a former prize-fighter, known locally as Crusher Murray. This Crusher was out of town too and the drab he lives off and, I assume, pimps out did not know where to or for how long. She had some fresh bruises but I think she was telling the truth. So I know he stayed in Frome and has found a heavy villain to help him, but the trail went cold. Sorry, my lord.”

“You did well, it does not sound like he has slunk back off to London to lick his wounds then. That’s a pity. He was boasting about buying up my debts and offering to buy the estate, so it seems strange that he was living in such a dive and not paying his shot. I was wondering whether I should contact Bow Street about him, but did not think about it when I spoke to your brother. Thanks for your help, Johnson,” Rupert said.

After the men had reported, Rupert and the Major shared a decanter of brandy while the Major told him stories from the peninsula campaign.

“Do you think there is a chance of getting the treasure down tomorrow? There is a small cart in the carriage shed that I think they use to transfer hay and straw from the home farm to feed the horses,” Rupert asked.

“If it does not snow again over night, I think we will manage. I think I will head for bed then maybe we can proceed after breakfast tomorrow.



* * *

The following morning was again clear and no more snow had fallen in the night. Rupert headed down for breakfast and ate with only the Major. Then they wrapped up warm and headed for the carriage shed. Johnson, Cooper and O’Neill, flanked Rupert, all of them visibly armed. The cart if basic seemed solid enough for the purpose.

“I think it is strong enough and should serve the purpose,” Major William said.

John Cutler appeared and asked if he help.

“Yes, could you harness up the cart for us to use, please?” Rupert asked.

“At once, my lord, I will fetch Gramps,” the groom replied.

“Gramps?” Rupert asked.

“Name of our cart-horse, my lord. I think it is because he is a grumpy old curmudgeon. Reminded old Amos, who was head groom before me of his grandfather I gather,” John Cutler said, tugging his forelock.

He headed off and returned with a smallish pied cart horse, who seemed obedient enough but had a disgruntled look on his long face. The men laughed because he did look like a cantankerous old man, although he seemed to move well enough. He did try to kick out once as he was put in the traces, but then seemed to gloomily settle down.

“Do you want to ride or sit on the bench while I drive, my lord,” Major William asked.

“Ride, I think and we need some old blankets or an oilcloth to cover the chests and some rope to secure them safely,” Rupert replied.

“I’ll saddle Nimrod for you, my lord, shall I?” John Cutler suggested.

“Yes please, thank you, John.”

The men had already saddled two horses and O’Neill and Johnson mounted them. John led out Nimrod and Rupert vaulted aboard his large black stallion.

“Major, if I might have a word before you leave?” John diffidently requested.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Cutler?”

“Only if your missus minds that yesterday, Nimrod got into her fancy mare’s stall...”

The major walked around Rupert’s horse, which he had considered his finest possession before inheriting the estate.

“He has fine points and good conformation. I am not sure if I should offer a stud fee or just be grateful,” the major laughed.

“I don’t suppose Nimrod is complaining. She’s a very pretty mare...” Rupert said back. “We are not going to fall out over nature taking its course, are we, William?”

“Certainly not, my lord. We can consider the matter further if there is a foal. Something like sharing the sale price might settle the matter?”

They set off for the road when they were fully organised. Cooper sat beside the major on the cart’s box. Gramps was steady but slow but eventually they reached the point in the road where the gate to the old road stood. The land was fenced and was part of the home farm, although the fields were currently closely cropped and growing only grass. The first part

of the road was utilised as an additional farm lane and was relatively clear of weeds as it was used at least during the harvest season. From some distance in the road split, one fork heading to the home farm, and the old road wove its way up the hill, but it was very overgrown and more difficult for Gramps to drag the cart over.

It was a bumpy ride for Cooper and the Major, but the road was not impassable and they finally reached the old chapel. Rupert unlocked the doors, lit the lantern, and took them down to the crypt. He unlocked the tomb and slid the top to one side. They lifted out the coffin and slats and then heaved the three chests out. The first was the heaviest, but Johnson and O'Neill were strong men who made it look easy and carried it up to the vestry. Johnson stayed in the vestry with rifle at ready in case of interruption. Johnson and O'Neill lifted out the other two chests and then the major helped Rupert to replace the slats and coffin. The three chest were loaded up on the cart and lashed in place. Rupert locked everything up behind him and put out the lamp. Then they set off down the old road again.

Gramps seemed to pick up speed when they were back on the proper road, probably because he recognised the route home to a nice warm stable. When they reached the Manor, Rupert directed them to a side door which he unlocked, and between them they carried in the chests to the library. When the cart was unloaded, they handed it over to Seth Brown who came out to help deal with the cart.

"Thank you, well, that is that job done," Rupert said, relieved. He intended to tuck the chests into the secret room by himself until the jeweller wrote or arrived.

Rupert walked to the entrance hall and shed his outer garments. He had dressed in his oldest clothes, so went upstairs to wash and change. Farrant knocked on his bedroom door, just as he was finishing tying his cravat.

"Excuse me, my lord, but Sir Cuthbert Addison has sent a message and there is a person who has arrived by the name of Riviere."

"Good, show the gentleman into the front drawing room and offer him refreshments. Say I apologize for keeping him waiting and will be down in a few minutes."

Rupert read the note Sir Cuthbert had written, or perhaps dictated to his clerk.

Dear Lord Rogers

The felon Maurice Rogers was traced to Frome, but regrettably, he slipped out before we could arrest him. I promise that this matter has my full attention and am doing everything possible to apprehend him and bring him to justice. Please take every precaution until he can be taken.

*Your obedient servant
Cuthbert Addison, Baronet.*

It was not a satisfying letter, but at least Sir Cuthbert was still looking for Maurice which might cramp his style somewhat. Rupert headed downstairs and entered the drawing room. Mr. Riviere was a dapper small man of uncertain years, who clearly aimed for a fashionable look without being seen as too ostentatious.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr Riviere. I wish you to understand that this matter is very confidential and it was on Sir Cuthbert Addison’s recommendation that I asked for your assistance,” Rupert said feeling a bit of a pompous oaf saying it.

“Of course, my lord. The Rivieres have always treated the matter of client confidentiality of utmost importance. You can trust that any matter you wish to discuss will be kept totally secret.”

“I have some articles I wish you to value for me. This may be a slightly unusual commission. Could you come this way, please?” Rupert led the jeweller to the library where the Major was guarding the chests, holding his rifle, in the direction of the door as it opened.

“It’s all right Major, this is the jeweller Mr Riviere I sent for. Do you want to see what is in the chests?”

“Do I? Yes of course I do, after Cuthbert’s tale and lugging them back to the manor, my curiosity is killing me,” the major admitted.

Rupert shut the library door behind him and turned the key in the lock, then strolled over to the first chest and opened it. There were gasps of surprise from both the jeweller and the major.

“Bloody hell, you’re as rich as Midas!” The major blurted out and then apologized for his language.

“I am staggered, my lord. When you said it was confidential and might be a little unusual I assumed you were in financial difficulties and needed to sell some family jewels, or possible sell and have paste copies made...” The jeweller uttered and then covered his mouth as if he had lapsed from his usual

diplomatic decorum.

The jeweller bent over the open chest and lifted out a coin.

“Islamic and definitely gold but I will have to test one, to confirm the gold content. Then on a solely gold value, I should give you an estimate of what they are worth. Do all three chests contain the same coins?”

“No; still intrigued, Major?”

“Best show in town, I heard your great-uncle was eccentric and towards the end of his life got a bit miserly, but I never thought he was hiding a treasure of this magnitude.”

Rupert bent and opened the second chest. The one with the bags of gems.

Chapter 13

Rupert pulled out three of the small bags at random. He untied the first and tipped it out on the middle of his desk, bright green stones, the size of his thumbnail cascaded out. There was an audible gasp from the jeweller and he could see that William was trying hard not to react. He untied the second bag, and clear white diamonds of a similar size sparkled as they fell onto the mahogany of his desk. He opened the third bag, this one did not contain stones, instead pearls of great size rolled out and Rupert had to move to prevent a couple from falling on the floor. There was silence until the Major quietly asked, "Do all those bags contain jewels?"

"I assume so, I only opened two bags when I found the treasure," Rupert said, staring at the gems and pearls.

It took the jeweller all day to examine and itemise the gems and jewellery then to count the coins. He had arrived in a rented carriage from Frome, having caught the Mail from Bath. He was put up for the night and driven to Frome in time to catch the return Mail coach from London on route to Bath.

He had told Rupert, "The gold coins will be no problem to sell as I doubt they have historical value. But the gems should be sold gradually, so they do not flood the market and lower the price. The jewellery will find a good market, when you decide what you want to keep."

Mr. Riviere suggested a ten percent commission on the sale of the gold and gems, taking away only one gold coin to assess its gold value, but promising to make arrangements with a bank in London to store the gems and gold coins until sale could be arranged."

Rupert and the major transferred the chests to the secret room but the major slept on the sofa in the library overnight and the room was kept locked, with one of his men inside when Rupert or the major were not in the room.

A letter from Lord Hansard arrived on the following day together with a note from the vicar, confirming tersely that he would read the banns on Sunday, which would be the last Sunday in Advent. That morning Cooper had reported to the major that he had found footsteps in the mud in the grounds behind the house, which he was certain were not caused by any of the employees. He had followed the tracks to the road and would continue to

keep watch for interlopers.

Rupert was driven around to Verity's that day and took the letters with him.

"Did everything go well with the jeweller?" she asked him once they were alone in the small intimate parlour.

"He gave me a provisional figure for the gems, wanted to check the gold value of the coins before giving a firm figure for them and I think you should choose which of the jewellery you want to keep, before we sell those you do not like," Rupert told her naming the provisional estimates he had been given.

Verity gasped. "You are terribly wealthy. You must be glad you won't have to marry to save your estate."

"Ah, my sweet, that wasn't a worry once I met you. Even if we did not find it, only you would be my bride. I would have found away, even if it meant working the fields myself. And do not forget with your fifteen percent you are also wealthy."

The smile she gave him was tender and full of promises. "Ninety percent in love," Verity whispered. "And I would have worked those fields with you."

A dark feeling swept over him then, and Rupert sat on the armchair of the sofa and pulled her between his splayed thighs.

What if...

It was hard to even think it, but what if everything blooming between them were to be ripped away? He could not shake the unsettling feeling that they might lose each other. "Maurice is still out there, and I just got this awful feeling that he might do something that will irrevocably alter us," Rupert said gruffly, his fingers tightening on her hips.

She gasped, and the pulse fluttered at the base of her throat. For a moment wild fear entered her eyes before it disappeared. "I do not believe that," she said fiercely. "We will not let him!"

Her spirited defiance warmed him. Verity cupped his cheeks, kissed him, and with a jolt he realized she was comforting him against the very unexpected fears.

Their passion flared bright and hot. Rupert stood and guided her to the sofa and sat, tumbling her into his lap. And he never stopped kissing her. Not wanting to make love to her in a hurried fashion, he broke their kiss and they rested their foreheads against each other.

“The next time I take you will be in our marriage bed,” he said a bit hoarsely.

Desire beat at him and he was so very tempted to ravish her now. He sought for any safe topic to speak about, but he did not ease her from his lap. Rupert wanted to feel her soft weight against him.

“Actually, I wanted to show you a letter from your brother and from the vicar and to ask if I can drive you and your ladies to the church on Sunday, to hear our banns being read.” He held out the letter from her brother.

Dear Lord Rogers

If Verity says she will have you, welcome to the family. May I invite you both for the Christmas festivities, if you arrive on the 22nd that would be ideal. We are expecting a small party. You can inform me then of the date of your wedding.

Faithfully,

There followed a squiggle which Rupert assumed was her brother’s signature.

“The rest of the letter was legible, so it must have been written by his secretary,” Verity laughed when he pointed it out.

His visit was brief, largely because the major was concerned about the dangers of him being attacked again. Rupert spent some time planning for his wedding, as they intended to hold a reception following their marriage at Ellesmere Manor.



* * *

On Sunday morning Rupert arrived once more at Lady Verity’s home, his carriage had Cooper on the box with Tom Coachman and Johnson up behind. Rupert was alone in the carriage, as Major William had stayed back to guard the library. He had kept O’Neill with him as extra security as Cooper had seen more foot prints and caught a glimpse of a large man. He had fired off a shot but the man had bolted and got away.

“I don’t know whether it is Maurice’s suspected co-conspirator seeking to kill you, or that word has got out about the treasure and a thief was trying to

case the manor, so for now I would prefer if we keep a presence in the house until this Maurice is taken and then we can carefully take the gold and gems to a bank in London,” the major had explained.

“You know more about keeping things secure than I do. I will enjoy accompanying three beautiful ladies,” he had said with a grin.



* * *

Rupert had descended with Cooper and Johnson’s guarded permission and handed the ladies into the carriage. Lucia was wearing a mantilla with a black veil, and a large silver cross around her neck, which Rupert assumed was to assert her Catholic beliefs in a heretic establishment. She also carried her rifle. As she boarded, Evans sprang on board and sat beside Miss Herriot, with their backs to the horses. Both Lucia and Evans kept their eyes scanning the road and countryside as they headed for the church.

Rupert tried to chat with Verity but the realisation of the threat, dampened their mood and they lapsed into silence. They travelled to the church and Rupert handed the ladies down although Evans and Lucia reluctantly left their rifles in the coach. Johnson stayed with the carriage, but Cooper slipped into the church and sat at the back.

The church was fairly full and Lady Verity and Miss Herriot greeted their acquaintances and introduced Lucia and Rupert to those who at least pretended to gentry within the community. Sir Cuthbert was in the church and spoke briefly with Rupert and Verity, then he spent some time talking to Mary Herriot. Rupert noticed that Mary blushed and giggled as the portly magistrate was clearly flirting with her.

“Verity, Sir Cuthbert is a widower, isn’t he?”

“Yes, his wife died three years’ ago of some illness, she had been delicate for some years.”

They sat in the Ellesmere pew and suffered through the service. The hymns were bearable, but the vicar clearly loved the sound of his own voice and there was a lot of shuffling in the pews as his sermon neared the hour mark in length.

“I think we should do something about replacing the vicar before our wedding, this man is a dead bore,” Rupert whispered to Verity, who sat beside him chastely holding his hand.

She covered her mouth to suppress a giggle and turned it into a slight cough in reply. The vicar finally read the notices including publishing the banns for their marriage and then a final hymn and some recessional music for the choir and vicar to process to the vestry by.

They stood up and Lady Verity and Miss Herriot made their goodbyes and accepted the congratulations of their well-wishers. The people tramped out, running the gauntlet of shaking the vicar’s hand. He made a point of congratulating them while wearing a miserable scowl on his face. They were grateful to escape and waited in the porch as Cooper dashed to have the carriage brought round.

It took a little time before the carriage came around, as there were others trying to board their transportations. Despite their caution, no one really expected anything to happen outside the church and they boarded safely and set off once more for Ellesmere Manor. Rupert had invited them to eat, promising to escort the ladies to have them driven to Lady Verity’s before it got dark.

The roads were not particularly busy as it was Sunday, there being no real farm or business traffic. It was sleeting gently and Rupert felt some sympathy for the men on the box and Johnson huddled up behind. Ellesmere Manor came into sight and they all breathed a sigh of relief. They began the turn into the drive and the leaders pulling the carriage reared up, neighing in panic. Tom Coachman pulled up the horse and tossed the reins to Cooper as he went to check on his horses. Both leaders, were preferring their back hooves and clearly lifting their leading foot in some agony. Crooning quietly to the horses, he calmed them down and then bent to examine the right-hand horse’s foot.

“Caltrops, my lord, we are under attack...” he yelled, plucking out a small metal contraption, but he was clubbed to the ground by a large ugly man, whose misshapen nose indicated his former profession.

Cooper hefted his rifle and shot the heavy-set man, although as the horses were clearly unsettled, shaking the carriage, it hit low in the man’s belly. He was amazed the horses had not bolted. Then the carriage came under fire from the shelter of a nearby hedge.

Rupert grabbed Verity and dropped down onto the carriage floor while

Evans fired at the shooter.

“Down, Mary!” Rupert said sharply.

Miss Herriot quickly joined them on the floor of the carriage. Rupert grabbed and cocked one of the pistols but he could not see anything to shoot at.

“Rupert...” Verity began shakily, and he squeezed her fingers reassuringly.

Cooper jumped down from the nearside and moved quietly behind the carriage to the rear, reloading his rifle as he ran.

“Stay here, Evans,” Lucia ordered discarding her mantilla and opened the door hidden from the shooters. She slithered out and up, crawling over the roof of the carriage, lying flat. Johnson had been shot and was bleeding heavily, Cooper had crept behind the carriage and was trying to drag him behind the carriage. There were voices and sporadic fire. Lucia let off a shot and then another and Cooper managed to pull Johnson out of the line of fire.

There appeared to be two shooters but the pugilist who had clubbed Tom Coachman was collapsed bleeding and groaning. Apart from the sound of the horses’ distress, and the boxer’s groans, all was not quiet. Two more shots rang out from the hedge, one zinged over Lucia’s head and the second thudded into the coach’s boot. Cooper fired from behind the carriage and there was a scream from behind followed by a thud. Then the sound of running and Maurice was revealed dashing across the field to where some horses were tethered. Lucia fired once more, and Maurice fell to the ground.

“I think it’s over,” Lucia called down. “I am going to check on Johnson, my lord. Evans, can you check the horses.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Cooper?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Can you check on our attackers please.”

The former poacher clambered over the hedge. “This one’s dead, ma’am. I’ll go and check yon Maurice...” Cooper loped off to where Maurice had fallen. “Lovely shot, ma’am. Stone dead. I’ll fetch their horses because ours are not going to be pulling anything for a while,” he shouted back.

The passengers climbed from the carriage, and Rupert assisted Verity and Miss Herriot down. Both ladies appeared pale but resolute. Rupert squeezed Verity’s fingers once more, and said, “It is over. Maurice’s threat is no more.”

Rupert spotted Tom Coachman who was now vaguely conscious and moaning.

“Go to him,” Verity said, “Mary and I are fine.”

Rupert went over to Tom and bent over his coachman, but beyond a large lump on the older man’s head he seemed to be recovering. Glancing over at the villain bleeding in the road, Rupert said, “This one is still alive, but I doubt he’ll live long enough to hang.”

Lucia climbed down and was binding up Johnson, whose shoulder was damaged.

“How is the coachman, my lord? Johnson should be all right, smashed his collar bone but he’ll survive,” Lucia replied.

“Yes, my lady, keep the pressure on there,” she continued to Verity, who had bravely started to tend to their wounded.

Cooper led three horses towards a farm gate, opened it and brought them back to the carriage. He helped Evans, release the leading horse from their traces and forcing two of the saddle horses into their places. The rear horses seemed fine, but both leaders had wounded hooves. Then a carriage appeared from the other direction and stopped as the Ellesmere carriage had slewed across the road diagonally. Sir Cuthbert descended and strode over, staring at the carnage.

“There’s two bodies in the field, that blackguard bleeding over there, Tom Coachman got hit over the head and Johnson was shot, but the ladies think he’ll survive. And I believe there are caltrops in the road...” Rupert declared.

“My men can deal with the felons and the caltrops, can one of yours take the spare horse and get the doctor?” Sir Cuthbert Addison asked.

“Cooper, help Evans to lift Johnson inside, then go for the doctor. My lord, can you help Tom into the carriage and board. I’ll lead the injured horses,” Lucia ordered, then persuaded the others back into the carriage. “Evans go for the doctor please?”

Then they returned to Ellesmere Manor, at a slow pace.

Epilogue

His bride stared up at him, a bright flush on her cheeks and pure, unguarded love in her eyes. She was splayed beneath him, her legs wrapped high around his hips, and his manhood poised at her hot and welcoming quim. The fire in the hearth crackled, and the smell of pinecone was redolent on the air.

She touched his mouth. "You are staring at me."

"I am still in awe that you are mine."

It was the night before Christmas, and they were at her brother's house in Wiltshire for a festive feast. They had arrived only a few days ago and shocked the entire family by announcing they were already wed. They hadn't wanted to waste a moment, not after the fright of Maurice attacking their carriages. Rupert could have been killed...or Verity, and upon that realization he had moved with alacrity to sell off a little of the treasure and purchase a special license.

His darling wife lifted her hands and twined them around his neck.

"Rupert," she breathed his name before kissing him deeply.

He thrust deep inside her tightness, and he captured her scream with his mouth. She wrenched her lips from his, panting.

"Husband?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Something powerful wrenched in the vicinity of his heart, and he stared down at her glowing face, robbed of breath. This was the very first she had said the words to him. They had delighted in teasing each other about how close they were to falling absolutely in love, but this...

"I love you," he said gruffly. "And I look forward to a lifetime with you, Verity."

Verity's heart beat wildly, her body pulsed with desire at the tenderness and love in Rupert's eyes. There were times she looked at him and felt shocked that she could love another so quickly, so fiercely, and her love was so completely overwhelming.

"I love you," she said again, tracing the fullness of his mouth. "I love you, Rupert, with a love I never knew was possible."

He took her mouth and her body with ravishing greed. Nothing else existed beyond the feel of Rupert plunging inside her aching sex over and over, the wild hammering in her, and the wonderful delight she felt in her husband's arms. A sob built inside her, catching in her throat as a blinding wave of bliss broke over her, and she came apart in his arms, quaking from the devastating pleasure.

With a harsh groan, he stiffened and emptied his pleasure inside her.

Several minutes later, their passion cleaned away, she laid snuggled into his arms, contentment in her heart.

"I got a letter today from Mary," Verity murmured sleepily.

"Is she running away with Sir Cuthbert?"

"How did you guess?" she gasped. "Not that she is running away, but that he had a tendre for her. In her letter, she said he came by the house, and he kissed her most thoroughly under the mistletoe!"

"I have a good eye for these things," Rupert said a bit smugly. "I saw how he looked at her at the church. Miss Herriot is a fine woman."

Verity beamed at him though he could not see her expression in the darkened room. "Yes, she is, and with the share of the treasure I gave her, she will have an ample dowry if she chooses to marry him."

Rupert laughed, and they chatted long into the night, embraced in each other's arms.

