



A BRITISH
CHRISTMAS

Callie
Hutton

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A BRITISH CHRISTMAS



CALLIE HUTTON

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MISS MERRY'S CHRISTMAS



ABOUT THE BOOK

England, 1817. David Worthington, Duke of Penrose dislikes Miss Meredith Chambers, the governess who accompanied his new wards to his home. He might be able to overlook the fact that she is an American, but her lack of propriety is a poor influence on the two girls in his charge. He especially detests his attraction to the insufferable woman, and is anxious for her replacement to arrive.

Despondent over having to leave her charges to the mercy of the overbearing Duke of Penrose, Merry is thrilled when the Dowager Duchess hires her as a companion. Now she can stay with her beloved charges. But can she ignore how her heart thumps when the pompous duke gets close?

Two people determined to ignore each other, despite the pull between them, and the sparks that fly whenever they're together.

* * *

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To Aunt Mary. Even after all these years, I still miss you.

CHAPTER 1



Hamptonshire, England
October, 1813

Miss Meredith Chambers took a deep breath and smiled at the two little girls staring up at her with wide eyes. “Well, it appears we’re here.”

Her smile faltered when they both grabbed her legs and hid their faces in her skirts. “What’s this?”

“I don’t want to live here,” Charlotte, the older of the sisters at eight years, wailed.

“Me neither,” Clare, the younger one at six years echoed.

Merry dropped to her knees and pulled them both close. “You are the duke’s wards. He is a very important man, your father’s best friend. You will love living here.”

Two curly, blond-haired heads shook furiously.

“Madam?” The front door of the massive house opened, and a tall, thin butler, his nose as long as the rest of him, glared down at them. “His Grace awaits you in the library.”

Merry stood and patted her hair, which had come loose from her knot. Well, no time to fuss with it now. She took each girl’s hand in hers and made her way up the steps. The sound of the well-sprung coach that delivered them, its wheels clattering on the cobblestones, rang in her ears, the last link to their old life.

“Girls, release my hands, you’re squeezing too hard.”

They ignored her request as they made it to the top of the steps.

The butler viewed the group without expression. “This way if you please.”

Merry followed the man, still dragging her charges.

Goodness, the house was huge. The marble entrance hall was filled with delicate tables, over-stuffed Queen Anne chairs, and an immense clock, its sound almost as loud as her pounding heart.

“Madam? Do you wish assistance?”

Realizing she gaped like a ruffian from the street, she attempted to step forward, still impeded by the girls who had dug their heels in. “Ladies, you must move forward.” They clung tighter. She flashed a smile at the butler, whose countenance remained impassive, leaving her to wonder if a smile ever graced his stoic face.

Despite her best intentions, Merry twisted back