About Stacy Reid

Stacy Reid writes sensual Historical and Paranormal Romances. Her debut novella was a 2015 HOLT Award of Merit recipient in the Romance Novella category, while her bestselling *Wedded by Scandal* series is among the top picks by Night Owl Reviews, Fresh Fiction Reviews, and The Romance Reviews. Stacy spends a copious amount of time binge-watching *The Walking Dead*, *Homeland*, and *Altered Carbon*, watching Japanese Anime and playing video games with her love. She also has a weakness for ice cream and will have it as her main course.

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About Giselle Marks

Born in London, but living on the beautiful Isle of Man, Giselle Marks is an editor, poet and novelist, penning such historical romances as 'The Fencing Master's Daughter,' 'The Purchased Peer,' 'The Marquis' Mistake' and 'A Compromised Rake'.

Her family is grown, contented and expanding.

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The Secrets He Keeps

by Amy Sandas



Chapter 1

London
December, 1817

Callista Hale stepped gracefully from her stylish barouche to the cobblestone street in Soho. A winter gale kicked up and swirled around her feet, sending gusts of icy air up her skirts. Ignoring the cold, she peered through the black netting of her hat, which had been drawn down to conceal her features, and assessed the building in front of her.

It was not as grand as she'd expected.

Her own establishment near St. James was a veritable mansion built of red brick with ivy crawling up one wall, black shutters on every window, and a black-painted door possessing a gleaming brass knocker in the shape of a dragon's head. This place was nearly its exactly opposite. Built in the romantic neo-classical style, it was three stories high but remained rather modest in size. It was all white with solid white pillars framing the entrance and marble steps that led up to double doors painted a conservative navy blue.

Smoothing her hands over the fur-lined black velvet of her winter pelisse, she started forward. Anyone observing would have seen a mysterious woman of obvious wealth and consequence. They'd have no idea the black veil concealed a shrewd and focused gaze. Or that such graceful, languid steps were grounded in determination and ire.

Because she was about to infiltrate the enemy's lair.

Whispers and rumors about London's newest gentleman's club had been flying about town for months. At first, Callista had brushed off the news of a new place opening up. No club, brothel, or otherwise had ever been able to compete with Pendragon's Pleasure House.

Callista should have easily been able to put any possible concerns about the new gentleman's club to rest. And she would have, if she hadn't started to notice that for all the talk it inspired, no one really seemed to know exactly what went on behind the establishment's blue doors.

Even after months of using her rather extensive resources to learn more

about the establishment in Soho, Callista had confirmed very little that proved to be useful or concrete beyond the fact that the place was owned and operated by one Erik Maxwell of unknown origins. And for a woman who'd been the primary custodian for the sexual secrets of England's most prominent aristocrats, politicians, and businessmen for more than a decade, the lack of information was infuriating.

She did not tolerate competition, and though she doubted this new club could possibly be considered as such, she'd had enough with the bloody mystery. The fact that the club catered to the same pool of extremely wealthy and influential gentlemen as Pendragon's was enough to place the establishment in her line of fire. It was time to discover exactly what secrets Maxwell's contained. Personally.

As she ascended the pristine steps to the front doors, she put an extra sway in her hips and curved her reddened lips. Poor Mr. Maxwell had no idea what he was up against.

Lifting a hand gloved in the finest black leather, she ignored the gleaming gold knocker to rap her knuckles smartly on the wood. The door opened immediately to reveal a man who possessed the appearance and manner of an aged butler. Stiff spine, hooked nose, disapproving glare and all.

"May I help you, madam?"

Though the pompous servant was not what she'd expected, she replied with smooth command. "I desire an audience with the proprietor of this establishment."

"Do you have an appointment?"

She laughed—a rich, husky, sensual sound. Assuming the man would continue his butler charade and refrain from physically stopping her, she swept past him into the building and began unbuttoning her pelisse. Though she probably shouldn't have been, she was surprised to see that the attempt at mimicking an aristocratic home had not been limited to the doorman. The entryway was set up to give a visitor the impression they were entering a gentleman's townhouse rather than a high-class brothel.

"Pardon me, madam, but all visitations are by appointment only."

Lifting the small velvet reticule looped over her wrist, she slipped her hand in to withdraw a calling card printed in red ink on black. With a graceful turn of her elbow, she handed the card to the butler. "Take this to your master. He'll receive me. With pleasure, I'm sure."

Then she turned and strode toward one of the open doors leading off the

hall. She had no doubt the butler would do as she said and even less doubt the man she wished to speak with would see her immediately upon receiving her card. She had only about five minutes or so to snoop around a bit.

As she listened to the butler's steps crossing the gleaming marble floor behind her, she entered what proved to be a small library.

She scoffed. Who the hell featured a library in a blasted brothel?

Although she had one at Pendragon's, it was for her own personal use. Men did not come to a pleasure house to read. Yet this was clearly intended for the club's guests. For a moment, she wondered if she had the wrong address.

But her information had been confirmed. This was definitely Maxwell's.

The floor was covered in thick Persian rugs and a grand fireplace occupied nearly the entire wall to her right. Leather chairs and sofas offered comfortable seating while books lined the opposite wall from floor to ceiling. The room felt like a quiet and studious sanctuary.

Callista laughed as she removed her pelisse and draped it over her arm. It was all so...lord-of-the-manor. So pretentious and arrogant and *aristocratic*.

She was all about discretion and keeping the specific activities at her brothel private and protected for the sake of her patrons. But no one walked into her place and didn't immediately know it existed for the expression and enjoyment of sin, sex, and all manners of wickedness. There was no shame in it.

Annoyance seared her blood as she looked about the room, judging it harshly for its attempt at elevating the establishment above its purpose. It was a brothel. Nothing more. One of many that had tried to pilfer some of her elite clientele. All the others eventually perished from a failure to replicate the kind of service Pendragon's provided.

This place would do the same.

"Pardon, madam," the butler intoned from the doorway. "Mr. Maxwell will see you. This way, if you please."

Callista smiled beneath her veil. Of course the man would see her. No one could resist an audience with Madam Pendragon, a woman celebrated throughout London for being the owner and proprietor of the most elite and fashionable brothel in all of England. It was a position she had no intention of relinquishing any time soon.

The butler led her up the wide mahogany staircase to a spacious landing on the second floor. From there, two hallways extended in opposite

directions. Both were lit by elegant gas lamps and were lushly carpeted in more Persian rugs.

She paused to see which hallway the butler would lead her down and was momentarily surprised when he continued straight forward instead. The wall across from the landing displayed an elaborate carved relief depicting a scene of woodland stags and other small forest creatures.

Callista tilted her head as she studied the piece. Almost all of the artwork within Pendragon's depicted Grecian themes of sexual congress—nymphs and satyrs, Zeus in his many forms with his many conquests. But this large bit of art was not the slightest bit sexual. It really was just a woodland scene.

The butler stepped toward the carved relief to press two fingertips against a knot carved into the image of a gnarled oak tree. There was a near silent click and then the entire wall panel gently swung open to reveal a short hallway and another staircase.

Callista's lips twisted with reluctant appreciation. *Finally, a little drama!*

But why would the club's proprietor have her brought up to what were obviously his private quarters when he could just as easily have come down to meet her in one of the common rooms? At Pendragon's, she had a special apartment of rooms that were designed to appear as her private suite, though it was nothing more than an illusion to make the clients she received there feel important and cherished.

It made no sense, however, to go through the trouble of concealing the entrance to your personal rooms in such a way if you were going to reveal them to your visitors. Unless, he was trying to demonstrate that although he kept such things from his patrons' knowledge, he saw her differently. Was it a way of treating her as colleague rather than guest or rival?

It suggested he knew exactly what he was doing. This man might prove to be a better adversary than she'd expected. A thrill of particular poignancy danced across her nape and she almost wished it were true. Ultimately, however, no man had ever proven himself to be equal to her in cleverness or ambition. She always won in the end.

At the top of the secret stairway, the butler activated another hidden latch and the wall in front of them opened to a better-lit hallway. The third floor was as richly decorated and conservatively styled as the lower levels. It appeared the whole place was a study in aristocratic, gentlemanly décor. Cultured, generic, and—aside from the secret stairway—rather boring.

Stopping in front of an open room, the butler clicked his heels and

gestured stoically for her to enter.

Pompous.

With a roll of her eyes, she handed the servant her pelisse before sweeping past him in a subtle rustle of skirts. She sensed rather than heard him close the door behind her as she found herself in a spacious room dimly lit by candles. Instead of thick carpets underfoot, the floor was a warm, gleaming wood that reflected the dancing firelight from the carved stone hearth. The only furniture in the rather Spartan space was the wide, imposing desk placed in front of the fireplace and the two tall wingback chairs that faced it.

Upon her entrance, the man seated behind the desk rose to his feet. With the fire glowing behind him, she was able to discern that he was a tall man, dressed in dark clothing, with broad shoulders and a trim torso. It was a pleasingly masculine form suggestive of strength and vigor. But Callista had a gift for seeing men with more than her eyes. She could often sense things about them—fears, worries, vulnerabilities, and desires—before they could put them into words. She prided herself on being able to understand the things men preferred to keep buried deep inside.

Already, she could feel the quiet restraint in this one. Though he'd only moved to stand, a steady force emanated from him. As though he could leap into action at any moment but chose quite deliberately not to. That he hadn't spoken yet suggested he was accustomed to taking his time, allowing things to fall into place as they would before taking command. And he would try to take command. That was evident as well. This was a man who embraced his power quietly but with definite assurance.

But he'd never come up against anyone like her before.

As she strode across the rather cavernous room, Callista knew very well that although he was in deep shadow, she was cast in a fiery light. Her favorite kind. Her black brocade gown would reflect some of the flickering glow while retaining its mysterious darkness, showing off the deep curves of her figure and accenting the sensual movement of her body. Her fair hair would ignite with the light of the flames while her veil would keep her face concealed until she chose to reveal it. Though he couldn't see it, her gaze remained sharply trained upon the infamously secretive man who'd become her temporary rival.

Reaching the space between the two wingback chairs, she paused to give a disdainful tilt of her head.

Mr. Erik Maxwell, who no one in London had heard of prior to his arrival nearly eight months ago, lifted his hand in a small but definitive gesture. “Please have a seat, madam. It is my honor to receive you.”

The words were formed in a slight, indiscernible accent with a voice that made her think of fine cigars and even finer brandy. Decadent, rich, and masculine, with just the slightest hint of roughness around the edges. Rolled together with understated but undeniable command and confidence.

Goose bumps—delicate and tingling—spread across her skin. She didn’t enjoy the feeling.

Sweeping forward, she lowered herself into one of the chairs. The tall, straight back did not prevent her from reclining with the sensual grace she was famous for. From her new angle in the chair, she was able to discern more details of the man’s face when she glanced up at him.

He looked to be close to fifty in age, though a very virile, well-maintained fifty, to be sure. His hair—dark and liberally laced with silver—was brushed back from a square forehead. Deep-set eyes of an indiscernible color addressed her with keen attention from behind square spectacles. Strong cheekbones, an angled jaw currently shadowed with a day’s growth of salt-and-pepper beard, and a wide sensual mouth.

He was undoubtedly the most distinguished-looking sex proprietor she’d ever seen. A gentleman pimp? The thought made her lips curl.

She replied to his greeting in a smooth, unhurried tone, “I hope my unexpected visit isn’t too much of an imposition.”

By the subtle arch of his dark, slashing brow, she knew they were both aware that imposing was her exact intention. When she saw the twitch of a smile at the corner of his mouth, her blood heated with a sensation she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Desire. Attraction. *Lust*.

Dammit. Of course her long-dormant libido would choose now to reignite. But she had never been subservient to her more base desires and she quickly buried the unwanted physical reaction.

“You may feel free to impose upon me anytime, madam,” he said as he reclaimed his seat.

His tone was sincere. The man was smooth.

Shifting in the chair, she slowly lifted the veil from her face. “Well, I do not expect my purpose to require more than one.” Meeting his eyes without the black netting filtering her view proved more unsettling than she’d

expected. The man had a poignant gaze. "I shall assume you are an intelligent man and that you know why I'm here."

He lowered his chin and the look he gave her then would have made her pulse flutter if she had been a weaker woman. "I would never presume to know a woman's mind."

"Intelligent, indeed."

He flashed his teeth in a brief smile. "Tell me what you need of me and I shall endeavor to please you."

She ignored the tightness his words and voice and eyes created low in her body. A sharp edge entered her voice as she replied with a practiced smile. "What would please me, Mr. Maxwell, is your exodus from London."

Her declaration did not appear to surprise him. Leaning back in his chair, he linked his fingers over his abdomen and returned her steady stare. The curve of his mouth was undeniable, as was the lowered, more intimate tone of his voice as he replied. "It appears you are everything you've been reported to be, Madam Pendragon. This pleases me immensely."

"It is not my intention to *please* you, Mr. Maxwell," she noted coolly. Though he remained silent and unmoving, his gaze intensified as light sparked in their depths, making her wonder if his eyes were not as dark as they'd first appeared. "Nor is it my intention to suggest a threat in my words. The simple truth is that you cannot compete with Pendragon's Pleasure House. Your club will fail." She smiled, silky smooth. "I hope only for you to avoid the inevitable embarrassment and loss. You would be better off re-establishing your club elsewhere. Might I suggest Bath or Edinburgh?"

He lowered his chin with a long, slow exhale as he removed his spectacles and laid them atop his desk. When he looked at her again, he kept his chin lowered and lifted only his gaze. "Madam Pendragon. It seems clear that you would not have come here if you did not fear the exact thing you deny. But I would like to assure you that my business is not a threat to yours in any form."

Annoyance filled her at his unshakeable poise and subtle condescension. But before she could respond, he leaned forward to prop his elbows on his desk as he looked intently into her eyes. "You see, our businesses could not be more dissimilar."

Her temper flared. Did he believe himself so damned superior, then?

Callista shifted in her chair and leaned forward to mimic his posture, folding her hands on the gleaming surface of his desk. Though the position

pushed her breasts against the edge of her bodice, exaggerating her cleavage and lengthening her neck, she was surprised to see that his gaze flickered not to her bosom but to her leather-encased fingers. The flame that had sparked in her core at the first sight of this man flared.

Steeling herself against it once again, she tilted her head to reply in a cool tone. “No matter how covert your services or how boring the décor of your establishment, the truth cannot be changed. Your business, Mr. Maxwell, is fucking. And so is mine.”

She didn’t exactly think she would shock him with her crude choice of words, but she certainly didn’t expect the reaction she got.

It started with a slow, almost gentle widening of his lips—as though he’d just been offered a favored sweet and was imagining how he’d savor it—followed by a glitter of unnamed intention in his eyes. “You are quite right, madam. And also very wrong.”

Chapter 2

Callista eased back into her chair and ran her hand along the waist of her corseted bodice, past the curve of her hip, before smoothing out the drape of her skirts over her crossed legs. Arching a brow, she gave a little sigh. “When it comes to the nature of my business, I am never wrong.”

His sharp, glittering gaze never left hers despite the temptation she offered in her lounging figure. Even so...whatever he was thinking caused a spark of heat to flare brightly in his eyes.

Callista saw it. She *felt* it. Like a bolt of white fire angling straight through her center, she felt it.

Still holding her gaze, he straightened in his seat and put his spectacles back on.

Callista honestly couldn't decide if he was more unsettling with them or without. The man was indescribably handsome. Virile. Unexpected.

“I would never question your expertise, madam. However, I do believe it is time to address the true purpose of your visit.”

“And what do you perceive the true nature of my visit to be?” she asked disdainfully.

He lowered his chin. “You are a clearly a woman of discernment. One who appreciates knowledge and discretion in equal measure. You have come to me for answers. And as I said earlier...I shall endeavor to satisfy you.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “But first, would you like a drink?”

Anticipation sparked inside Callista. It was an interesting tack he'd taken. But she possessed an agile mind and unwavering resolve. “Brandy,” she answered with an easy smile.

He opened a drawer in his desk and withdrew from it a bottle of fine French brandy and two snifters. After pouring two fingers into each glass, he rose to his feet and started around the wide desk. As he neared her position in the chair, she finally saw that his eyes were a very pale gray. Nearly silver. Despite his controlled manner, there was a predator's gleam in their depths.

Reaching her side, he extended one of the snifters. “If you would indulge me, madam, it would be my pleasure to explain.”

A thrill went through her at his low-spoken words, but she hesitated.

Stupidly. This was exactly why she'd come here. To get a sense of what he offered that had inspired such loyalty in his patrons. To learn the secret to how he'd formed a base of understated power and undeniable success in such a short time. She *needed* to know what she was up against.

Yet, as she looked up at his towering form—taller and broader than she'd realized—and noted the way he cradled the glass of brandy in his large palm, she got the oddest sense he was offering something she wasn't ready to accept.

Just take the blasted drink before he thinks you're daft. Or worse—afraid.

Affecting a tone of boredom, she accepted the brandy. "Do not expect me to be impressed, Mr. Maxwell."

He nodded in acknowledgement as he lifted his glass to swirl it in the firelight. "I am aware of your great accomplishments, Madam Pendragon. A gentleman cannot step foot in London without hearing tales of a woman of insurmountable grace and influence. A woman capable of bringing the most powerful men in Britain to their knees—and having them beg for more." Silver eyes caught hers in a quick snare. "A woman of indescribable beauty and fierce ambition. To achieve such success, one would have to possess extensive experience and infinite intuition. I've no doubt you can claim both in abundance. But I might just surprise you."

Callista hid the distrust his words aroused with a graceful shrug. No man offered such pretty compliments without expecting something in return. Yet somehow, when he spoke in such a way, it felt more like a restating of fact than flattery. She had to admit...Erik Maxwell possessed a great deal of charm within his restrained manner.

Crossing in front of her, he took a seat in the chair beside her.

Watching at him from beneath the sweep of her lashes, she couldn't help noting his patrician profile and athletic manner of movement—economical, relaxed yet dignified. He was a man who knew himself and trusted what his body was capable of. No doubt, he committed to a regular exercise regimen to maintain a superior degree of strength, endurance, and vitality.

That or he frequently enjoyed other, more pleasurable ways to promote a healthy physique.

To keep herself from wondering exactly how physically energetic a lover Erik Maxwell might be, she shifted in her seat, leaning toward him. The new position created deep, sensuous curves in her figure as she lifted her brandy. "By all means, Mr. Maxwell, surprise me."

He removed his spectacles again, this time resting them atop his thigh—his solid, hard-muscled thigh. He looked a little older without the glass shielding the darker shadows of experience in his eyes. She was also able to detect the gleam of self-awareness in their depths and spied the fine lines fanning out from the corners. The evidence of age in his features supported his calm air of casual arrogance while avoiding any suggestion of world-weariness often seen in older men.

“Your devotion to discretion and the security of your patrons’ personal business is well-known. It is for this reason alone that I am willing to tell you the truth, yet before we go further in this discussion, I must have your assurance that you will not speak of what I tell you to anyone else.”

“Is it so scandalous?” she asked dismissively.

He tilted his head, and though amusement hovered around his mouth, his answer was given in all seriousness. “Some might consider it an unforgivable transgression. Either way, it involves a delicate and personal issue my clients wish to keep private. The true nature of what happens within the walls of Maxwell’s cannot become common knowledge.”

She was intrigued despite herself. “You have my assurance.”

“Although you were correct in saying my business is *fucking*”—his lips formed the word in a way that made her low body tighten—“my club is not a brothel.”

Callista arched her brows. “Of course it is, Mr. Maxwell. You provide sexual services for a fee. There is no way around it and no shame in admitting it.”

Silver eyes found hers. “It is not my intention to cast shame on the profession, madam. When managed well and safely, brothels offer valuable amenities to our societies by providing a welcome space for people to explore their desires and proclivities without fear of censure or risk to their person.”

Callista was only slightly impressed. “Then why deny the association?”

“I do not deny it. In fact, I encourage it as it distracts from the truth. But Maxwell’s does not deal in the business of pleasure for pleasure’s sake.” He lowered his chin. “Men do not come to me seeking such indulgences. They come to me for desperately needed guidance and instruction.”

It was not what she’d expected. “Instruction?”

“Essentially, among other related services, I tutor gentlemen in how to seduce and make love to their wives.”

Disbelief rolled through her at his words and her eyes widened as she

stared back at him. She couldn't possibly have heard him right. "Surely, you jest."

"Not even a little."

"Mr. Maxwell, I have been involved in this trade for many years, most of which have been spent exclusively catering to men of high society. Men of that breed in particular are notorious for seeking their pleasure outside of the marriage bed for a very clear reason. Their wives are purchased through dowries and business arrangements to provide proper, well-pedigreed wombs for breeding. The ladies serve a strict and limited purpose. Mistresses and bawdy houses serve another." Callista shook her head with firm conviction. "No gentleman wishes to seduce his wife."

Dark brows lifted as he gestured with his brandy snifter. "My success suggests otherwise. There are, indeed, gentlemen who wish to enjoy the full gamut of pleasures—domestic, intimate, and sexual—with the woman they've taken as life mate."

"Then why bother with seduction? A husband's rights dictate that his wife must submit to his lustful needs." Skepticism made her voice harsh. "She has no choice in the matter."

"That is exactly the issue Maxwell's rectifies." The expression of the man beside her was earnest and thoughtful as he continued, "So many of these men grew to manhood with obscene amounts of wealth and prestige. They've easily obtained everything they wanted in their lives. Mistresses were not earned or won; they were beckoned with a ringed pinky finger. Lovers and friends flocked and fawned by the dozen. These men have always known well how to be pleased, but only a rare few know how to go about pleasuring another with true emotion and generosity. And then there is the ridiculous notion that has pervaded humanity for too long—that a wife does not need or desire the same sort of attention in the bedroom that a mistress demands."

Callista waved a hand in dismissal. "The number of men who do not know how to properly pleasure their bed partner is not under debate. What I will never believe is that a man would go through the trouble of directing such efforts toward his wife."

"When a man's heart is involved, he will go to great lengths to achieve his goals."

Sitting back in her chair, Callista smirked. "Now I know it's a con. Men don't have hearts."

He did not immediately refute her bold claim but sat looking at her with a steady focus. Then he lifted his glass for a long sip. “Again, madam, I must disagree. Though many men may disregard the value of a loving, *satisfied* wife...some do not.” He smiled. “I offer my services to those rare gentlemen.”

“For an exorbitant fee.”

“For a fair and reasonable fee when marital bliss is the reward.”

“Bliss,” she scoffed. “And what of these wives? What if they have no desire to deepen their relationships with their husbands?”

The light in his eyes darkened for a moment. “Coercion and manipulation are the antithesis of what I impart. Seduction is about *connection*. It is about knowledge and consideration and shared passion.”

Meeting his intent gaze, she gave a slow shake of her head. “You speak of things that simply cannot be taught.”

“Tell that to the countless men who have been enjoying more fulfilling marriages by becoming more generous, loving, sexually satisfying mates.”

She laughed. “You can claim that all you’d like. But you cannot prove it.”

He smiled. Slowly. Sensually. Intently. And that predator’s gleam entered his gaze once again. “There is a way to prove the validity of my methods.”

“I do not have time to observe your lessons, Mr. Maxwell. I have a business of my own to run.”

“You misunderstand, madam. I’d like to demonstrate my methods. Allow me to seduce you.”

As a thrill of delicate flames licked along the nerves of her body, Callista eyed him carefully and offered a short, indelicate laugh. “I am not susceptible to seduction, Mr. Maxwell, no matter how well practiced the techniques. I’ve seen behind the veil. It’s where I spend all my time.”

“I’ve promised to surprise you, madam.” His voice was warm and textured. Though he didn’t smile, Callista detected something anticipatory in his eyes. “Give me the chance.”

“I won’t go to bed with you.”

But then he did smile. A quiet curve of firm, sensual lips. “No. Not tonight anyway.” He replaced his spectacles and rose to his feet and stepped in front of her before offering his hand. “There is no need to rush.”

For the first time since stepping into her rival’s lair, she felt a frisson of alarm. She tilted her head to give him an assessing look, sliding her gaze up his trim form to his face, which was once again in shadow. Unable to read his

expression, she lowered her attention to his hand. He possessed a wide palm and elegant fingers.

A shiver coursed through her. He thought to seduce her. And though the attempt would prove a failure despite her intense attraction to the man, she was admittedly very curious to see how he'd go about such a task. She wanted information about Maxwell's. It seemed he was willing to give it her. That it was in the form of a futile demonstration shouldn't matter.

After setting her brandy on the table beside her, she ignored his hand as she stood and smoothed her hands down the bodice of her black gown. "I shall give you until the end of the year."

"That's in twelve days."

Callista shrugged and moved to step past him. "If you doubt your methods..."

"I've no doubts." The weight of promise in his voice brought her to a stop. Their gazes met at an intimate distance.

"You're rather sure of yourself." The husky tone of her voice could not be fully disguised.

"With good reason."

Callista narrowed her gaze to disguise the effect his words had on her. "If you fail to prove anything beyond your own hubris, you will close your doors and leave London."

It was bold move.

"Agreed," he replied easily. "Are you available tomorrow evening?"

"Evenings are difficult for me," she replied as she slipped past him with a swish of her black skirts and started across the room to the door. It was time for her to leave before she started to regret coming in the first place. Or he thought to demand something in return if he should happen to succeed. Not that it would have mattered what boon he demanded since she had no doubt he would fail quite fantastically.

"I'll arrange something," he replied, undaunted by her evasion.

Callista lifted her hand in a wave over her shoulder. "You do that, Mr. Maxwell. I'll see myself out."

Chapter 3

Erik was still as he watched the dynamic woman walk away. The regal tilt of her head and purposeful stride contrasted in a fascinating way with the deeply sensual movement of her hips.

Once she stepped out of sight, he released a slow breath and leaned back against the edge of his desk.

His body was drawn taut. From head to toe, he felt primed and ready for action. The woman had worked him over with barely any effort. Though he was relatively certain she hadn't detected his fierce, consuming attraction, he was just as confident that if she ever did turn an eye toward him with the intention of seduction, he'd be in serious trouble.

When he'd first arrived in London, he'd learned a great deal about the woman behind the success of Pendragon's Pleasure House. It had only been a matter of time before he'd expected her to arrive at his club.

Madam Pendragon had proven to be the most captivating female Erik had ever encountered. With the ethereal beauty of a seraph and the commanding presence of a sorceress, Pendragon would undoubtedly prove to be a force unlike any he'd ever come up against.

Anticipation rushed through him.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd looked forward to something so intensely. His offer to seduce her had been impulsive but he had no desire to take it back, despite its many risks. One of the first things he told his clients was that they needed to be certain of their motivation and desired outcome. Seduction—as he taught it—was a serious endeavor. The effects of which had the potential to affect not only the seduced but also inevitably the seducer.

It had been a long time since he'd taken a lover. Once he'd begun to help men in realizing the full scope of pleasure and enjoyment to be found in their marriages, he'd found casual affairs unsatisfying.

But he'd never encountered a woman he wanted so intensely upon one brief meeting as he did Madam Pendragon. Everything about her attracted him. Her regal confidence, her sensual form, the shrewd gleam in her gaze, and the subtle twist of disdain in her smile.

Erik paced around his desk to stare down into the fire. He imagined stripping away her calculating aloofness and brash arrogance just as he'd remove the many layers of her fine clothing. What might be revealed beneath the black brocade and bewitching authority? Would he find a hot and fiery core within her cold ambition? Or was she made of steel throughout?

Twelve days to convince the bold woman she belonged in his bed. He'd have to be careful. His mouth curved as a thrill of anticipation coursed through his blood. He was up to the challenge.



* * *

When Erik sent the invitation to Madam Pendragon's attention at her business address in the very early hours of the morning, he hadn't expected a prompt response and hadn't gotten one. The answer he eventually received just a few hours ago, however, gave him a breath of insight into the woman's nature.

His message had requested her company for a late lunch at a location of her choice. Erik graciously offered to come for her in his carriage at an hour best suited to her full schedule.

Her reply was brief. An address. A time. And the assurance that she could manage her own way to the restaurant.

It was another challenge. He'd have to be resourceful—which he always was—and he'd have to be exceedingly quick.

The most popular oyster bar in Covent Garden was not typically open for business at such an early hour, but the owner had agreed to make an exception for a healthy fee. Despite the very late notice, the restaurant was staffed to accommodate their two guests with the manager agreeing to take care of them personally.

Erik arrived early to ensure all was in readiness, then sat at a table with a view of the door and waited.

The woman arrived promptly at the appointed hour, entering the establishment with bold confidence. The restaurant's manager rushed forward to greet her at the door as Erik rose to his feet. Across the small restaurant, he

watched as she released the fastenings of her black velvet pelisse to reveal the scarlet gown beneath. The manager draped her pelisse over his arm as he gestured toward their table. She murmured something to the man and he backed away. As she approached Erik, he noted how her stunning gown molded to her figure, accentuating the deep, luscious curves while the stiff bodice lovingly cupped and lifted her full breasts, creating a lush setting for three ropes of black pearls. She wore no hat or veil today and her fair hair was piled atop her head in loose curls. As she neared, he could see that the cold December air had brought pink to her cheeks and a glitter to her green eyes.

“Madam,” he greeted with a bow of his head, “I am enchanted.”

Red lips curved into a tempered smirk. “Of course you are.”

He smiled at the jaded tone in her voice and thought he might have seen a responding twitch in her lips.

Once they were both seated at the small wooden table, the manager appeared at their table to ask if they’d like to start their meal with champagne or some other refreshment.

Pendragon replied first, offering a half smile as she noted her choice. “I’d like a stout, please.”

“Of course, madam,” the manager said before glancing to Erik in inquiry.

“The same.”

“Right away, sir.”

Neither spoke as they waited for the drinks, choosing instead to openly assess each other.

The previous day in his club, Erik had sensed this woman’s intuitive nature. Her sparkling gaze had a way of making the observed feel vulnerable and exposed. It was no different today. Though it did not bother him at all to fall under her intent perusal, it was clear she could unsettle a man with no more than a fleeting glance if she chose.

He appreciated that.

He admired the severity and tenacity it took for a woman to gain the kind of wealth and power this one had in a world so dominated and desecrated by men. But he also knew such endless ambition and resolve often required a person to sacrifice—or at the very least, carefully conceal—their softer elements.

After their stouts were brought out and the manager retreated once again, Erik raised his glass in a toast. “To the next twelve days.”

She lifted her glass in a graceful salute. "Eleven, Mr. Maxwell."

He smiled. "The day is not over yet."

"True," she acquiesced, "but I hardly think you'll have me splayed across this table before we finish lunch."

She accented the statement by brushing her hand across the table. She wore red gloves today. Satin, reaching up to her elbows. Erik immediately envisioned her wearing nothing but the gloves, her lush body draped in sultry abandon across the bare wood surface of their table as he stepped between her parting thighs.

The woman's gaze narrowed. A knowing smirk twisted her reddened lips. "I can see you are now imagining exactly that, though I struggle to believe you are the type of man to indulge in even a little bit of daytime debauchery."

He lowered his chin to reply in a tone of dark confession. "You know better than to judge a man by his outward presentation, madam."

She searched his gaze for a long moment before replying in a heavy murmur, "I do indeed."

Their conversation was briefly paused as a wide tray of chilled oysters was brought to the table.

As his dinner companion removed her gloves by tugging at each of her fingertips before sliding the satin free, Erik was surprised by what was revealed. A tattoo of a black winged dragon graced the pale skin of her inner arm. The serpent's tail encircled her wrist like a permanent bracelet while the creature stared out with green eyes as sharp and penetrating as the lady's own gaze.

He glanced up to see she had noticed his intent perusal. Rather than feign disinterest, he reached his hand across the table and tilted his head in question. "May I?"

A fine blonde eyebrow arched and he got the impression most people did not openly comment on the tattoo. Without a word, she extended her hand toward him.

Her hand fit perfectly in the cradle of his. Pressing his thumb to the soft center of her palm, he slowly drew her hand closer so he could study the intricate detailing in the creature's scales and wings and its noble expression of disdain. The artwork was stunning. Though it was a decidedly European depiction of the mythical beast, Erik hadn't seen a tattoo of such quality since his years in Asia. Unable to stop himself, he lifted his other hand to trace the design with his fingertip. From the dragon's angular head, along the curving

coil of its powerful body, following the elegant lines of its tail around the delicate bones of the lady's wrist to the spiked, arrow-point tip.

A flawless depiction of grace, power, violence, and sensuality.

Though he perused the tattoo intently, he did not miss the subtle rise of gooseflesh on her skin in reaction to his light touch, nor did he miss the way her fingers curled involuntarily toward her palm when his fingertip reached the delicate skin of her wrist. When he shifted his hold to continue the soft caress along the individual lines of her palm, he was immeasurably pleased that she did not pull away.

"Why the dragon?" he asked as he lifted his gaze back to hers.

The green of her eyes had darkened during his exploration and her eyelids had grown slightly heavy, shielding the secrets of her thoughts. Heat swirled instantly through his blood in response. It amazed him how swiftly and intensely his lust was triggered by this woman.

"Dragons guard their treasures fiercely and indiscriminately," she replied. "Any fool who'd covet the dragon's possessions can expect a fiery death."

Erik gave a short nod. "You chose the symbol as a warning."

Her hand tensed briefly in his. "That's correct."

"How many men have you been forced to light aflame?"

Her lips twitched as she gave a graceful shrug of her bare shoulders. The gesture was both dismissive and suggestive at the same time. "I've lost count."

He had no doubt of that. "Fools," he murmured thickly.

"Every single one," she agreed in voice of subtle steel. Her green eyes stared intently into his for a long, silent moment before she withdrew her hand from his. He knew better than to try to hold her.

The oysters were the best he'd enjoyed since arriving in England while the stout proved to be a perfect pairing. They ordered a second round as the remnants of their meal was cleared from the table.

Erik relaxed in his chair as his body embraced the languid aftermath of a good meal. In contrast, his mind remained fiercely alert and focused on the enigmatic woman across from him. He'd known from the onset that seducing the celebrated madam would not be easy. He didn't want easy.

He wanted her. Plain and simple. From the moment he'd watched her approach him in his office the previous day. The undeniable strength of purpose she possessed and the dynamic, sensual, almost ruthless confidence she embodied made his blood simmer and his cock stand. But more than the

lust she inspired, it was the way she ignited his mind that attracted him most intensely.

In her presence, he had to be vigilant and shrewd. He could not rest on a superior intellect to retain an upper hand as he so often did. He enjoyed the way she challenged him with her jaded disbelief and brash arrogance. She was formidable. No doubt.

But he was no fumbling lad.

“Have you always lived in London?” he asked.

With a knowing smile, she eased back in her chair. “Have we reached the point in our meal where we disclose our heartbreaking backstories?”

“I want nothing you aren’t willing to give.”

She arched a brow at that but didn’t refute him. “My story is no different than many others. Born and raised in the rookery until my morally destitute drunk of a father tried to sell me for a bottle of gin. I preferred to make my own way, instead. As many girls do, I quickly went from the gin shop to the bawdy house. It wasn’t long before I decided how much control I was willing to allow a pimp, which turned out to be not a damn bit.” Erik smiled at that and she smiled back. “I fought hard to get free and claim the right to protect myself and run my business by my own rules.”

“Not an easy feat.”

“Nothing worth keeping comes easily,” she noted coolly.

Though he would have agreed with her, he made no reply.

“And you?” she asked with a tilted smirk. “What is your story?”

Erik leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. “I was born into an acting troupe that traveled all across Europe and parts of Asia. Such a childhood instilled a wanderlust in my soul that continued throughout my life. I was not very old when I started attracting amorous attention. Once I realized the benefits to be found in certain arrangements with my admirers, I left the troupe and fashioned myself as a bit of a Lothario.”

He looked down at his hands. “Those years of hedonism provided material wealth beyond any I ever had before. It also gave me a range and depth of experience that proved far more valuable.” Lifting his gaze without raising his chin, he met the shielded gaze of the woman across from him as a smile tugged at his mouth. “It turns out that when gentlemen of fine pedigree and sophistication direct their passion and creativity toward their mistresses, it leaves their wives...rather hungry.”

Pendragon’s brows lifted. “I’m sure you were quite happy to satiate those

poor ladies.”

“Neglect of a woman’s desires is one of the greatest wastes of human existence. I provided pleasure and an opportunity for these women to release inhibition and explore what satisfied them. It was a worthy practice until I began to notice what was missing in the interactions between myself and my paramours.”

“What was that?” Though the woman was practiced in feigning a subtle disinterest, Erik detected the light of curiosity in her gaze.

“Intimacy,” he replied simple. “True intimacy that can only be developed over time with someone you trust. A partner in life as well as in the bedroom. The kind of intimacy that grows between two people who are committed to each other. In hearing of how unhappy my lovers were in their marriages, I began to understand how the pleasure found in truly passionate, deeply intimate lovemaking is essential to such unions.”

“Such a noble perspective.” Her lovely features tightened with a smile of superiority. “But unrealistic. Men will always seek out new flesh to plunder.”

“Not men who truly love their wives.”

“Love,” she scoffed. “No matter how enamored they might be on their wedding day, men *always* grow bored with their pious, perfect mates. If they didn’t, I wouldn’t have a business.”

Erik nodded. “It is true. For some. But I am not talking of those men. My focus is on the gentlemen who have a true desire to cultivate such a relationship with the woman they have taken as life mate.”

Giving up her relaxed posture, the madam leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table in a posture that matched his own. Her green eyes flashed. “Tell me, Mr. Maxwell, are you also married?”

He paused, understanding the antagonizing note in her voice. Meeting her green gaze with steady focus, he replied, “No, madam. I am not nor have I ever been.”

“Then what exactly can you offer these men?”

Erik smiled, appreciating her skepticism and her demand for explanation. She was not one to simply accept what anyone told her. She’d need to experience something personally before agreeing it was possible. This was likely the only reason she’d agreed to allow him to demonstrate his practice.

He lowered his voice. “We’ve previously established that far too many men do not know how to properly make love to a woman. I share the knowledge and techniques I developed in my time as lover to many varied

women. But more important than that...I assist them in understanding how to cross that important bridge from gentleman husband to thoughtful, passionate life partner. It often requires a complete overhaul of their trained way of thinking and a destruction of the false assumptions that perpetrated about the fair sex. These men come to me because they want to become a lover and partner to their mates. I help them to see their wife as a woman first with all of the needs—base and exalted—a woman possesses. The seduction and pleasuring come rather easily after that.”

Pendragon’s gaze was narrow and assessing as she looked back at him. The tension in her jaw was barely discernable, but he saw it. She almost appeared...angry. Interesting.

“You are obviously very pleased with yourself,” she noted.

“I have witnessed great love stories unfold before my eyes. It is an honor to be a part of it.”

“That is a load of bullshit.”

Erik laughed. Her blunt way of talking caught him off guard on occasion. He enjoyed it. “I can understand why you’d think so. But I assure you, I mean every word.”

The woman eyed him over the rim of her glass as she took a sip before saying with disparagement in her tone, “You are a sentimentalist.”

Was he? Probably.

He shrugged. “I’m also logical, analytical, and sometimes a bit overly focused. Ultimately, I trust in what my experiences have revealed to me.”

“And what is that?”

“People need love.” When she rolled her eyes, he smiled. “Don’t get me wrong, madam. The pleasures of the flesh are also absolutely necessary, but when sexual satisfaction combines with true emotion within a devoted partnership, something wonderful is created.”

“A delusion?”

Erik caught her gaze and held it. “I promise you. It is very real.”

The lady set her unfinished stout on the table and stood. Erik rose as well, allowing himself a quick perusal of her stunning figure.

“While I appreciate your candid explanation, Mr. Maxwell,” she began as she slid her gloves on, smoothing the satin from her fingertips to her elbows, “it reveals a significant flaw in your planned demonstration.”

He lifted a brow. “Does it?”

Her red lips widened in a smile that was more genuine than most he’d

received from her. “We are not married. And I am not a high-society gentlewoman.”

Erik watched with deep appreciation as she turned and sauntered to the door where the manager was waiting with her fur-lined coat. She stepped out into a light swirl of winter snow.

Chapter 4

The next morning, a small package arrived at Pendragon's. The card addressed it to Madam Pendragon and also included an invitation to the theater for the following evening. It was signed simply, *E.M.*

Callista took the wrapped box up to her private suite to open. Inside she found a stunning pair of red elbow-length gloves made of a leather so fine and supple it felt like butter against her skin when she slid her fingers into place and smoothed the gloves up her arms.

Recalling the look in Maxwell's eyes when she'd done the same before leaving the oyster bar the day before, her core tightened with an intense jolt of desire.

The man had proven to be unexpected. For the most part, he possessed an air of thoughtful patience and self-assured restraint. She'd already ascertained that not much flustered the man. He was not one to waver under criticism nor did he appear particularly vulnerable to female manipulation. His demeanor was almost studious in nature.

Yet...he'd shown her more than once that a wickedness resided beneath his stoic façade. There was heat in his eyes when he looked at her. And a gleam that suggested the sort of knowledge that came only from extensive experience.

It made her want to indulge in a little of that experience herself.

She wouldn't, of course. And not just because he declared his intention to seduce her as a means of demonstrating his methods. If she wanted a man, she didn't need him to seduce her. She simply welcomed him to her bed. It had always been that way.

And wasn't that exactly why she'd been without a lover in far too long?

The act had grown stale and uninteresting. The truth was, even though she operated the most infamous and exclusive brothel in London, she rarely thought of sex in a personal context. Her last bed partner had been a few years ago now and she hadn't felt like she'd been missing anything. There was nothing new to explore. One man was much like another.

Erik Maxwell was surely no different.

Her unexpected sexual awareness of the man might simply have been

triggered by the fact that she couldn't fully read him. She knew men. She knew them well. Knowing what men needed before they knew themselves had been the focus of her life for more than two decades. Maxwell was the first in a long time whose motivations and desires still remained unclear to her after two encounters.

The anomaly was the only reason she so readily accepted his invitation. Besides, it wouldn't exactly be fair to declare his efforts at seduction futile if she never allowed him opportunities to employ his supposed skills.

Typically, she'd never leave her place on an evening they were open for business. However, with the Christmas holiday arriving in only a few days, business had slowed tremendously as gentlemen spent more time than usual with family and at intimate parties. It was exactly why one of her biggest events of the year occurred between Boxing Day and the New Year. Free of familial obligations, her clientele always proved ready for more risqué revelry.

The reply she sent to Maxwell's invitation indicated that she would meet him at the theater. She dressed in a gown of black silk beneath an overlay of red lace netting embroidered with a snaking pattern around the hem and over her bodice. Accessorized with her favorite strand of black pearls, her new red leather gloves, and a black velvet cloak, she was finally satisfied with the drama in her appearance.

The signature colors and eye-catching, seductive style was a crucial aspect of the infamy that surrounded her. Madam Pendragon was a character who'd developed out of a need for Callista to stand out at a time when she'd been just another pretty prostitute. Her ambitions had always reached far beyond whatever current status she found herself in, but at one point, she came to the realization that men wanted more than a pretty face and a good fuck. They craved fantasy and the kind of drama they could enjoy and then walk away from.

Madam Pendragon provided that and so much more.

Callista's dedication to the persona had grown until she'd lost sight of any delineation between herself and the madam. They had long ago become one and the same. Not even her brother—the only person who'd known her as she'd been before all the production she surrounded herself with—saw much of Callista anymore.

It was fine.

Callista Hale had been a rookery brat, raised in poverty and violence.

She'd scrounged and clawed and bit to escape the muck and soot of her origins. Though that angry, desperate girl would always be a part of her, there was no reason for anyone to ever become acquainted with her.

The theater in Covent Garden was teeming with people dressed in their finest.

Callista swept past them all, not bothering to glance toward any of the shocked or curious faces of people who wondered how she could have the audacity to show her face amongst such noble citizens. Pshaw! Those who knew better—the gentlemen who frequented her wicked establishment—kept their stern faces carefully averted, trying desperately to avoid her notice lest she indicate by word or deed their association with her in front of their precious wives.

Idiots!

Each and every one of them knew her policies on discretion and privacy. She made sure they followed her rules strictly or they risked being banned from her place or worse. Only in their self-guilt would they think she'd even consider revealing their dirty little secrets.

Idiots. Every one of them.

“Madam.”

Her inner tirade was brought to an abrupt halt as Mr. Maxwell stepped in front of her, seemingly out of nowhere.

She was rarely caught off guard and his sudden appearance caused her to stiffen before she recalled the grand audience around them. With a slow, sensual smile, she continued forward to offer her hand to her escort for the evening.

“Mr. Maxwell. A pleasure, I'm sure.” He took her offered fingers and bowed his head over them. When he straightened, a subtle smile turned up the corner of his mouth and his pale gray eyes stared intently into hers. He wouldn't have missed the fact that she was wearing his gift, yet he chose not to comment on it.

“You are exceptionally lovely this evening.”

Callista accepted the compliment with a tilt of her head before she slid her attention down the length of his masculine form. She'd thought him handsome before, but in his black evening wear and stark white cravat, he looked far more distinguished and more delectable than any of the lords surrounding them. “No spectacles?”

If he was put off by her comment, he didn't show it as he gave a half

shrug. "I prefer opera glasses when at the theater." Gesturing to the side, he asked, "The show will start shortly. Shall we take our seats?"

When people attended the theater, it was to observe the other attendees as much as it was to watch the performers on stage, which meant the seats were rarely occupied by the start of the show as people continued to mingle in the lobby well into the evening.

It seemed Mr. Maxwell did not intend to follow that trend.

"If you wish," she replied lightly, then had to hold her breath as he smoothly stepped to her side. After tucking her hand into the bend of his elbow, he maintained a respectable distance as he led her through the crowded room. His proper decorum was disconcerting. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man who played the role of escort. If she went anywhere with a member of the opposite sex, she was leading the way.

His stride remained unhurried as he brought her first to the cloak room to check her outer garment before passing right by the refreshment counter to take her up the stairs to the upper seating level. When he stopped outside the drawn curtains of a private box, Callista glanced at him curiously.

He smiled at her questioning look and swept the curtain aside to allow her to pass onto the darkened balcony. "After you."

"How extravagant," she noted.

"I've a few friends in high places."

Though the box held seats for up to six people, it appeared it had been reserved for just the two of them. A table had been set up with chilled champagne along with a bottle of brandy.

As Maxwell stepped up behind her, the curtain leading to the hall fell closed. Standing back from the balcony railing as she was, she couldn't see the floor seating at all and the stage curtains were still closed. All she could hear were the sounds of the orchestra playing softly and subtle movement of her skirts as she turned to face the man behind her.

"I think I like your friends," she whispered.

His answering laugh was rich and warm. A man's laugh shouldn't be so physically affecting. Shaking off her reaction, she stepped forward to take one of the seats.

"A drink, madam?"

"Champagne." She was in the mood for something light and sparkly to balance the velvet darkness surrounding them. Just because she'd decided to allow him the opportunity to seduce her didn't mean she intended to make it

easy for him.

After handing her a crystal flute and taking one for himself, he took the seat beside her.

“Thank you for joining me this evening.”

Callista glanced aside at him. Keeping her expression neutral, she noted the way his black and silver hair swept back from his broad forehead in soft waves. Without his glasses, the predatorial gleam of his gaze was poignant and sharp beneath thick brows, even in the darkened theater. But his mouth was relaxed and soft. The upper lip was modestly arched while the lower was full and lush. It was a deliciously kissable mouth.

He waited patiently for her to finish her perusal, without fidgeting or glancing away. He was comfortable being under direct observation, which usually indicated a person who was confident they had nothing to hide or someone who was so accustomed to deception they had no fear of detection.

Which was he?

“I imagine your business takes a great deal of your time,” he added.

“It does,” she finally replied as she sipped her drink. Though in truth, the demand on her time was far less than it had been even five years ago. Pendragon’s Pleasure House was well staffed and had reached a point when it could essentially run itself.

“Is it difficult for you to get away?” He gestured toward the stage. “For diversions such as this, I mean.”

She arched a brow. “Not particularly. I simply prefer to spend my time doing what I enjoy. I enjoy business, Mr. Maxwell. I enjoy success and profit and the wealth and influence that have come with it.”

He smiled then. Lowering his chin, he asked earnestly, “And what about life outside of Pendragon’s?”

Callista scoffed. “There is no life outside of Pendragon’s. It is me and I am it.” She looked away from him to casually scan the slowly filling theater below. Already she spotted several of her clients, some of them escorting their wives, others ensconced in the shadows with their mistress. Without turning her head back to the man beside her, she asked, “Why all the questions? What will you do with my secrets once you’ve dug them all up?”

“Nothing.” His voice was velvety and dark. The accent she’d become accustomed to thickened with his whisper. “Secrets are for keeping, madam.”

She slid him a glance from the corners of her kohl-rimmed eyes. “Well, I have none. Anyone who wants to know about me will have little trouble

gathering the facts of my life. There have been many who have sought to discredit me over the years. Rivals who have tried to sink my ambitious rise. They have all failed. I hide nothing, so there is nothing to discover.”

He shook his head. “That is blatantly untrue.”

Callista narrowed her gaze.

Leaning forward, he noted smoothly, “What of the secrets in your soul? The private longings of your heart?”

Her laugh was harsh and cold. “My heart? That offensive thing? Discarded long ago. And if I’ve a soul, it’s far too blackened to possess any tender morsels for you to feast upon.”

The sound he made was a low hum and his eyes sparked with silent intention as he leaned back again and raised his glass for a long sip of champagne.

She could see he didn’t believe her—that he fully expected to uncover some long-buried yearning she’d yet to fulfill. Then he’d likely press upon that weakness, mold it and reshape it to suit his purpose, until she believed he was the only one capable of filling whatever void he believed to be inside her.

The amount of arrogance men managed to cultivate had long ago ceased to astound her. Yet she found herself disappointed to witness it yet again in this man. Had she actually been hoping he might be different? Smarter. More experienced. Less self-obsessed. Truly interested.

As the lights lowered around them and the curtains drew open upon the stage, Callista shifted her full attention to the scene unfolding before her, intentionally and completely ignoring the man beside her.

The performance was a well-known Italian opera she’d seen many times before. It was a farcical comedy about bedroom escapades and secret lovers and she’d always enjoyed the way it depicted sexual congress as a lighthearted, pleasurable diversion. She never could abide the operas about vestal virgins and perceived betrayals that invariably ended in someone’s untimely death.

She actually loved the opera. It provided one of the rare instances in her life that allowed for true escapism. To her surprise and appreciation, Maxwell was content to allow her to enjoy the performance without overwhelming her with unwanted small talk or attempts at flirtation or other such annoying interruptions. Most men, if they got an object of their desire to join them in a private theater box enshrouded in darkness, would have made definite

attempts at furthering their agenda. But Maxwell hadn't attempted any sly caresses. Nor had he leaned close to whisper in her ear at any point during the performance.

As the curtains fell on the final scene and the lights came up, Callista rose to her feet to applaud the show. The man beside her stood as well. His shoulder briefly brushed hers, but when she turned to look up at him, his face was in profile as he directed his focus to the stage, where the performers were taking their bows.

After a moment, he turned to meet her gaze. His expression was unreadable, but something in his eyes unsettled her.

"Shall we make our way down?" he asked. "Or would you prefer to wait until the crowd has dispersed?"

"There's no need to wait."

There was just a brief pause, then he gave a nod as he gestured for her to precede him from the box. Once past the heavy curtain, he offered his arm once again. She accepted his escort despite the odd tension that had settled in her being. Most frustratingly, she couldn't quite pinpoint the source of her discomfort.

Becoming lost in her thoughts, as she often did after a particularly transporting performance, it took a bit to sense the subtle shift in the energy of the man beside her. Glancing up at him, she could not detect anything overt in his manner. Still, she sensed an increased alertness in his being. A sharper focus in his gaze as he looked out over the flow of theatergoers making their way from their seats.

When they entered the more open common area, she finally had to ask, "What has you so intent, Mr. Maxwell?"

The look he gave her was one of question mingled with a slight suggestion of concern. "Do they always stare in such a way?"

She cast a dismissive glance about the crowd then shrugged. "I suppose. I don't typically bother myself with the rude habits of strangers."

He chuckled. "Have you any idea how many men and women are both covetous and intimidated by just the sight of you passing through their midst?"

Callista met his gaze with a sardonic lift of her brow. "Of course I do. As well they should be."

"Indeed," he agreed with a slow smile, "the lady dragon is fearsome and sensual beyond compare." Dipping his head closer to hers, he added, "I

wonder if they see the superior intelligence and unique beauty of the woman within the awe-inspiring creature?”

Arching her brows, Callista replied, “Woman and beast are one and the same.”

He tilted his head and studied her quietly for a moment. “Are they? I am not so sure.”

They reached the cloak room, and when the attendant retrieved Callista’s heavy black garment, Maxwell took it before she could. Shaking it out, he held it up with a subtle light of challenge in his eyes.

Inexplicably, she hesitated. But only for a moment. There was no reason to resist such a gesture. She’d had men touch her in ways that went far beyond this simple act. So why did it feel so damned unsettling when she turned in place, giving him her back?

The sound of her cloak brushing the skirts of her gown told her he was stepping closer, though it would have been obvious anyway by the warmth of his body at her back and the scent of sandalwood drifting through her senses.

The weight of the velvet touched her bare shoulders first, then the gentle press of his hands smoothing the material in place. His touch was confident without being intrusive. The act was not overtly sexual in any way. In fact, it was quite platonic. Yet, for a second, she stopped breathing, wondering if he would use the opportunity to extend his caress, perhaps by sliding his hands down her arms. Or drifting a fingertip across her nape or along the outer edge of her ear. Or he could step closer—press his hard, trim body to hers.

She knew for a fact she’d fit perfectly against him like this. Her back to his chest, her buttocks lush to his groin, her head tipped back against his shoulder so his mouth could access her throat. Perfect.

When he did nothing more than adjust the fall of her hood, she glanced over her shoulder at him, not even caring if her irritation showed in her face.

His smile was slow and knowing, which caused her irritation to deepen.

So, that had been his intention. To make her physically aware of his nearness, his touch, then leave her body wanting more. It was a common ploy. She shouldn’t have fallen for it.

As he turned to retrieve his greatcoat, she took a moment to re-establish her natural grounding. To brush away any hint of sensual longing he might have inspired with his practiced torment.

“May I escort you to your carriage?” he asked, offering his arm once again.

Callista sighed. “If you must, though you should know the show of gallantry is utterly lost on me.”

When her words inspired a gentle chuckle from the man, she realized with a jolt of shock that she’d made the jaded comment specifically for that purpose. Already, she’d come to understand that he enjoyed her cynical and blunt sarcasm. And she enjoyed his rare show of amusement far too much.

Rather than wait for the carriage to come around, by silent agreement, they started walking to where the carriage was parked a couple blocks down from the theater. The silence continued during the stroll along the dark, frozen pavement. A few light, drifting snowflakes swirled about in the winter air and Callista tipped her face to watch them dance against the backdrop that was Covent Garden.

Callista loved this part of London. She loved its grittiness and danger and how it existed at the very edge of the sophisticated societies who came to the neighborhood of excitement and risk. She loved how it blurred the lines between light and dark, sin and virtue, entertainment and survival.

There was a specific sort of energy here. Filled with ambition and a soul-deep hunger. That energy had fed her for years, until she’d gained a fat enough purse to buy her own place closer to the neighborhoods of the elite patrons she’d intended to service.

“Is it possible I’m witnessing an expression of contentment?” His tone was warm and carried only a hint of the seductive undertones he’d employed earlier in the evening.

Callista allowed a smile but didn’t turn to look at him. In her current mood, she decided to be a bit magnanimous. “I suppose anything is possible.”

“I know better than to assume my company is the cause. Will you share the thoughts inspiring such enjoyment?”

Having reached her carriage, Callista stopped and turned to face him. A few snowflakes sparkled in his hair and dusted the shoulders of his greatcoat. His mouth was soft, his gaze curious. He appeared almost harmless in the winter moonlight.

But regardless of what he wanted her to believe or how she occasionally found herself feeling almost comfortable and relaxed in his presence, he was her rival and her adversary.

She smiled—a stiff curving of lips that had grown chilled in the night air. “Come now, Mr. Maxwell, we both know you’ve less interest in my thoughts than you do in my perceived heart.”

His expression didn't change at first. He simply stood in the light falling snow, looking handsomely distinguished and utterly self-possessed as his focus moved slowly over the details of her face. She oddly got the sense he was a bit...disappointed.

Then his manner slowly changed. She felt his shifting intensity like a vibrational wave. Her breath held and her leather-gloved hands curled into fists beneath the fall of her cloak.

"Madam Pendragon, I apologize for not having made myself clear since our first meeting." His brows lowered, shadowing his gaze, while his firm lips shaped the next words with carnal intent. "I am interested in *all* of you. Not only the softness of your skin or the lush heat between your thighs. I want to learn the rhythm of your heartbeat. Share in your deepest dreams and darkest pleasures. Such desires are undeniable." He leaned toward her to add in a heavy whisper, "As is my wish to become intimately acquainted with your shrewd and beautiful mind."

Despite the riot of sensations his words and voice and silver eyes triggered throughout her body, Callista hardened her expression and tilted her head to a condescending angle. "You don't want much, do you?"

"Just you, madam."

The heavy words sunk through her winter wear into her skin as light snowflakes drifted around them in the golden light of the street's gas lamp.

"You didn't expect it to be easy, did you?"

"Nothing worth keeping comes easily," he said, repeating a phrase she'd used when talking of Pendragon's.

Her stomach twisted.

It was a grave miscalculation on his part. This whole seduction was a ploy to get her off his back. She could believe he wanted her in his bed. Not many men didn't. But he'd made a mistake in implying he had any intention of *keeping* her.

Without a word, she turned and stepped into her carriage unaided by Mr. Maxwell or the groom who stood waiting beside the open door. As soon the door closed and the vehicle started moving, she put the arrogant man directly from her mind.

Chapter 5

Erik stood by the window of the private sitting room on the third floor of his club. A morning snowfall had caused the roads of London to become a slushy mess. But tonight was Christmas Eve and not even poor weather or wretched road conditions would keep people from attending their many soirées and dinner parties. The steady stream of carriages passing back and forth on the street below certainly attested to that fact. It was an evening devoted to intimate gatherings of family and friends to acknowledge and celebrate the holiday.

Tomorrow would bring long church services and family luncheons. Tonight was for revelry.

Turning his back on the scene, he crossed the room to the fireplace, where he added a couple more logs to keep the winter chill at bay. Standing there, he watched as the flames danced higher and sent a wave of heat and light into the room. He was not used to such cold weather. Though he'd traveled a great deal in his life, he had rarely been so far to the north during the colder months.

Despite how he often felt, it appeared he wasn't too old for new experiences after all.

As his association with Madam Pendragon had also proven.

The woman was getting to him with her jaded green eyes, armored manner, and quick, sardonic wit. Though she was obviously determined to keep him at a distance, he reveled in those moments when her guard came down. When her full lips smiled in genuine pleasure and her eyes lit from within. She was proving to be as difficult to seduce as she'd declared herself to be. Difficult but not impossible.

Because Erik had seen desire sparking in the depths of her gaze. He'd felt the barely perceptible trembling of her fingers when he took her hand in his. The attraction he experienced for the enigmatic woman was not one-sided, but she was no novice to lust and she had her reasons for resisting her desire for him.

She didn't trust him and Erik couldn't blame her. The life she'd lived was a hard one. To achieve the degree of success she had would have taken

complete and total devotion. Not for the faint of heart.

A woman like her would not fall for a false seduction. But there had been nothing deceitful or contrived in Erik's pursuit. He wanted her in every way. More than he'd ever wanted a woman before. There had been no lie present when he'd declared his interest in all of her. He never would have offered to seduce her if he hadn't already known in his soul that something more was supposed to exist between them.

But he'd never convince her to give their undeniable attraction a chance to expand into something deeper and more fulfilling if she didn't believe such even existed.

The staccato knock of his butler sounded on the door.

Erik gave a call to enter but did not turn away from the fire.

"You have a visitor, sir."

Turning his head, Erik watched as the woman who had been occupying his every thought lately sauntered into the room. Days ago, he'd advised his butler that unless he was with a client, he would be available to her at any time of the day or night and that she should be shown to his private quarters immediately if she called.

Even so, her appearance tonight was unexpected.

As the butler bowed from the room, closing the door securely as he did so, Erik turned his back to the fire so he could watch her approach.

Damn, but the woman made an exceptional entrance. Dressed tonight in a black satin gown that bared her shoulders and lush cleavage while accenting every lovely curve of her body, she was the archetypal seductress. Sinuous and strong, deeply sensual and utterly self-controlled. Erik was so bewitched by the liquid movement of her hips it took him a moment to see that she carried a bottle of brandy in her hand.

Anticipation rushed through him as he lifted his attention to the woman's face.

Green eyes reflected the dance of the flames behind him and lush red lips curved enticingly. After the way their night at the theater had ended, he wasn't sure if she'd continue meeting with him.

He should have expected to be surprised by this woman. She had come to him.

"Madam," he said as she reached him before the fireplace. "This is unanticipated."

Fine brows arched. "It shouldn't be." She lifted the bottle of brandy.

“You couldn’t have thought I’d enjoy this rare and very expensive bottle of brandy all by myself.”

“I had thought you might enjoy savoring it in your quieter hours.”

She gave a graceful shrug of her bare shoulders. “Some things are for savoring. Others are for enjoying with full, unadulterated gusto.”

“And this brandy falls into the second category?”

“It does tonight.”

“I’ll get the glasses.”

Erik crossed to a sideboard to collect two snifters, and when he turned back to face his guest, it was to see that despite the comfortable sofa and chairs positioned nearby, she had chosen instead to recline on the thick ivory-colored rug spread before the stone-carved hearth. Leaning to the side, she propped herself on one hand as the skirts of her black gown fanned about her legs, reflecting the light from the fire.

When she turned to look over her shoulder at his approach, there was a challenge in her bright, clever gaze, but also a hint of something he hadn’t previously detected in the woman. A quiet, subtle sadness that spoke directly to the loneliness within himself.

Lowering himself to his knees, Erik sat back on his heels as he set the two glasses on the stone hearth. In a silent gesture, he extended his hand for the bottle, which she promptly handed off to him. After opening and pouring, he set the bottle aside and offered a snifter to the lady, who immediately lifted it in a toast.

“To cold winter nights and fine liquor.”

“And even finer company,” he added.

Her smile was fleeting as she lifted the glass and nearly drained it in one swallow.

Erik followed suit, then topped them off with another pour before settling into a more comfortable position. Then he turned his openly assessing focus on his unexpected companion while she directed her gaze toward the fire. She had to sense his blatant perusal but it did not appear to discomfit her in the slightest, and he was glad of that since it was not his intention to distress her. He simply found himself too fully intrigued by her to try to conceal his curiosity.

Curiosity and *longing*.

He couldn’t deny that part. It was inseparable from his increasing feelings for her.

No doubt, she was very accustomed to men staring so keenly, though he suddenly hated the thought of being just one among likely countless admirers.

With a tilt of her head that was both haughty and coy, she slid a glance in his direction. “I assume since I was shown up here so directly, my visit did not interrupt anything important you might have been tending to.”

Erik chuckled. “Not unless you count the silent cursing of winter weather to be important.”

She made a rough sound of disgust as she lifted her glass for a drink. “I abhor this time of year.”

“That is a strong statement.”

“But a true one. Everyone bustles about promoting this ridiculous façade of *good cheer* and a *generous spirit*, when any other time of year, they are selfishly devoted to personal pleasures and hedonism. It’s all so bloody false. And wretchedly dull.”

“I take that to mean you do not celebrate the Christmas holiday.”

“Only as I must. Christmas is best enjoyed by children and the faithful. I am neither.”

“But you *do* have plans for tomorrow?”

She sighed and turned back to the flames. “My brother is insisting I join him and his family for a holiday dinner. He’s being rather stubborn about it actually. Very annoying.”

“Dinner does not appeal to you?”

She finished the amber liquor in her glass before reaching for the bottle to replace it. “Dinner is fine. I’m simply dreading everything that goes with it. Family is not my forte.”

“They’re a bunch of arseholes?” he prompted in a dry tone.

Her laugh was short but rich and real. “Oh, my brother is definitely an arsehole. But a tolerable one most of the time. His life has undergone some drastic changes recently. Good changes, I suppose, but they’ve prompted this unprecedented attempt at creating some sort of holiday tradition.”

“There is nothing inherently terrible about tradition. Not when you understand that tradition is what you make it.”

She slid him a skeptical glance. “Is that so?”

Erik swirled his brandy as he thought back to the pleasures of his childhood. “My troupe was made up of people from all over the world. We all brought our own beliefs and faiths with us. We found a way to blend these

things into new traditions we shared together. Growing up with such freedom and non-judgement showed me how people from differing backgrounds and experiences can come together if they simply prioritize compassion and mutual respect.”

She studied him silently from beneath the heavy sweep of her lashes. Erik remained still under her perusal as he stared intently back at her. The intelligence and bright calculation he admired so genuinely were ever present in her green gaze but there was a softening there as well, though it could simply be attributed to the brandy.

The woman was intimidating, to be sure. Self-assured and independent in ways many women were not. Clever, passionate, distrustful, arrogant, and mysterious. It was a singular experience to attempt the seduction of a woman who refused to let you know where you stood. Though he sensed her attraction to him and was delighted she'd chosen to come to him tonight, he knew better than to assume either of those things meant anything in regard to whether or not he would be successful in his endeavor.

She was too cynical and far too unpredictable.

But he was becoming more and more determined to know her. Not Madam Pendragon, who ruled London's world of sexual delights and pleasures untold. Erik wished to know the girl who'd left home young to claim sovereignty over herself and her future. The young woman who'd dreamed of having it all and having it all under *her* dominion.

With a depth and intensity that surprised him, he wanted the woman seated before him to find him worthy of not only her intimate time but also her most secret thoughts and unspoken dreams for the future. He was not a man to do anything half-measure and he'd known almost from the very start that he wanted this woman for everything she was, including those elements she carefully kept hidden from the rest of the world.

As his thoughts continued to swirl through the unsettling emotions she inspired, a small knowing smile curved her lips. “You're all the same, you know.”

Though he suspected he knew what she was referencing, he still asked, “We are?”

“Men. Always wanting what you can't have.”

“Are you referring to my desire for you?” he asked in a low tone.

“Of course,” she replied with an elegant gesture and a manipulatively coy smile. “I can feel your hunger like heat in the air between us.”

“There is no reason to deny it. I made clear at our last meeting what I want.”

“That’s right. All of me,” she said sardonically as she sipped her brandy.

Setting his snifter to the side, he leaned forward—bringing the heat of his desire with him—until he could see the pupils of her eyes widen a moment before her lashes swept lower to conceal her reaction.

“Madam,” he murmured in a tone heavy with truth. “I am no longer a young man. There is more of my life spread out behind me than what I expect to encounter ahead of me. With that understanding comes a certainty about what I want to fill the time I have remaining. If you still believe my pursuit of you has anything at all to do with business, you’d be horribly mistaken.”



* * *

Callista focused on breathing as the force of his words shot through her like white-hot lightning. For a moment, it felt like his declaration changed her intrinsically. Her cellular makeup felt altered by his words, which told her something unexpected—she *had* believed it was all a business ploy on his part, and now that she knew it wasn’t, everything was different.

Still, many years of self-preservation urged her to reply with sharp finality. “As I said previously,” she noted with a smoothly forced smile, “you cannot have me.”

“Not yet,” he murmured, repeating the words he’d spoken to her once before.

The man’s patience was awe-inspiring and irritating beyond belief. Now that she had been forced to acknowledge the truth and depth of his desire, which went beyond basic lust to something far more terrifying, she also had to admire his determination to stay the course of seduction with slow and steady intent.

Despite her constant resistance.

Callista glanced to the snifter cradled in her palm. She was due for another pour but realized she’d likely had more than enough already. She couldn’t exactly recall what had prompted her to share the man’s gift with

him. Likely, it had simply been the desire not to enjoy the pleasure alone. But now that the lovely liquor had softened and warmed her body in such a delightful way and was starting to melt her insides, as well, she feared remaining in Mr. Maxwell's presence any longer.

She was liable to starting rethinking this whole seduction thing and that would not be good for her.

And why was that again?

It didn't matter.

Setting her glass aside, she rose to her feet in a graceful, sinuous motion. Unfortunately, she miscalculated the degree of her inebriation and her head spun for a moment as the world tipped precariously on its axis.

Maxwell noticed her slight loss of balance before she could correct it. Though still in the process of rising to his feet, he immediately grasped her waist to steady her. The heat and strength of his hands on her body, soaking through the thin layers of satin and silk, triggered a rush of desire through her blood. It swirled and spun then settled heavily in her center.

Foolish desire. Reckless need. Desperate longing.

Still holding her secure in his hands, he continued to his full height until they stood facing each other with bare inches between them. Callista knew real fear in that moment. Fear unlike any she'd experienced before because it touched a part of her she'd believed to be nonexistent.

"Shall I let you go?"

His low-spoken words could be taken as a request for assurance that she'd regained her balance. Or they could be taken as something else entirely. Callista chose to respond to the less detrimental option. Obviously.

"I won't tumble to the floor, I assure you."

He smiled. A devastating expression of subtle amusement and undeniable appreciation. Nothing seemed to dissuade this man.

His fingers tensed briefly against the muscles of her low back as his thumbs pressed firmly to her belly. Sensation erupted throughout her body, touching on every secret little corner of her being. Then he withdrew his hands, chilling her body with an intense sense of loss.

She shook it off.

"Although it's been a lovely evening, Mr. Maxwell, I must be off."

"I'll escort you home."

"I've been making my own way in the world for a very long time. I'll manage."

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you have to.”

For some reason, his words struck a chord within her. It both scared her and irritated her.

He wanted to insinuate himself into her life? Fine.

“If you really want to accompany me somewhere, join me for my brother’s little get-together tomorrow.”

His expression revealed only a hint of the surprise she’d anticipated.

“Is that a genuine invitation?”

She gave a casual shrug. “Why the hell not. At least I’d have someone to converse with. I’ll be round to pick you up.”

Chapter 6

“Your brother lives here?” Erik asked as Pendragon’s carriage pulled to a stop in front of a palatial mansion in the heart of Mayfair.

The lady seated beside him tossed him a smirking smile as a groom opened the carriage door. “He does.”

Erik stepped from the vehicle then turned to offer her his hand. As typical, there was a very slight hesitation before she slid her leather-clad fingers along his palm and allowed him to assist her to the pavement. “He is an aristocrat?”

Her laugh was a delicate snort. “Far from. But he did marry one.” She lifted a fine brow. “Now you understand why I invited you.”

“I might,” he replied with a subtle grin. He’d suspected the evening would be rather interesting, but he was getting a sense he’d underestimated by a significant degree.

They were let into the house by a footman the size and approximate shape of a bull. Tall and solid with beefy shoulders and ham-sized fists. The grand entry hall was warm and welcoming, with gleaming parquet floors, rich mahogany wainscoting, and the scent of evergreen filling the air. Fresh boughs of Christmas greenery wound around the stairway banister and hung in heavy swags from the crown molding. Carefully placed candles lent a warm glow to the scene.

A very proper-looking butler greeted them next. After taking their outerwear, he led them to a well-lit drawing room, where festive ivy, holly, and mistletoe formed an enormous wreath trimmed with red ribbon that hung over the fireplace. Pausing in the doorway, the butler announced them as “Miss Callista Hale and guest, Mr. Erik Maxwell.”

Callista. The name snaked delicately through Erik’s mind. *Most beautiful.*

“Lissy!”

A great hulk of a man came striding forward, essentially blocking out the rest of the room and any other occupants from Erik’s view. He was larger even than the footman had been, though with his long tawny hair falling loose about his shoulders and his muscled physique, he resembled a lion

rather than a bull. It became apparent he was Pendragon's brother once Erik caught sight of the man's green eyes a few shades darker than hers. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I got the impression my attendance wasn't optional," she replied dryly.

Her brother flashed a wide grin. "It wasn't. But I'm still glad you made it." He leaned forward to mutter quietly, "It won't be as dreadful as you're thinking." Then he straightened and jerked his thumb in Erik's direction without bothering to look at him. "Who's this?"

The gesture told Erik a few things about the man; he had genuine affection for his sister and that included a protective streak that she either ignored or tolerated. And he was even more brash and crude than she ever allowed herself to be.

Pendragon slid him a sly glance from narrowed eyes. The corner of her mouth twisted upward as she replied, "This is Mr. Erik Maxwell. He owns a new gentleman's club in town and he's trying to seduce me."

Her brother gave rough snort as he flicked his glance to Erik. "Good luck with that, mate." The tone clearly indicated he expected abject failure, but he extended his hand and gave a firm handshake. "Mason Hale. Welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Hale. I apologize for the intrusion."

Hale gave a shrug while a female voice spoke from behind him. "Not at all, Mr. Maxwell. We are quite happy to have you." A young woman with dark auburn hair and even darker brown eyes stepped around Hale's great form to offer a polite smile. Though she was nearly dwarfed by the man beside her, she possessed a quietly fierce presence that suggested she could hold her own against far more intimidating adversaries.

"My wife," Hale stated in a hard tone of warning as he slipped his arm around her slim waist. "Lady Katherine Hale."

Erik gave a proper bow. "A pleasure, my lady."

After giving a nod of acknowledgement, the young lady of the house turned her attention to Pendragon and stated with genuine feeling, "Thank you so much for joining us. The children will be down shortly. They were very much looking forward to your visit."

Looking back to Erik, she added with an arched brow, "I hope you have no aversion to the company of children, Mr. Maxwell."

"Of course not," he replied readily.

"Excellent. You'll likely discover our family prefers not to follow all the strict rules of social engagement."

“An understatement, luv,” Hale muttered gruffly before pressing a kiss to his wife’s temple. “You married me, after all.”

The lady tossed him a glance of stern reprimand though her lips twitched with humor. Then she turned to gesture toward a seating arrangement placed before the room’s enormous fireplace. “Please make yourselves comfortable.”

“A drink, Lissy?” Hale asked as he started toward a liquor service in the corner.

Erik was surprised by her allowance of the nickname. He suspected that if Mr. Hale was subtly protective of his sister, then she was just as subtly indulgent of him.

“Claret, if you please.”

“I’ll have one, as well,” Lady Katherine said as she led the way and took a graceful position in one of the tall wingback chairs.

“Maxwell?”

“The same. Thank you.”

In an obviously contrary move, Pendragon claimed the other wingback chair in a flourish of her scarlet skirts, leaving the small settee for the men. Erik almost chuckled but managed to hold it in as he took a seat on one end of the narrow sofa. Leaning back, he crossed one ankle over the opposite knee. If the madam’s intention was to make him uncomfortable, she’d have her work cut out for her. If his childhood performing in front of endless crowds taught him anything, it was how to avoid becoming distressed in even the most awkward circumstances.

Hale brought the ladies their wine first, then returned with a glass for Erik. It appeared he hadn’t poured anything for himself. When he saw what the women had done, he made a low sound of displeasure. Sending his sister a swift glare, he took up a spot standing beside the fireplace, where the heat rolling from the roaring flames would likely soon grow unbearable.

Pendragon smirked in self-satisfaction as she sipped from her crystal wineglass.

“Are you only recently of London, Mr. Maxwell?” Lady Katherine asked.

He met the young woman’s directly questioning gaze and noted that, although she wasn’t as boldly beautiful as Madam Pendragon, there was a distinct loveliness in her dark eyes and fine features. “Yes, I arrived in England less than a year ago.”

“And where were you before that?”

Her interest obviously derived from pure curiosity rather than a desire to pry, but Erik had to think on it for a moment. The extensive nature of his past travels tended to make the details blur together after a while. “I believe I was in Istanbul just prior to coming to London.”

Lady Katherine’s dark brows lifted in interest. “Really? Have you traveled to a great many places?”

Erik smiled. “More than I’ve time to name tonight, my lady.”

“How fascinating. I’ve only ever been to Lincolnshire, where I grew up, and now London. I’d love to travel someday.”

“We will, luv,” Hale asserted firmly. “Once everything is settled. Promise.”

His wife responded with a smile that reflected her complete and utter confidence in his words. Erik glanced to Pendragon, wondering if she saw the depth of faith and devotion between her brother and his wife. The Hales’ marriage appeared to be a perfect example of what she claimed didn’t exist.

Likely sensing his regard, she looked back at him. Her green eyes flashed with quiet frustration. When he tilted his head in silent question, she quickly averted her eyes and took another sip of her wine.

“Ah, here they are,” Lady Katherine noted with a smile as she rose to her feet.

Erik stood as well and turned toward the doorway to see a dark-haired boy of twelve or thirteen holding the hand of a small girl with soft blonde curls who could be no more than three years old. The girl looked a bit shy as her blue eyes darted between Pendragon and Erik before settling on Hale.

“Come here, sweet pea,” the big man said in a soft tone.

The girl immediately dashed forward to be swept up in Hale’s arms.

“Frederick,” Lady Katherine said as she gestured for the boy to come forward. “I’d like you to meet Mr. Maxwell. He is an associate of Miss Hale.” Lifting her gaze to Erik, she continued, “Mr. Maxwell, this is my brother, the Duke of Northmoor.”

After executing a bow appropriate for the boy’s rank, Erik replied, “A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.”

With a surprisingly stoic expression for one so young and a sharply intelligent gaze, the young duke nodded. “And you, Mr. Maxwell. It is always nice to be introduced to new friends.” Turning to Pendragon, he added, “I’m very happy to see you again, Miss Hale. Your visits always bring a welcome bit of excitement to the house.”

Her smile was slightly teasing as she replied, "Then I shall do my best to come by more often."

"I think Claire would like that, as well," Hale interjected as he stepped forward with the little girl still held high in his thick arms. "Wouldn't you like to see Aunt Lissy more often, sweet pea?"

The little girl smiled sweetly and she nodded her head, causing her pale curls to bounce about her cheeks.

"See?" Hale stated emphatically as he gave his sister a smirking look.

She responded with a roll of her eyes.

Turning to Erik, Hale added, "And this is Aunt Lissy's friend, Mr. Maxwell."

Erik tilted his head toward the girl and offered a gentle smile. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Claire."

After blushing prettily, she murmured softly, "Merry Christmas."

"And Merry Christmas to you."

"Well done, sweet pea," Hale whispered to the child as he set her down. The little girl went immediately to Lady Katherine, who scooped her up and placed her in her lap as she regained her seat.

Hale returned to his spot by the fireplace and the young duke took a seat on the settee next to Erik.

They continued to exchange small talk for a while. Lady Katherine questioned him a little further on his favorite places while Hale seemed intent on irritating his older sister. For her part, Pendragon appeared mostly relaxed, if a bit more restrained than he'd grown accustomed to seeing her. Likely, she was making an effort to hold back some of her more biting replies to her brother for the sake of the children. It became clear that Hale was fully aware of his sister's predicament and used it against her. She managed to say quite a lot, however, with her searing gaze, which only appeared to amuse Hale all the more.

At one point, while the children were busy on the other side of the room, admiring the snow falling outside the large bay window, her frustration finally got the better of her.

"Really, Mason, must you insist on calling me that dreadful nickname. I haven't been Lissy since you were a little brat who couldn't say my name properly."

Her brother simply grinned wide and teasing. "Sorry, sis. You'll always be Lissy to me."

Pendragon glanced to Lady Katherine. “How the hell do you put up with him?”

The lady arched her brow and slid the man under discussion a look that sparked with intimate heat before replying in a perfectly flat tone, “He’s proven to have his uses.”

Hale snorted a rough laugh, while Pendragon rose to her feet and smoothed the wrinkles from her gown. “Well, he certainly doesn’t have much to offer in his head.”

“Depends which you’re referencing,” Hale retorted crudely.

His sister responded with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m in need of a brief respite from all this *family accord*.”

As she swept from the room, Lady Katherine turned a harsh eye to her husband. “Do you always have to be so irritating? That’s probably why she doesn’t come by more often.”

“You know that’s not why and, yes, I do. My sister requires regular reminders that she belongs to a world that extends beyond the house off St. James.” Turning to Erik, he added, “I’d guess Maxwell here knows what I mean.”

He did but he knew better than to enter the fray.

“Could you at least try to make these rare visits more pleasant and enjoyable?” Lady Katherine pressed.

Hale shrugged, unconcerned. “If they were pleasant, she’d hate them even more.”

Erik rose to his feet. “Please, excuse me.” Leaving the couple to continue their argument without his audience, he left the drawing room and looked about the awe-inspiring entry hall. After a moment, he noticed a faint light visible beneath a door at the far end of the hall.

Walking quietly across the parquet floor, he opened the door without knocking.

Pendragon stood at the far end of the room, pouring herself a drink from a discreet liquor service. The room appeared to be a personal study containing a desk, some chairs, and a small sofa. As Erik approached, she glanced up with a visible frown before putting the stopper in the liquor bottle and lifting her glass to down its contents in one smooth swallow.

“Perhaps you missed my cue, Mr. Maxwell. I left the room to be alone.”

Erik paused. “I do not wish to intrude. I just wanted to give your brother and his wife a few moments to finish a private conversation.”

She smirked as she set her glass down and turned to face him while leaning back against the table behind her. “I assume they were arguing again. Those two have absolutely nothing in common. I cannot imagine why they thought it would be a good idea to marry.”

Lifting a brow in genuine surprise, Erik continued forward until he stood directly in front of her. Close enough that her crimson skirts were stirred by his polished black boots. “Nothing in common?” He tilted his head to search her green eyes. Lowering his voice, he asked, “Surely you see the mutual respect and genuine admiration they have for each other. They are very different people with radically different backgrounds, I am sure. But they clearly appreciate those differences. I suspect they enjoy a deep abiding love.”

Her eyes widened with mocking shock. “My God, you are utterly relentless and totally delusional.”

He laughed. The woman fought hard to retain her skepticism. “If you did not see those things, surely you were able to detect the passion simmering between them.”

“Passion is not love,” she retorted curtly. “The hotter it burns, the faster it dies.”

“When valued and properly nurtured, passion can richen and deepen with time.”

“Passion is lust and lust weakens as soon as it’s indulged.”

Erik’s gaze fell to her lips—reddened and lush. “Shall we test that theory?”

Boldly, irreverently, she tilted her head back and met his gaze with a challenging stare as she twisted her beautiful lips into an expression of sensual superiority. “Do your worst, Maxwell.”

He could see in her eyes she expected to be disappointed. He couldn’t allow that.

Stepping closer, he bracketed her feet with his, allowing his thighs to rest warmly against hers. Then he lifted a hand to her throat, caging the lengthened column with his fingers. The green of her eyes flashed brightly and her lips parted to allow a swift, subtle exhale. But beyond that, she did not react. He took a moment to meet her gaze, looking into her eyes with heavy intention, showing her what he wanted. Revealing the dark hunger in his soul and the secret yearning beneath the shadows.

As her eyes narrowed, shielding the flash of light he saw in their depths,

he lowered his head and took her mouth in an instantly possessive kiss. The lush cushion of her lips—the spicy and unexpectedly sweet, heady taste of her—nearly distracted him from his purpose. Full, brutal honesty. Still holding her gaze, his hand remained secure around her throat as he swept his tongue past her teeth.

She answered the invasion with a short flick of her tongue against his. It was taunting and insolent. A reminder that she was no common conquest.

What she failed to accept was that Erik had never seen her as such. She was perfection in form. To him, she had already surpassed every prior lover he'd ever known. And there had been many...more, perhaps, than she even realized. At this moment, he only wanted her to know how deeply he wanted her and how badly he wished to please her.

He gave another long lick of his tongue within her mouth. It was wet and thick and unabashedly erotic and he was rewarded with a slight flutter of her sooty lashes and the darkening of her gaze.

Tilting his head, he fit his mouth more securely to hers. Gliding his tongue in and out until she responded with a languid swirl of her tongue past his lips. Taking advantage, he suckled her tongue, drawing it deeper into his mouth before releasing it. As her eyes finally fell closed, he nearly moaned but subdued the sense of triumph he felt at her subtle, momentary surrender. She was not a woman to remain submissive for long. He'd need every bit of his skill to show her why they shouldn't stop with a kiss.

He gave a brief and gentle squeeze of his hand at her throat, before sliding his fingers down over her collarbone, between her pushed-up breasts, to the inward curve of her waist. Grasping her in both hands, he brought her up against him—body to body—a stunning fit.

She seemed to agree as she brought her arms up around his neck and finally—fully—gave herself over to the kiss. Lips, tongue, teeth, breath. Swirling, tasting, licking, biting. It was passion and fire—a willful, intentional destruction, but he lost track of who was destroying whom as they went up in flames together.

Reminding himself of the need for patience in the midst of mindless desire, Erik finally pulled back, lifting his head enough to press a final kiss to the corner of her lush mouth.

A feeling unlike any he'd experienced before spread through him then as he slid his gaze over her features, noting the kohl-rimmed eyes, the fine cheekbones, and the way her lush, sensitive mouth curved just slightly

downward at the corners. The sensation was bright and heady and wonderfully consuming.

As her eyes swept open, he felt a deep reluctance to let her go, even for the time being. A part of him feared she wouldn't let him this close again.

"We should return to our hosts," he said in a roughened voice.

She gave a short sound of derision. "Should we?"

He smiled at her show of scorn. "Though you sound put out, I suspect you fully enjoy their company. Even the children."

Pulling back from him, she smoothed her hands over her gown before replying, "One kiss and you presume to know what I enjoy."

Stepping closer to her, reclaiming the distance she'd placed between them, he replied in a heavy tone, "Your pleasure has become a part of me, madam. I cannot separate it from my own."

Though she arched her brow in a show of disdain, her pulse fluttered at the side of her throat and her gaze slipped briefly to his mouth before she replied coolly, "I hope that doesn't prove too painful for you." Then she swept past him and left the room.

The damned woman was forever walking away from him.

It was his greatest desire to change that.

Chapter 7

Dinner was called shortly after their return to the party and they all moved into the dining room. It was a formal, imposing space with a grand table that could easily seat a dozen or more. More richly scented evergreen formed a simple but festive centerpiece. The winter greenery was accented with red ribbons, glossy apples, and bright oranges.

The children remained with them through dinner. Having Frederick and Claire at the table assisted in lightening and enlivening the tone of the evening, giving it a casual feel despite the obvious care that had gone into the exceptional meal consisting of various roasted meats, seasoned vegetables, mincemeat pies, steamy sweet breads, and Christmas puddings soaked in brandy.

The young Duke of Northmoor was exceptionally intelligent and well-versed in various topics of conversation. He contributed to the adult conversation with as much ease and seriousness as he when he spoke quietly with young Claire. At one point, Lady Katherine explained that the two of them had grown up under rather unusual circumstances. Their mother had died when they were young and their father had been intensely devoted to his work in the field of herbalism and pharmacology, leaving his children to form their own educations and far from the influence most often forced upon aristocratic children to meet a certain molded expectation.

“And I’m damned grateful, for it brought you stumbling through my door,” Hale added as he took his wife’s hand and brought it to his lips.

“Stumbling?” the lady asked with a haughtily raised brow. “I believe you’ve forgotten that our first encounter involved a set of dueling pistols aimed for your person.”

“On the contrary, it’s one of my favorite memories,” he murmured thickly before giving a quick wink that brought a tint of pink to her cheeks.

Erik glanced to Callista with a lifted brow, wondering if she’d concede his earlier point. But she appeared to have missed the interaction between her brother and his wife as she was busy staring at him instead. Her expression was tense and her gaze narrowed as though she were contemplating something intently.

He suspected he knew exactly what was on her mind.

The kiss they'd shared had been everything he'd known it would be—intense and erotic, but also undeniably emotional. He'd hazard a guess to say it might have been a bit more than she'd expected.

There was no hiding from the passion between them. The *potential*. Only a fool would deny it existed and the woman was no fool. Despite that, Erik was under no delusion that his campaign had been won with a single kiss.

As her gaze flickered with the shadow of something unnamed, he almost wished he could reassure her. But she'd have to come to her own conclusions about what she was feeling and what it meant for the two of them.

Though he chose not to say anything, he did offer a smile.

Her expression tightened in response before she looked away to sip from her wineglass.

After the meal, the party returned to the drawing room. It wasn't much longer before Claire's nurse came to fetch the young girl. Though she pouted about having to leave, it was clear the little girl was ready for bed. The young duke decided to go upstairs as well. Though his sister assured he could stay and visit a bit longer if he liked, he explained that he wished to work on his current project before going to bed. Before they left, Callista stopped the children beside her chair. Leaning toward them, she whispered something and handed each of them a small velvet pouch. Their smiles were bright as they continued from the room.

"That wasn't necessary, Lissy."

There was a heavy note in Hale's voice, but his sister looked at him with an arched brow. "It was just a few sweets and a coin or two. Nothing inappropriate, I assure you."

"Still a helluva lot more than we ever got," he muttered gruffly.

"Yes, well, that is the whole point, isn't it, Mace? To leave the evils of the past in the gin-soaked lanes where they belong."

A silent communication passed between the siblings before Hale raised his glass. "Hear, hear." After that, he launched into a tale of one particular holiday in his youth that involved a runaway pig, a gang of street urchins, and a frozen ditch that proved to be not so frozen after all. Erik followed with a story of one year when his acting troupe met up with a caravan of the Rom while traveling through Italy. The two groups all contributed to an elaborate festival of dancing, drinking, and feasting that lasted four days without stop.

The evening continued with more shared stories and bittersweet

recollections as laughter flowed as freely as the wine. Eventually, however, the hour grew late and the liveliness of the gathering began to fade. As they all made their way to the entry hall, where the butler waited to hand off their winter coats and cloaks, Hale hauled Lady Katherine in against his side with a thick arm around her waist. Tossing his sister a wide grin, he said, “Not such a bad evening, eh, Lissy?”

The look she gave him was full of amiable annoyance. “It was tolerable, I suppose.”

Lady Katherine, not at all put out by Callista’s sarcastic response, smiled warmly. “I thought it was lovely. Thank you both so much for celebrating the holiday with us. I hope we’ll have an opportunity to repeat the experience soon.”

Erik was in the process of settling Callista’s black fur-lined cloak about her shoulders and he felt the brief, subtle tensing in her body. Smoothing his hands over her shoulders, he replied to their hostess with an easy smile. “It would be a pleasure and an honor, Lady Katherine.”

The night was crisp with cold, but the sky was clear. Moonlight and stars brightened the sky and filtered a silver haze into the atmosphere as they climbed into the carriage, where a warmer had been set on the floor to keep their toes from freezing. Even so, Erik immediately reached for the heavy woolen rugs set in the corner and unfolded them over their legs.

Though they sat close beside each other to share the limited warmth, neither spoke for a while as their breath puffed cold into the air. And when he noticed the woman beside him still shivering with cold even after the vehicle began to warm, he brought his arm up around her shoulders and slowly drew her in closer against his side.

If she had given any sign of resistance to the shift in position, he would have ceased, but she didn’t. In fact, she offered a quiet sigh as she rested her head against his shoulder and curved her body toward his. One of her hands fell to his upper thigh beneath the blanket, causing a swift rise in his internal temperature.

With his cock hardening and his chest aching sweetly, he looked down to see that her eyes had closed and her features were in repose. He wasn’t sure if it was the wine or their shared comfort that encouraged her to claim a moment of rest, but he was grateful for it as he allowed himself the luxury of admiring her beauty at this intimate angle.

The black kohl lining her eyes added a dramatic element to her features

but he found himself more mesmerized by the lush fan of her lashes against her smooth skin. The red tint she often added to her generously curved lips had all but faded away throughout the evening, leaving her mouth a dusky rose color that was soft and sensual. Even in repose, there was an element of calculated ambition in the details of her face. It was there in her broad, smooth forehead and in the angled, almost square shape of her jaw and in the slashing arches of her elegant brows.

Such a formidable woman.

He knew she could be ruthless when it was warranted. She could be cool and manipulative and brash. She was relentlessly competitive and arrogant and utterly bewitching. And yet, she was allowing this moment. A moment of silent companionship and shared ease.

His heart ached with the privilege even as his body tensed and hardened with the visceral pleasure of having her lush softness pressed against him.

Leaning his head back against the wall of the carriage, he closed his eyes, as well. Listening to her even breath and the rhythm of the carriage wheels while soaking up the warmth and ease and honor of holding her in his arms, he might have drifted off a bit before the lurch of the vehicle as it came to a stop brought him swiftly back to full awareness. Blinking, he lifted his head and glanced about as the lady in his arms also stirred. Her hand on his thigh tensed and squeezed as she used it to leverage herself to a more independently seated position a moment before the groom opened the carriage door.

As she leaned forward to glance outward, she muttered a quiet curse.

“What is the matter?” Erik looked past her into the night. Beyond the groom who stood holding the door, he saw a softly lit townhouse. The residence was stately and stylish in a way that spoke of understated wealth.

“I forgot to instruct the driver to drop you at your club.”

“Where are we?” He knew it wasn’t Pendragon’s Pleasure House as he’d already made sure to acquaint himself with its location though not its services.

Her expression tightened as she replied in a clipped tone, “I’d prefer no one know of this place.”

“Your private residence?”

“Private no longer, unfortunately,” she grumbled in response.

“It pleases me to know you have a place you can go to retreat from all of the demands on your time and personal attention,” he replied gently.

He waited for her to say that it was not her intention to please him, but she just slid him a glance from the corner of her eye and said nothing.

“I’m sure you’re anxious to be in the warmth and comfort of your home. I’ll walk you to your door, then your driver can take me to my club.”

“No,” she replied readily, “you can stay here, I’ll walk myself to the door, then my driver can take you to your club.”

Erik laughed. “As you wish, madam, but first...” He caught her gaze with his. “I must request another kiss.”

Her lips curled in amusement. “You *must*?”

“Indeed,” he replied, lowering his voice to an intimate murmur. “If I did not, I would never forgive myself for the cowardice of letting you go without at least *trying* to taste you again.”

Cynicism returned to her gaze. “And why should I allow it this time?”

“Because you want to taste me just as badly. And you are no more a coward than I am.”

Her laugh was sultry but held a harsh note. “You think that kind of blatant challenge will work on me?”

“I do. Because it is the simple truth.”

He waited for her acknowledgement, knowing it would come. Because along with her bold confidence came deep and undeniable self-awareness. He saw the acceptance in her eyes a moment before she placed her hand back on his thigh and leaned toward him.

Lifting his gloved hand, he slid his fingers along the side of her jaw then back to curve around the base of her skull and gently tip her face up to his. Tension built between them as he stared into her eyes before moving to take her mouth.

She likely expected a kiss similar to their first—fiery and fierce. But he wanted something else in this moment. Wanted to *offer* something else.

As a gust of frigid air swept through the open door of the carriage, causing the woman in his arms to give a delicate shudder, he lowered his head. Brushing his lips warmly across her cool lips in a careful application of friction and pressure, he waited for her eyes to drift closed. As soon as they did, he began to sip gently from her lips in quiet little kisses.

Her soft sigh as her mouth parted urged him to deepen the kiss. Adjusting his hand to more fully cup the back of her head, he angled his mouth over hers. Though their lips were parted enough to share warmth of breath, he did not employ his tongue to taste her secrets just yet.

The slow seduction of the kiss affected him as much as he hoped it might affect her. His insides melted with yearning and desire. His body thrummed with need. But it was a need he was more than happy to deny. The pleasure to be found in the lush sweetness of her mouth was all he wanted to explore just now.

Her hand shifted on his thigh as she leaned farther into him, her breasts pressing to his chest. There was no stopping the low growl of hunger that rumbled in his throat as he brought his other arm around her back to hold her against him as he finally slipped his tongue between her lips to deepen the kiss.

Her response was languid and perfect. An answering twirl of her tongue against his, then a nip on his lower lip when he withdrew.

They opened their eyes at the same time and Erik slowly eased his hold from around her body. But before she could fully retreat from him, he asked roughly, "When shall I see you again?"

Something flashed in her gaze, something that caused a clench of concern.

Pulling free of his arms, she turned toward the carriage door. "I'll be rather busy for a while."

The groom assisted her from the vehicle but Erik couldn't leave it at that. Before she could walk away from him yet again, he leaned forward to remind her, "There are six days remaining in our agreement."

Wrapping her cloak securely around herself, she looked at him over her shoulder and offered a sly, knowing smile. "That is true, but I am a busy woman, Mr. Maxwell. Something of which you are well aware. I will not change my life to suit your purposes."

He frowned. "And I would never ask you to." Her devotion to her business was one of the things he admired most about her. And the truth was, if he could not convince her to give him a chance within the boundaries she had set, then he did not deserve her time.

She arched her brows. "Wouldn't you?"

The distrust in her voice struck him harder and deeper than ever before. He'd thought she was starting to understand him as he was coming to better understand her. He'd hoped she might be starting to feel some real affection for him.

But as she turned away and walked to the front door of her private residence, he realized he might be further from his goal than he'd thought.

Chapter 8

Callista rarely made mistakes when it came to Pendragon's. She took risks on occasion and experimented every once in a while, but she never considered any of her decisions—even those that did not turn out as well as expected—*mistakes*.

But the moment she dropped the invitation in the post, she suspected she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.

Yet she refused to take the small missive back.

Callista was nothing if not honest with herself.

She was fully aware that she had spent the last couple decades obsessively focused on creating a business and a life that could not be compromised by any man.

She knew she'd sacrificed a great many personal relationships to achieve her goal, though she'd managed to somehow tenuously hold on to the only one that really mattered. Even that, she acknowledged, was likely due more to Mason's efforts than her own.

She was driven, ambitious, focused, and maybe a little preoccupied with attaining personal power. But she also knew those things were motivated by a past when she'd had nothing, and the sense of powerlessness she'd experienced had nearly ruined her.

She also had to admit to herself that she had enjoyed Christmas this year more than any year prior and it had been all because of the company.

So, if she could recognize and accept her faults and occasionally flawed motivations, she had to also admit when something she'd assumed to be fact turned out to be incorrect.

Erik Maxwell and his gentleman's club, or whatever it was, did not pose any threat to Pendragon's Pleasure House. They might cater to a similar social demographic, but any gentleman interested in the pleasures offered by her establishment would not be the same type of man who sought entrance to Maxwell's. Her time with the man had convinced her that if nothing else, he believed whole-heartedly in what he was doing. And because of that, there was no need to drive him out of town.

No need to deny her intense attraction to the man and resist his seduction

any longer.

If she weren't so accustomed to redirecting men's desires and resisting their attempts at influencing her, she would have tossed herself into Maxwell's bed the night they'd shared the brandy in front of his fire.

But the truth was, in the spirit of being completely honest with herself, Callista also had to admit that her feelings for the man were far more complicated than simple lust.

Somehow, he'd managed to slip beneath her barriers. With his smooth words and intense gaze, he'd accessed parts of her she'd long ago learned to keep hidden. She could deny it all she wanted to his face, but he'd been absolutely correct about the fact that there was a part of her she hadn't allowed past Pendragon's façade in a long time. He'd seen it and he'd delicately trailed his fingertips along her sensitive and vulnerable underbelly.

With his patient questions and quiet consideration and the way he seemed to genuinely want to know the contents of her mind as much as he wanted to release the contents of her corset, he'd ignited a few secret wishes she'd tucked so far into the shadows of her being, she'd forgotten they existed.

And now that they'd been relit, she couldn't ignore them.

In fact, she suspected she might want to explore them. Even if it were for only one night. She simply couldn't allow any more than that. But a lot could happen in one night.



* * *

After weeks of preparation, Pendragon's annual end-of-the-year celebration event had finally arrived.

Callista always took exceptional and deliberate care with her appearance, but on this night it felt different. Because she wasn't dressing to stun and awe the dozens of high-spenders who'd be coming to Pendragon's expecting a night of exceptional pleasures and over-the-top depravities. She was dressing for one man only.

Keeping in line with her signature red and black, the dress she wore tonight was one she'd designed herself. The base of the gown was a blood-

red silk, but instead of the empire waist currently in fashion, the bodice was designed into a full corset that shaped her figure from breasts to hips. Delicate swaths of silk draped over her shoulders, leaving her arms bare and her dragon on full display. There would be no gloves tonight.

The skirts of the gown had been slit in several places from the hem, all the way up to the embroidered base of her corset, revealing an underskirt of black lace. As she walked and moved, the transparent lace would be revealed, showing suggestive glimpses of her bare legs beneath.

But only glimpses.

Her slippers were black beaded satin and a black onyx choker encircled her throat. In her elaborately styled hair were several red roses so dark they appeared almost black in certain light.

She looked magnificent.

Strong. Seductive. Utterly in command and utterly untouchable by the common man.

It was the persona she'd spent years creating, and tonight, she was at the height of her power.

Pendragon's Pleasure House was located near St. James Square and Mayfair, where so many of the high-society gentlemen she catered to lived in domestic dissatisfaction. Decorated entirely in a Grecian theme, the larger rooms held mural-sized paintings depicting blatant sexual scenes, and marble pillars framed every doorway. The main floor contained an entry hall where her doormen carefully managed the flow of people entering and exiting the building. Even on regular nights, one must either be on the list of established members, be sponsored by an approved member in high esteem, or they must have a direct invitation from Pendragon herself. Once allowed in, guests could wander through various public rooms, each one leading deeper into the heart of the house where hedonistic sin and wickedness reigned.

Music played by five musicians flowed from the grand salon, which also contained a stage for her dancers surrounded by chairs, sofas, couches, and divans for comfortable viewing of the entertainment and other activities. A second salon had been designed more for conversation, where gentlemen could debate over port and tobacco while naked lovelies served them from golden platters. Beyond that was a room lit with soft candlelight, most often occupied by those who wished to engage in exhibitionism or voyeurism. And then, a room left in perpetual shadowed darkness to allow guests to release their inhibitions to the full extent. Alcoholic refreshment was provided in

each room while light and savory fare was offered in the main drawing room to keep guests from leaving to pursue dinner elsewhere.

Several rooms on the upper floors were dedicated to Pendragon's personal use. Additional rooms were reserved for her ladies. She currently had nine in residence, though she hired additional entertainment for special events like tonight. For that purpose, several additional private rooms could be used as needed. Every available bed, couch, divan, and chaise in the place would likely be occupied well into the morning hours.

She'd thrown enough of these grand parties by now to have it all organized to perfection. The cellar and larders were well-stocked. Extra servants filled the kitchens and below stairs to keep everything moving smoothly and she had double her usual flash men to keep her guests in line should the excessive alcohol lead to any behavior that broke the strict house rules. One misdeed could see a member barred for life, which meant there were rarely infractions and events such as these tended to go off without a hitch.

Waiting until the evening was in full swing before leaving her rooms to join the party so as to make the kind of dramatic entrance she was known for, Callista sauntered down the main staircase in full view of the entry hall and the main salon.

She loved this moment.

When all eyes turned to her. Admiration, lust, and a little bit of fear reflected up at her. This was her world and she was empress. The lady dragon ready to bestow her treasures on foolish mortals or send them to fiery fates.

As she scanned the crowd below with a narrowed gaze, she exalted in her success. *She* had made this. With her wits and determination. She was far more than a vessel for men's pleasure. She was a force. Though she did not immediately see silver-streaked black hair or striking gray eyes amongst the gathering guests, she was not concerned.

He would come.

With a smile full of knowledge and secrets, she wove a seductive dance through the crowd. Bestowing grace upon her guests with a glance, a few words, or—if the gentleman were particularly lucky that evening—a light, suggestive caress of her hand as she passed. Each man held his breath, hoping they might be one to receive some exceptional favor from the queen of the evening. Callista very carefully and intentionally cultivated that hopeful anticipation. Part of her allure was in her unpredictability, the way her mood

could shift from hot to cold and back again within a single interaction. It kept the gentlemen on their toes, never certain of her regard, ever aware of how much power she possessed within the walls of Pendragon's and beyond.

Their pleasures relied upon her grace and discretion and she made sure they never forgot that.

After taking a couple hours to make her way through each room, assessing the turnout and verifying that her protections were all in place should a guest get unruly, she went below stairs to check on things in the kitchen and go over additional details for the evening with her manager. Neither of which were necessary, as everything had been planned and prepped to perfection.

As she returned to the main level, she advised her head doorman that she would be in her personal suite if anything was needed. She liked to show herself only sparingly to her guests though she'd remain available for any concerns throughout the event. It was important she keep herself at a distance. Too much familiarity bred confidence and comfort, which led some men to think they could take more than they were offered, that they were somehow *owed* more.

Those men quickly learned otherwise.

Retreating to her library, her favorite room in the house, Callista poured herself a glass of red wine before reclining on her black velvet chaise.

Tonight would be a success. All of her grand parties were though each one became more elaborate than the last as she was forced over and over to outdo herself.

A glance at the clock indicated it was already early morning, yet the revelry and debauchery would continue for several more hours.

Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes. Anyone who might happen to observe her in that moment would assume she was resting. They'd be wrong.

Her body was taut with anticipation, which had been increasing throughout the day and evening. And her mind whirled through thoughts that were unprecedented.

Thoughts of a man who'd claimed her focus and her desire. A man she no longer believed to be a threat to her business, though he most certainly posed a significant risk to her personally.

In business she had always been fearless.

But in this...she had to acknowledge she'd become slightly unsteady.

It had been a long time since her last lover. But that was not what had her

belly trembling at the thought of welcoming Erik Maxwell to her bed. What bothered her and threw her off-balance tonight was the realization and acceptance that what she wanted from him was different from anything she'd wanted before.

“Madam.”

She opened her eyes without lifting her head to see one of her well-trained men filling the doorway. “Yes?”

“Your special guest has arrived.”

Tingling, sparking anticipation rushed through her from head to toe. “Thank you, Simon.”

With a nod, the bouncer stepped back into the hall and disappeared.

Sipping on her wine, Callista allowed a smile.

Of course he'd come.

No doubt, he was grateful for the opportunity to explore Pendragon's while also expecting to take advantage of her invitation to further his seduction. She hadn't seen him since Christmas dinner, yet per their agreement, he still had two days to demonstrate his skills. He couldn't know that, after tonight, they would no longer be needed.

Though a part of her wanted to rush downstairs to him, she forced herself to remain where she was. She wanted to allow him time to wander about and soak up the fantasy she'd woven for her guests.

What would he find most compelling?

Her stomach tightened. Would he choose to partake in the many wicked delights Pendragon's offered in abundance?

The urge to claim him for her own rose fiercely inside her. Now that she'd embraced the decision to accept him as her lover, she had to fight against a sense of possession. He did not belong to her any more than she would belong to him. No matter how intensely she was compelled to claim that right.

She paused in the midst of lifting her glass for another sip as a distinguished male form clothed in elegant black evening wear that accented the silver of his hair and the magnetic light in his eyes moved into the open doorway.

He stood there for a moment as his steady focused gaze moved slowly over the curves and dips of her body showcased to perfection by blood-red silk.

Though she felt the heat of his desire like flames licking over her skin,

she responded to his appearance with a lift of her brow. Rolling to one side, she propped herself up on an elbow and noted smoothly, “The party is downstairs.”

“I’m not here for the party.” Understated confidence flowed through his words. And hunger. Heavy, rich hunger.

For the first time, she allowed some of her own hunger to reflect in her eyes. “I hope you allowed yourself a moment to take in the various delights I offer my guests.”

He took a slow step into the room, then another. His gaze never leaving hers as he crossed the thick carpet. “What I want isn’t being offered below.”

“Is that so?” she asked with a quirk of her lips.

His smile was slow. Assured. Seductive. Did he already suspect why he’d been invited tonight?

“You know it is,” he replied.

“What else do I know?”

Reaching the chaise, he extended one of his gloveless hands.

There was no hesitation as she slid her bare fingers along his palm until his hand enclosed hers and he brought her slowly to her feet. Without a word, he took her wineglass and set it on the table beside them. Then he lifted her hand to his mouth, where he pressed his warm lips to the center of her palm.

His silvery eyes held a quiet, unshakeable intention. But it was unhurried and calm. So unlike the riot erupting in her core. A part of her wanted him to sweep her off her feet, maybe toss her over his shoulder or take her to the floor right there in the middle of her library as he covered her mouth in a deep, claiming kiss. But another part of her held her breath and urged her to patience.

His voice was gruff and weighted when he finally replied. “You had to know I would find you.”

She hadn’t, actually. But she realized now that she’d hoped he would.

“Just as you know I am about to kiss you.”

Callista lifted her chin as her lashes swept over a narrowed gaze and her lips parted. She felt no need to respond as his attention fell from her eyes to her mouth. She watched with thrills livening her blood as his pupils dilated and his nostrils flared.

Take it. The private thought came out in a husky murmur she hadn’t intended to voice out loud. But then she was glad she did because a gravelly moan rolled from his throat as he took her face in his hands and claimed her

mouth in a kiss that was deep, hot, and mind-melting.

As she slid one hand up and around his neck, she flattened her other palm to his chest, seeking the subtle rhythm of his heart as she gave herself over to the delicious skill he employed with his lips, tongue, and teeth. He immediately shifted to wrap his arms fully around her, one bracing behind her shoulders, the other encircling the narrow span of her tightly corseted waist to hold her close. Body to body. Breath to breath.

As hot as the kiss was to start, it grew even hotter. The flames of long-denied desire leaping to new heights within seconds.

Just when she thought she might drown in the maelstrom of need flowing through her, he slid his mouth to the side of her throat, then lower, where he paused to scrape his teeth delicately along the muscle connecting neck to shoulder before he placed a warm kiss just above the draping, wispy sleeve of her gown. The delicate caress caused shivers to cascade down her spine.

The hand she'd been resting against his chest curled into claws and her fingernails dug into the expensive fabric of his coat.

Lifting his head, he rested his mouth against the sensitive shell of her ear. "Most importantly," he whispered roughly, "you know the one thing I do not."

"What's that?" she asked. Her voice breathless and heavy.

"What happens next."

She opened her eyes to find him staring intently at her face. His eyes were hard and hot. His jaw was tense with need, his lips firm, and his breath subtly ragged.

"But you've known what would happen all along, Mr. Maxwell."

"I've hoped."

She smiled and combed her fingers through the hair at his nape. "Hmm. Now, you play at humility," she murmured thoughtfully.

He smiled but the curve of his mouth did nothing to soften the intensity in his expression. "Only an idiot would be anything but humble in the presence of the lady dragon."

The sound she made was a warm purr. "And you are no idiot."

His hands shifted to grasp her waist. She could feel the tension of his fingers pressing into the stiff material of her bodice, as if he wished to tear it away from her body to reach the softness encased within.

She wanted to tear the damn thing off, just to feel the smooth glide of his bare hands on her skin. Instead, she gave a subtle undulation of her body. A

quiet urging, a silent permission for him to take a bit more.

Eyes blazing, he smoothed his hands up along her sides until his thumbs brushed across the peaks of her breasts with the perfect amount of pressure before he reached around her. One hand slid down to press flat against the lowest curve of her spine, right where her buttocks flared beneath soft silk. His other hand followed her spine up to wrap around her nape. Holding her like that, he brushed a light kiss across her parted lips.

“I’m clever enough to know my first mistake with you would also be my last.”

“You think me so harsh?” she asked in a ragged whisper as his lips trailed to her jaw, then her temple, then the hollow below her ear.

“Not harsh, madam. You are simply too magnificent for most mortal men.”

She gave a husky laugh. The man knew how to compliment a woman.

His hand tightened on the back of her neck, urging her to drop her head, exposing her throat. She expected him to kiss her there. Instead, he held her like that for a moment. Just long enough for vulnerability to spark deep in her heart. But as she met his dynamic gaze, swirling with desire and knowledge, she instinctively knew she was safe in his hold.

“But I am not most men.”

She narrowed her focus on his mouth, admiring its firm lines and the softness that was present only in the fuller bottom lip. She ached for that mouth and its unexpected smiles and intriguing words. She trembled inside with the desire to feel it again on her lips and imagined the many other ways he might use it.

Bringing her gaze back to his, she murmured in agreement, “No. You are not.”

Chapter 9

When she stepped from his arms, Erik experienced a moment of panic but loosened his hold anyway, allowing his hands to glide over her curves in a sensual caress that made her eyes spark beautifully and her lips curve with promise.

Then she took his hand in hers and turned to lead him across the room. Without a word, she continued from the library and down the hall toward the rear of the house, away from the main stairs that that would have taken them back down to the party. Next, they ascended a narrow, twisting staircase to the top floor of the building and another hallway with red carpeting and brocade-covered walls that contained several closed doors.

Despite the muffled sounds of revelry that could be heard from below and the suspicion that there were others enjoying the privacy and quiet behind each of the closed doors they passed, he felt as though it were just the two of them. In the world that surrounded them but not *of* it. He always seemed to feel like that when he was with her.

At the end of the hall was a door, closed and locked.

Sending him a seductive glance over her shoulder that had his stomach tightening and his cock thickening in a rush, she withdrew a single key on a silken black cord from a concealed pocket in her gown.

The room beyond was a luxurious sitting room done in more of the lady's signature scarlet but accented with gold rather than black. Gold threads in the embroidered settee, gold in the flames rolling gently in the hearth, gold brocade drapes covering the windows, and a large gold filigreed mirror on the wall between.

The room was gilded fire.

And as Pendragon led the way forward, he acknowledged how perfect a setting it was for her. He couldn't keep his eyes off her in the stunning gown, her hips swaying confidently beneath liquid flowing silk. Closing the door behind him, he leaned back against it, watching her. Admiring everything about her as she stopped in front of the oversized mirror hanging almost directly across the room from him.

Green eyes snared his in the reflection as she lifted her hands to tuck a

stray curl back up into her coiffure. Her smile was full of feminine mystique and sensual power as she allowed her fingertips to trail slowly down along her slim neck, across her collarbone, and lower, to the soft upper swells of her breasts.

As he watched from behind her, the mirrored reflection making him feel farther away than he was in truth, she slid her index finger along the top of her bodice, where a thin edge of black lace peeked from under the red silk.

Lust swirled heavily in his body, tensing his muscles, clenching a fist around his throat while blood thundered to his cock.

The woman could put him to his knees if she tried. Part of him wished she would. He would readily offer every pleasure to her, prostrate himself at her feet for the privilege of a single taste.

But he understood that wasn't what she wanted. Nor was it what she needed. She'd no doubt had countless men bowing to her beauty and her pleasure, tossing themselves at the mercy of her desires.

Their intense mutual attraction had grown into something far more complex than sexual power dynamics and pleasures of the flesh alone. He'd long accepted the connection between them. The inevitability of their joining and the undeniable enjoyment that would be found when they finally came together. As two people who might appear to be rivals on the outside but were well-matched in all the ways that mattered. Their pasts had been charted through decades of experiences and ambitions and loneliness to bring them both to this night. To each other.

Her fingers moved nimbly along the tiny hidden fasteners running down the front of her gown. With each little pop of the hook releasing from eyelet, the stiff bodice began to gape.

And Erik's mouth began to water.

Lush, pale pink flesh. Soft and full. She wore nothing beneath the gown and every bit she exposed to him was more tantalizing than the last. As his gaze hungrily devoured the sensual feast she revealed so cleverly and torturously, he felt as though he were being offered something no man could ever prove worthy of receiving.

Pulling the corseted bodice free of her body, she dropped the thing to the floor.

The smooth skin of her torso gleamed like marble in the dusky golden firelight. Her breasts were wonderfully full, the tips crested with dark rose-colored nipples. Her waist was narrow but soft in a way he wanted to rub his

face against.

Still facing the mirror and now bared from waist up, she reached behind her back to where a tied ribbon secured the skirts around her narrow waist. The position thrust her breasts higher, making them jiggle delightfully.

Reluctantly lifting his gaze from her creamy bosom, he noted the small tilt of a satisfied smile curling her mouth. The consummate seductress. Her sexual assurance was intoxicating, leaving him incapable of doing anything but staring with clenched teeth.

Understanding his predicament entirely, she gave a soft chuckle before pulling the ribbon of her skirts, freeing the red silk to fall in a billowy scarlet cloud to the floor.

A powerful jolt of need shot through him. But he forced himself to remain unmoving.

Clad only in an underskirt of transparent black lace that did next to nothing to conceal the lush flare of her hips or the long lines of her shapely legs, she turned to face him. The shadow of pale gold curls at the juncture of her thighs nearly did him in.

With herculean effort, he swallowed the deep groan of hunger pushing up from his chest and managed to utter three true words. "You slay me."

A blonde brow arched. "Isn't that what dragons do? Surely, you didn't expect me to spare you my flames."

"I'd willingly drown in your fire. But I'd prefer we dance in the flames together."

Sparks lit her gaze as she started toward him. Slowly but with undeniable purpose. Her steps languid. The movement of her body sultry. Sensual confidence flowed through her form, holding her shoulders back as her hips swayed.

Stopping halfway across the room, she lowered her chin and smiled with sinful promise as she beckoned him with a curl of her finger.

Pushing off from the door, he reached her in long, swift strides. He saw her ribs expand and her full breasts lift with a swift inhale that caught and held. Her kohl-rimmed eyes were narrowed and dark, watching him. Her reddened lips slightly parted to show the edge of white teeth.

Though his hands burned with the desire to smooth over her pale skin, to cover her breasts and pinch their peaks, he instead reached up to gently caress one of the roses in her hair.

Petals like the richest velvet. A red so dark it was nearly black. And as he

carefully withdrew the first bloom from her golden tresses, he discovered the stem still held its thorns.

He took care releasing her twisted and curled coiffure, making sure not to tug too hard on the pins or tangle the blooms in his attempt to free them. Within minutes, her hair fell in long gilded waves to her hips, framing her stunning beauty in pale gold light.

His chest tightened as the fierce fire of possession engulfed him. “Callista.”

Her given name slipped from his lips on a ragged whisper before he could hold it back. Her eyes flashed, but she said nothing.

She was a creature beyond fantasy. An ancient and sensual goddess. A woman of myth and magic. And tonight she was his.

Still holding the last rose he’d slipped from her hair—a full-blown bloom with wicked thorns and a scent of sensual promise so intoxicating it made his head spin—Erik lifted the flower to brush the petals softly across her lips. Though he felt her gaze intent upon his face, he couldn’t keep from watching the path of the rose as he trailed it down the side of her neck, along her collarbone, then down between the heavy globes of her breasts to her navel. Circling the rose over her low belly, he watched her muscles tense with a satisfied smile.

Drawing the rose up again, he followed the undercurve of one breast. Her nipples tightened and puckered beneath his gaze, anticipating the velvet touch of the rose.

Tension rode gently across her brow as breath passed swiftly between her lips and her green eyes flashed.

Had the bewitching seductress finally fallen under his spell?

Holding her gaze, he circled the peak of first one breast, then the other. Her lashes fluttered as she spoke in a husky whisper. “Beware how much you tease. I’ve some skill in sensual torment, as well.”

“I fucking hope so,” he replied in a gravelly confession, drawing a soft chuckle from her throat.

He took that moment to lower his head and take one breast fully in his mouth, drawing the budded peak deep.

Her gasp was loud and raw as her hands lifted to grasp his head and her spine arched.

Slipping one arm around her waist, he held her secure to accept the luscious roll of his tongue and the sharp edge of his teeth. Her body fit

perfectly within the concave curve of his. Their legs intertwined, her low belly was soft against his aching erection, and her breasts lifted to his mouth. When he turned his head to capture the other breast for equal attention, her fingers curled into his hair, tugging at the scalp while holding him to her.

She knew her pleasure and how to claim it.

But he wanted to give her more. More than she'd ever experienced. More than she knew was possible. He was offering all that he was to this woman tonight. Every breath and thunderous beat of his heart.

Grabbing her buttocks in his hands, he raised his head and lifted her against him. Her legs parted to wrap around his hips.

“Bed?” The one word was a question and a demand.

“Through the door behind you,” she gasped before rolling her hips along his length.

His grip on her lush rear tightened as he turned in place. If he didn't hurry, they wouldn't make it to a bed, and he so wanted to have her spread out on the softness of a mattress as he attended to her pleasure.

The room beyond was dark compared to the outer room, but after only a moment, his eyes began to adjust to the dim, seductive candlelight.

The bedroom was small, and if the sitting room had been gilded fire, this room was all secret darkness and wicked night. The walls were black and silver brocade and thick black carpeting covered the floor. The four-poster bed was made of wood that gleamed a cherry red in the candlelight and was dressed in velvets the color of a midnight sky. But in the center of the room was a straight chaise bench, long and wide, covered in sleek red leather that no doubt felt like butter to touch.

The chaise gave him ideas. Sinfully delicious ideas.

Later.

He took her first to the bed, but he didn't lay her down. Instead, he lowered her feet to the floor and pressed her back to the bedpost behind her. Their gazes locked and held, but neither of them spoke. He could feel her expectation, her trust—if only in this—as she appeared content in the moment to await his direction.

Grasping her wrists in his hands, he lifted them up over her head until she wrapped her elegant fingers around the smooth column of the bedpost. Then he slid her hands higher. Higher. Until she was stretched out, reaching far above her head, elongating her torso, and lifting her plump breasts.

Erik stepped back to admire the picture she made. Skin pale in the

darkness, the swirl of black lace shielding her lower body, her gaze direct and challenging, her lips red and glistening.

“Gorgeous.”

His low murmured word sounded like a benediction in the dark silence.

Utterly fitting as he lowered to his knees before her. She still wore her black heeled slippers. He left them in place as he smoothed his hands up the outsides of her legs, reaching beneath the fall of lace. Taking a deep breath, he drew in the rich, honied scent of her as he explored the silk of her bare skin, the elegant curves of her calves, the softness of her thighs. Shoving the transparent skirts up and up as he went.

And when she boldly tilted her hips toward him, heat blasted through him.

Yes. He would give her what she demanded.

His hands reached the swell of her buttocks and he wrapped them firmly around the backs of her thighs, his fingertips tingling with the barest touch of heat from her core. With his thumbs, he held the black lace above her exposed mound. Gold curls glistened, shielding paradise.

Her thigh muscles tightened and Erik glanced up the length of her lush body. Her head was thrown back, but her eyes—heavy-lidded and bright—gazed down at him.

“More teasing?” she asked. Her tone was sultry and thick. Needful.

He smiled. “Not teasing. Savoring. I’ve been wanting to taste you, claim you, pleasure you with my mouth for an eternity. Now that I’ve got you where I want you, do not expect me to rush the experience.”

She made a short sound as her hips undulated in his hands. “Your patience is unbelievably frustrating.”

Erik chuckled thickly and turned his head to press a kiss to her inner thigh. “You’ll be grateful for it by the end of the night.”

“But it’s already nearly dawn. The night is almost over.”

“Not here. Not in our world,” he murmured as he pressed another kiss to her trembling thigh, slightly higher. “The night has just begun.”

The sound she made was an otherworldly growl. “If you don’t put your tongue to me right n—”

Her voice caught harshly in her throat before sliding into a moan as Erik covered her clitoris with his open mouth in a hot, suckling kiss. Her hips gave an involuntary jerk but he lifted one of her legs to rest over his shoulder, opening her body for the full attention of his mouth.

Holy hell. The first long glide of his tongue along her honied cleft made his head spin with the musky taste of her arousal. Liquid gold. Fire and sin.

With one hand still gripping her thigh, he brought his other hand between them to gently part her folds, exposing her further to his gaze and the full thrust of his tongue. He wanted to get as deeply inside her as he could go while burying his nose in her soft, sweet-scented curls. When she rocked against him, he softened his tongue and lapped along the full length of her swollen folds before circling her clitoris with skillful, urging intent. He suckled the bud before nipping at her sensitive inner lips then thrust again into her honied center.

The taste of her pleasure wet his lips and soon dripped down his chin.

He couldn't get enough. His body responded to every little sound she made, every tilt and twist of her pelvis, ever delicate flutter and pulse of her flesh. He'd become hard as stone from head to toe, but still he couldn't stop attending to her. Not until she offered that first precious orgasm to his mouth.

And when she finally did, it was glorious.

Her thighs tightened around his head, locking him in place. One of her hands fell to the back of his head and her body tensed with the rushing climax that claimed her.

Erik didn't stop thrusting and licking and sucking even as her hips bucked wildly and her fingernails dug into his scalp.

It was everything he wanted. Complete abandon. Violent pleasure. Passionate surrender.

Once the wave swept through her, it left her shaking and trembling in his hands.

Rising to his feet, he swept her up and laid her on the silk-covered mattress before swiftly divesting of his own clothing. By the time he stepped back to the bed, she'd rolled to her stomach and lifted herself to rest on her elbows.

The glitter of her green gaze greedily soaked up the sight of his naked body.

Erik had always taken good care of himself, enjoying the strength and ability he experienced when he maintained a well-honed physique. It was a welcome by-product that his trim, muscled form pleased his lovers. One he'd never been so grateful for as he was when her hot, desirous gaze settled on his standing cock and she issued a sultry moan of pleasure before murmuring, "Your turn."

Chapter 10

The man was a goddamned masterpiece. Not to mention a genius with his tongue.

But of course he was. She'd seen the knowledge in his eyes at their first meeting. A man only came by that kind of self-assurance through honest means. And thank God for it!

Her body still trembled with receding pleasure. But if Maxwell was a genius, she was a savant because she knew they'd only exposed the tip of what was to come tonight.

At the moment, however, she couldn't take her eyes off him. His body was honed with muscle. Solid and strong, yet trim and devoid of any unnecessary bulk. Most importantly, so was his cock. Long and thick without being of an obscene size, it curved proudly up toward his belly with a slight tilt to the right. The imperfection made her mouth water.

He stepped toward her at the same time she reached out for him, wrapping her fingers tightly around the base. Hot, hard, satiny flesh throbbed in her hand. She breathed deeply and evenly through her nose, reveling in the pure male scent of him. Clean, earthy, grounding. Then she flicked her gaze upward. Past his taut, rippled stomach. Over his defined chest covered in a sprinkling of iron-gray hair. To the tense line of his jaw, the firm press of his fabulous lips, and finally, to the sharp spear-like focus of his gaze.

Only then did she lean forward to lash her tongue over the head of his cock.

He tensed but said nothing. His eyes held hers with manacle strength and his hands fisted at his sides.

She extended her tongue again. This time executing a more intricate dance around the crown, teasing the slit and the sensitive ridge with quick flicks. He pulsed in her grip, growing even larger. Harder. In reward, she ran her tongue up his full length from base to tip. Then did it again, adjusting the pressure of her tongue, adding a few swirls and delicate little kisses along the way.

Yet still, her teasing did not break his calm or his patience.

Hmm.

Shifting position, she brought her knees up beneath her, resting her buttocks back on her heels. This allowed her a bit more leverage and freed her other hand, which she immediately put to use, cupping his balls as she directed his head between her lips. When her lips slipped past the glans to the veined shaft, he finally issued a deep-throated groan of pleasure.

Sliding her mouth back to the tip, she looked up at him again.

His eyes had closed and his head had dropped back. But only for a moment. Bringing his attention back to her, he slid a hand into her hair to grasp her head with wide-spread fingers.

Yes. This was what she wanted. This show of command. This display of base, primitive need. Her belly swirled with desire and wet heat pooled in her cunny.

For just a second, she resisted his subtle urging, holding her mouth an inch distance from his pulsing tip.

His stomach muscles released and contracted on a harsh and ragged breath as he waited.

But he waited.

Power surged through her. Power and pleasure and something else.

Despite the sexual hunger of his body, the obvious need coursing through him to culminate in the member grasped tightly in her hand, he waited. With his gaze glinting and sharp. His lips pulled back just enough to show the edge of teeth and his breath unsteady. He waited.

And Callista teased.

A quick flick of her tongue to the underside of his pulsing head. A gentle squeeze of his balls. A look of challenge.

To her surprise and delight, he smiled down at her. “Wicked woman,” he accused in a gravelly murmur.

She smiled back, but not for long as she was already bringing him back to her mouth. This time, when she took him as deep as she could then slid her mouth back to the crown, she didn’t stop. Continuing the rhythm of deep, sucking strokes, she reveled in the tightening of his hand in her hair, the low groans rolling through his chest, and the trembling she began to feel in his hard thighs.

Though she enjoyed this act more than some women, she’d never particularly loved the culmination. But this time, with him, she found herself craving that moment when he’d reach climax and release his pleasure into the heat of her mouth. So much that the thought of him pulsing between her lips

had her moaning softly as more heat flooded her sex.

While she lowered her head to tickle one of his testicles with her tongue, he reached over her, sliding his hand down the arch of her spine. He first squeezed one buttock before gently slapping the other. Then he slid his finger down the cleft between, until he reached the flesh that ached so sweetly.

Her moan was full and sultry around his cock as he spread her moisture along her folds before taking her clitoris in a spine-tingling pinch.

Her breath caught and held at the burst of sensations he caused. Her belly clenched with a harsh, hollow feeling. And as she sucked hard on his length in an instinctive urge to fill that void, he eased two fingers deep into her body.

Her exhale was another moan. Involuntary and raw.

He withdrew his fingers then thrust them into her again.

She arched, tipping her hips higher, spreading her thighs, giving more. Demanding more.

He set a rhythm to match the one she executed with her mouth and hands on his cock.

But soon it got to be too much for both of them. In unspoken accord, they shifted position. Erik climbed onto the bed, kneeling as Callista rose up to her hands and knees, turning her back to him.

There was a brief pause as he grasped her hips in his hands.

His erection bumped against her heated flesh, but he did not thrust forward. She glanced over her shoulder as he slid his hands up along her rib cage to her shoulders. There he gathered the full mass of her hair in one fist, twining its length around his wrist.

Then very gently he pulled her up to her knees until her back was flush to his chest. She tipped her chin up and turned her head to the side. He met her there with an open-mouthed kiss that made her bones melt. Their tongues tangled and their teeth nipped.

Wrapping his other arm snug around her waist, he held her against him as he scooped his hips and entered her in a smooth upward thrust. The sharp angle had him hitting all the right spots inside her, making her gasp and shudder. Another short, rolling thrust nudged his head along that sensitive inner flesh that made her thighs tighten and her low back bow.

Again and again, he thrust like that, while his mouth fell to her shoulder. He sealed his lips over the muscle there, sucking hard on her flesh, giving her the edge of his teeth and a hard pinch on her nipple as she gasped and

strained and shook in his hold.

A fucking genius. No denying it.

And when he shifted his hold to grasp her breast, her body convulsed, on the verge of another climax. This one promising to be more intense than the last.

His growl at her ear made her tremble from head to toe, her body weakened by the sound of his possession. Bringing a hand up to rest around her throat, he deepened his thrusts and whispered darkly against her skin, "Come for me, Callista. Now."

And she did. The pulsing pleasure overwhelming her like a tidal wave, washing through her, obliterating thought or resistance of any kind.

She'd never been with someone who so effortlessly took command of her body and her pleasure. Anyone who'd tried in the past had been efficiently and subtly redirected. No one had ever seemed to know exactly what she needed before she did herself. No one had ever touched her with such confident and focused intention.

But Erik did it effortlessly.

He was utterly attuned to her shifting needs as she was to his, she realized as they once again changed positions without having to speak. And as she looked down at him stretched out on the black silk while she straddled his lean hips and took him into her still throbbing body, she realized something else. Something that touched deep inside her.

Connection.

The acknowledgement was startling.

As she should have expected, he seemed to sense her sudden disquiet. While his stiff member throbbed inside her, he gently slid his hands up her spread thighs. Then he reached up with one hand to curl his fingers around her nape and pull her down to him. His gray eyes were dark and focused as he brought her mouth to his.

But he didn't kiss her. He just held her there like that as she stretched atop his solid form, her lips hovering a breath from his, his cock buried in her pleasure-swollen heat.

And something pulled taut in her chest. It was a painful, breath-stealing force.

Her first instinct was to become angry at the intrusive emotion and her body tensed. But he wouldn't let her retreat. Instead, he tickled his fingertips across her nape in a soothing caress while his other hand grasped firmly to

her rear.

When he spoke, it was in a ragged whisper, words that soaked through her skin and snaked through her blood. “You know what this is, Callista. The truth is evident in your gorgeous eyes.”

A hard thread woven deeply into her being would have had her pulling away or scoffing some denial, but the rest of her trembled on the verge of accepting something impossible.

His eyes darkened even more. “Embrace it. Revel in it.”

Before she could reply, he pulled her mouth to his. The taste of him ignited red-hot flames in her belly. The swirl of his tongue erased any further thought. The power of his kiss claimed her as his.

Astonishingly, she allowed it.

She sunk into it and surrendered to it. But only for a moment. The feeling quickly grew too heavy, too consuming. The pull in her chest ached. She could not succumb completely, could not give herself over to whatever magic he’d conjured between them.

This was simple lust. An act of physical desire manifested. This was fucking and she knew fucking.

Pushing against his chest, she sat upright astride him and shook her hair out behind her as she rolled her hips to initiate a deeper, more intent rhythm. Sensation sparked and spread out to her fingers and toes. Closing her eyes, she focused on the pleasure, ignoring all else. There was nothing different about this experience than any other before. The man beneath her might be exceptionally—phenomenally!—skilled as a lover, but that was all this was.

Yet when he smoothed his hands up and down her thighs before kneading her hips with his strong fingers as a rough sound of pleasure sounded in his throat, she couldn’t keep herself from glancing down at him again.

His body was drawn taut and his head was thrown back. The cords of muscles in his throat stood out and his arms bulged with strain as he held her hips in his large splayed hands. Pleasure had nearly consumed him. He was perilously close to the edge. A few quick snaps of her hips, a squeeze of her inner muscles, perhaps a teasing pinch of his nipples or a bite on his shoulder and he would fall apart.

As she braced herself to finish him off, a dull regret spread through her chest. She wasn’t ready for it to end.

In her brief moment of hesitation, he opened his eyes. A fiercely lit gaze met hers and she suddenly felt as though he could see straight through to the

darkest pit inside her. He saw it and claimed it in an instant as he sat up and rolled them both over.

In a breath, she was on her back. His cock remained deep inside her as he settled between her thighs. Reaching for her hands, he held them to the mattress beside her head. She lifted her knees, expecting him to start a fast, punishing rhythm to claim his release. Instead, he stilled completely.

The only movement was their chests expanding and contracting with their deep and even breaths.

“You think this is over?” he asked, circling his pelvis in a subtle motion that sent tingling sparks through her core. She bit her lip to hold back the gasp rising in her throat. He smiled. Wicked. Knowing.

Too knowing.

She felt exposed and vulnerable in a way she had never known. And she’d experienced helplessness a hundred ways in her life. It was a feeling she abhorred and spent a great deal of effort avoiding at all costs. Yet this man managed to invoke this unprecedented emotion with a smile.

She might have hated him a little bit in that moment.

“I think you’ve proven your abilities, Mr. Maxwell,” she stated as evenly as she could considering how favorably her body was responding to his physical dominance.

His eyes narrowed at her reply. The light in their depths flickered with something dangerous that stalled her breath even though his expression remained calm. And frustratingly patient. “You speak of sexual gratification, madam. Pleasure is easy to come by and fleeting.”

As if to prove his point, he circled his hips again—a deeper, lusher movement that ground his pelvic bone against her clitoris and touched on all her pleasure points.

She arched her spine and tried to roll her hips, seeking more. But he held her too securely, his body pinning hers. Only he had freedom of movement.

“This,” he continued in a gravelly voice as he gave a short, shallow thrust inside her, “is something far more precious.”

Though her heart lurched and her belly twisted, she stared boldly up at him and forced a flippant reply. “This...is fucking.”

There was a flicker of disappointment in his eyes, there and gone in a flash. But she saw it—*felt* it. Her next breath was tight as his lips widened slowly into that smile again. The one that said he knew what she was doing and confidently declared her ploy wouldn’t work. The one that promised to

give her exactly what she wanted even if she couldn't admit what that was.

Lowering his head, he took her mouth in a kiss with that smile still spreading his lips. She felt it, tasted its dark and lovely sweetness, took the promise of it into herself before he murmured heavily against her lips. "If that's what you believe, then fine. Let's fuck."

He shifted his hold on her hands, interlocking his fingers with hers as he straightened his arms to hold himself above her. Bending his knees, he brought them under her thighs, lifting her hips to accept the deep, full strokes of his cock.

Her body ignited with sensation.

Planting her feet on the mattress, she rolled her hips to meet and accept every thrust.

Yes. This was what she wanted. The power of primal mating. The mindless physical hunger. The reckless, personal striving for sexual satisfaction. She arched and writhed. She tensed and bucked and moaned while he brought her higher and higher with every plunge of his body into hers.

Finally, when she neared the peak, felt the crest beginning to break, sensed the imminent approach of an orgasm that promised to destroy her, she met his gaze again.

And knew in an instant—he was right.

Pleasure exploded like a star throughout her being. Reaching every corner, brightening every dark secret she'd ever possessed, bringing the truth into stark, undeniable view.

And through it all—the gasping, trembling, pulsing release—she couldn't look away from him. She was bound by his gaze. Bound by his pleasure when he finally gave himself over to his own climax with a harsh growl that satisfied a deep animalistic craving she hadn't known existed within her.

She saw the spark of power in his eyes. The possession. The truth.

For those long moments while their bodies communicated in a far more succinct and powerful way than words could ever achieve, she did indeed revel in the beauty of it all.

But feelings so intense and powerful cannot last forever.

Eventually, the trembling slowed, sweat dried, heart rates returned to normal, and Callista's chest tightened with the press of undeniable reality.

She might have experienced something that far surpassed every expectation or understanding of what was possible, but now it was over. The

man who'd been so generous and perfect might still be pressing soft kisses to her eyelids, the corners of her mouth, the pulse at the base of her throat, while his member remained hot inside her. But soon, he'd roll from the bed, perhaps mutter a quick *thank you*, and then leave.

Though she'd been pleased beyond prior experience and had gotten exactly what she'd wanted out of her one night with the man, she wanted more. A hell of a lot more.

But she was no fool. She allowed herself just one more moment. One moment to acknowledge the loss filling her heart. One moment to remind herself who she was and how she'd gotten where she was now.

Men were a distraction at best, a liability and a source of destruction at worst. And Erik Maxwell had just proven himself to be the most dangerous of all.

His hands gently framed her face while his thumb brushed across her lower lip.

“Callista.”

Her name was spoken softly but intently in his rich, gravelly voice. She barely noticed his accent anymore, but she heard it then in the way he formed the vowels of her name.

With her belly swirling, she opened her eyes and forced a gentle smirk to her lips. “Well done, Mr. Maxwell.”

His gaze narrowed as one brow arched in question. “You cannot bring yourself to call me Erik?”

She lifted a hand to pat the side of his face where black and gray stubble roughened his skin. It took all of her willpower not to caress the hard line of his jaw or drift her fingertips across his frowning mouth. “Of course...Erik.” His name felt too perfect in her mouth—succinct, formed with a smooth roll of the tongue that ended with a short kick in the back of the throat. “I suppose I shall have to offer my concession.”

“I don't want a damned concession,” he said slowly. Heavily.

She tensed beneath him. “Then what do you want? You never did name your prize should the seduction succeed.”

Eyes that had been dark and mysterious in the aftermath of his pleasure suddenly hardened. “I want *you*, Callista. Don't pretend you don't know that.”

Though a fist clenched tight around her heart, Callista kept a smile on her lips. Sliding out from underneath him, she rose from the bed. “You just had

me, darling.”

She walked across the room to the washstand. Though she tried to avoid his reflection in the mirror above it, the image of him sitting strong and proud at the edge of the bed, his hair delightfully mussed, his feet planted wide and firm on the floor, his gaze burning a hole in her back, would forever be imprinted in her mind.

She took her time wetting the cloth before smoothing it over her body, wiping away the lovely smell of him. Of her. Of the two of them together.

“Callista, I...”

She really couldn’t allow him to go on. The tone of his voice already suggested what he might say, and if she heard him say the words, she might actually want to believe it. And then she’d be doomed for certain.

“I must get back to my guests. You can dress in the other room if you’d like. I imagine you can find your way out.”

The silence that followed her words was as cold as any winter she’d endured in her poverty-stricken youth.

It was best if he decided to hate her.

They could go on in their prospective business endeavors, never having to cross paths again. If he happened to see her in the street or at the theater, he could avoid her with a scowl of disgust and eventually she wouldn’t even be bothered by it.

“That’s it, then?” he asked thickly.

Lifting her hands to twist her hair up into something resembling a proper coiffure, she replied, “What else could there possibly be?”

He didn’t reply. And after a while, she risked glancing in the reflection at the room behind her.

It was empty. He’d left.

Chapter 11

“Hiya, Lissy.” Mason sauntered into Callista’s personal study. It was a rare occasion her brother visited Pendragon’s these days now that he had a family to care for and protect. But when he did, it was always unexpected and usually at the worst possible time.

Today was no exception. It was the morning after her grandest party of the year...the morning after her night with Erik Maxwell...

Though she’d changed into a slightly more comfortable day gown, she hadn’t slept yet and her mood was growing more atrocious by the minute.

“What the hell do you want, Mace?”

Her brother’s expression was one of false shock and insult. “Can’t a man visit his only sister for no reason?”

“Not you,” she snapped.

He grinned. Settling his overly large, muscled frame into one of the chairs facing her desk, he tilted his head and arched his brows. “What’s the matter? You’re particularly prickly today.”

“It was a long night.”

“Right! The event of the year. Not the success you’d hoped?”

“It was a crush,” she replied flatly. “Early estimates suggest it was the most profitable night in Pendragon’s history.”

“Hmm.”

She didn’t like it when Mason made that sound. It meant he was thinking. And that was never a good thing. Whenever he used that clever brain of his, he ended up saying something she didn’t want to hear.

“It’s that Maxwell bloke, isn’t it?”

Dammit.

Something in her expression must have confirmed his assumption since Mason burst into laughter. It was a rich and hearty sound that warmed her despite herself.

He’d had too little cause for laughter as a boy. She’d been born twelve years before her little half brother, and though she’d tried to shield him from the worst of their shared father, she hadn’t always succeeded. And then she’d been forced to leave. Eventually, she managed to get Mason out of the hovel

they'd come from, but she'd always wished she could have done more in his youngest years.

But now he had Katherine. And Claire and Freddie. Her brother was doing all right.

Some might suggest he was doing even better than she was herself.

Rising from her seat behind the desk, she wandered across the room. It was a foolish attempt at avoiding the conversation looming ahead of her. Foolish because Mason was not likely to let the topic die.

And because a part of her actually *wanted* to talk about the man who'd been haunting her thoughts since he'd risen from her bed.

"Talk to me."

Looking over her shoulder, she noted her brother's stern countenance and the shadow of concern in his green eyes, just a couple shades darker than her own.

For so long, he'd been the only person she'd truly cared about.

Of course, she cared for the women who came under her protection, but in the way of benefactor, guardian, and mentor. Her feelings for Mason were different. He was her only family. Her blood. Looking at him now and seeing his protective, supportive demeanor, she had to admit that although she'd helped him in a myriad of ways, she had never been very good at showing him what he meant to her.

Her chest ached with the acknowledgement. Damn, but she was terrible at this emotional shite.

Mason rose to his feet and rolled his head atop his broad shoulders. "Do I need to go have a talk with the arsehole?"

She rolled her eyes. "No." The next breath she took caused the ache in her chest to tighten rather painfully. "But I might be long overdue for one."

He appeared startled for a moment before he stepped forward, his hands rising as if to offer an embrace. But then he recalled himself and lowered his hands to his sides. "What's this about, Lissy?"

Meeting her brother's intent gaze, she felt a prickling pressure behind her eyes she hadn't known in decades. "I fucked up, Mace."

It was almost comical how Mason looked at her, as though she'd suddenly become a different person. And in a way...she had. "What'd you do?" he asked, his tone slightly incredulous, slightly wary.

"I chased him away."

"So, get him back."

She scoffed. “It’s not that easy.”

“Sure, it is,” he argued. “You want the man?”

Want him? *Yes.*

And more.

With a rough sound of frustration, she whipped her skirts aside and crossed the room. “What’s the blasted point? It cannot last. Nothing like that ever does. It’s a fool’s illusion.”

“So, be a fool. Take the bloody risk. It’s fucking worth it, Lissy.”

Keeping her back to her brother, she shook her head. She’d avoided that kind of risk all her life. Starting with her own mother, Callista had seen far too many times what a woman’s love got her—beaten, sold, degraded, lost to the desires and demons of men.

Of course, she’d also encountered men who were noble and honorable. But as a whole, they were rare creatures. Despite his rough edges and crude demeanor, Mason was one.

And Erik. He was one.

But that didn’t guarantee a thing.

“Listen,” Mason said behind her, setting a hand on her shoulder to turn her back to face him. His brows were furrowed and his gaze met hers with surprising compassion. “Whatever this is, you’ve gotta play it through to the end. And if he turns out to be an arsehole...or if *you* end up being the arsehole, you deal with that when it comes. Sometimes it doesn’t work out.” His eyes darkened and she suspected he was thinking of Claire’s mother. But then his mouth tilted in an irreverent grin. “But when it does, Lissy, it’s pretty fucking amazing. Don’t cheat yourself out of that possibility just because you’re a little scared.”

Callista narrowed her eyes at that last comment, which he’d obviously added just to provoke her. Mason knew damn well she was not afraid of anything.

But then again... *Was* fear holding her back?

The answer hit her like a fist to her sternum. Dammit to everlasting hell. That wouldn’t do at all.

Giving Mason a look that would turn most men to stone, she noted in a dangerous voice, “You know what? I’m pretty sure *you’re* the arsehole.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “That and more, as my duchess would no doubt attest.”

“I don’t know how that woman puts up with you.”

His smile then was full of pure male arrogance. “The lady loves me.” He lifted his fists and curled both arms to flex his biceps. “And these. She fucking adores these.”

With another roll of her eyes, she turned and walked away. “You know the way out,” she offered over her shoulder as she continued from the room, his laughter echoing behind her.



* * *

Maxwell’s butler greeted her at the door with a shallow bow and a sweep of his arm toward the stairs. “You’ll find him in his sitting room, madam.”

She’d suspected on her last visit that Erik had given instruction to allow her free entrance, but now she was sure of it. Why hadn’t he rescinded the order after last night? She would have if their situations had been reversed. She honestly never would have wanted to see his face again if he’d treated her the way she’d treated him.

Heat flowed across her nape and her low belly twisted. This was going to be harder than anything she’d ever done.

Though a hollow feeling settled in her chest—she refused to call it fear—she made her way up the stairs to the concealed doorway.

During that first visit, she’d guessed his reason for so readily revealing the secret passage to his private rooms was to demonstrate his consideration of her—the great Madam Pendragon— as a business colleague. A professional equal. Having his butler lead her through the secret passage to his private rooms hadn’t been a careless choice. She knew him well enough now to be assured that Erik Maxwell did nothing carelessly. At the time, she thought it a clever if presumptuous move. Madam Pendragon had no equal and she’d been anxious to enlighten him on that basic fact.

But now, as she triggered the latch to open the panel, a new understanding dawned.

She’d come to Maxwell’s nearly a fortnight ago, prepared to stand toe to toe with him, to threaten him if necessary. He’d been yet another man who endangered her business, her very livelihood, and most importantly, her

power.

She had consistently ignored his assurances to the contrary and construed nearly everything he did as a manipulation to get what he wanted from her.

And what was that exactly? What had he wanted?

Just her.

He didn't need her power and influence. Nor her wealth. Nor her clients.

He wanted her. And blast it all—she wanted him as well.

Her steps lengthened with purpose as she headed toward the room where they'd shared the bottle of brandy. Striding through the open door, she saw him standing before the fireplace, staring into the flames. He was still in his evening wear from the night before though he wore no coat or cravat and his sleeves had been rolled back to his elbows.

A combination of hope and fear churned inside her. It was a new sensation, something she wasn't entirely certain she was prepared to experience. But she was here now and she refused to be a coward. Setting her shoulders and lifting her chin, she started across the room, her skirts making a soft sound as they swished about her legs.

Alerted to her presence, he glanced over his shoulder. Surprise flashed briefly in his eyes before he turned to face her, putting the fire behind him and his face in shadow. He did not speak as she approached and neither did she.

When she stopped in front of him, he squared his shoulders and removed his spectacles. She was close enough now to see his face, to look into his eyes. Close enough to draw in his familiar scent. Close enough to desire his touch.

She steeled herself against the wanting. She'd come here intending to confess her feelings, but first, there was something she needed to understand. Titling her head, she tried to keep her expression as neutral as his as she looked up into his shadowed gray eyes. But an unfamiliar fire burned inside her. A fire she was struggling to contain.

After a moment, he spoke, his voice quiet but strong. "I didn't expect to see you today."

Callista made a dismissive gesture before replying, "I assure you; I didn't expect to come here."

He lowered his chin and met her fierce gaze with one of calm intensity. "Then why did you?"

"Before I answer that, I'd like you to explain something to me. And I'd

like you to be completely honest.”

“Always.” The single word rang true and poignant through her being.

“What was your true intention when you offered to seduce me?”

The corner of his lips twitched. “Getting you into bed was not a proper enough motivation?”

Callista smiled in return. A practiced, knowing smile. “Of course it is. If it’s the only one.”

There was pause. Then his voice was thoughtful as he replied, “I’m prepared to answer you in full honesty. But it won’t matter if you’re unwilling to accept the truth.”

She narrowed her gaze, daring him with a hint of danger in her eyes. “Try me.”

Another twitch of his lips. “From the moment you appeared in the doorway to my office, I knew something remarkable had just entered my world. I was undeniably intrigued by your cunning mind and bewitching manner. I was determined to know you better.”

“Do you feel you accomplished that goal?” She arched a brow imperiously. “Do you know me, Mr. Maxwell?”

His silver-gray eyes sparked from beneath a furrowed brow. “I know your success was hard-won and that your business is much more to you than financial security. I know you have a hard time acknowledging that, despite your strength and influence, you still experience loneliness. I know you prefer to lead the way in your personal relationships and I suspect it’s because you’ve been disappointed in the past. People have taken from you—or have tried to,” he corrected with a tilt to his lips.

Lifting his hand, he traced his fingertips across her temple as he swept a tendril of hair behind her ear while his gaze remained locked with hers.

“You are clever and crafty beyond anyone’s understanding. You’ve hardened your heart to protect it and you do not believe in love because you’ve witnessed how the emotion can be falsified and manipulated.” His focus dipped to her mouth and his words thickened as he added, “Your lips taste like heavenly sin, your skin is softer than silk, and your moans of pleasure twist me into knots.”

Callista parted her lips as something intense began to snake through her, stirring up emotions she struggled to identify. She wanted to refute his claims but his words rang too true. Every one of them.

His gaze lifted to hers again as the flat of his thumb gently brushed over

her cheek. “But there is still so much I want to know about you. I want to know how you take your tea or if you prefer coffee. I want to know how your eyes look upon waking. I want to know what amuses you and what infuriates you. I want to discuss your hopes and dreams and fears over breakfast every morning and talk to you about the weather and the latest town gossip every evening.”

She didn’t realize she’d begun to shake her head until his hand slid away from her face. His expression darkened as a furrow of disappointment clouded his brow. “You don’t believe me,” he stated in a low voice.

That was the problem. She *did* believe him.

She didn’t know what to think of everything he’d just said, but she couldn’t deny how she felt about it. Elated. Terrified. Hopeful.

Turning away, she crossed to the windows, where heavy drapes blocked out the light of day. She pulled one of the drapes aside to gaze over the white and wintery scene. Carriages rolled along the snow-covered street as people bustled about, bundled in furs and wool. So mundane. So domestic.

For so long, her world had been contained within the walls of Pendragon’s.

Mason dared her to take a risk.

But how did one go about risking their very heart?

She felt his presence as he silently came up behind her. “I don’t know how to do this,” she murmured quietly.

“Yes, you do,” he assured.

Letting the curtain fall back into place, she turned around. His gaze met hers and within them she saw a quiet conviction, calm confidence, and heated longing. His lips were pressed into a firm line, but it didn’t stop her from hungering for them. And suddenly, kissing him was all she could think about.

That, at least, she knew how to do.

Slipping her gloved hand around his neck, she pressed her body to his as she rose up to place her mouth against his.

Though she wished he would, he didn’t encircle her waist with his arms or pull her in tighter. He stood there, patiently accepting whatever she was willing to give, leaving it up to her to push it further.

And just like that, in a flash of certainty, her fear was gone.

Wrapping both arms around his neck, she deepened the kiss. With passionate intent, she slid her tongue along his then drew his lush bottom lip between her teeth. Finally, his arms came around her and the satisfaction of

being held secure in his embrace filled her with warmth and desire.

Pulling back just enough to murmur against his lips as she looked into his lovely eyes, she said, "I know you didn't want a concession, but I'm giving it to you anyway. *You've got me.*" His eyes blazed and she smiled. "Now what are you going to do with me?"

He answered by shifting his hold to sweep her up into his arms before heading toward the door. "Now," he replied with sensual intent, "I'm going to make love to you until we are both so exhausted we fall asleep with limbs sprawled and sweat cooling on our skin. And when we wake up, we'll start again and again and again."

Her laugh was husky with anticipation. "And then?"

At the end of the hall, they entered a large bedroom decorated in jeweled tones of sapphire and emerald. He carried her straight to the bed, where he followed her down to the mattress. Settling atop her, he took her face in his hands. His voice was rough and low as he answered her question in a thick murmur. "I'm going to devote myself to convincing you that love is real and wonderful and yours for the taking."

Callista's heart thundered in her chest, and as she looked into his intense gray eyes, she realized she'd be a fool to deny the truth shining from their depths.

And Callista was no fool.

About Amy Sandas

Amy lives with her husband and children in Northcentral Wisconsin. She writes historical romance about dashing, and sometimes dangerous, men who know just how to get what they want and women who may be reckless, bold, and unconventional, but always have the courage to embrace all that life and love have to offer.

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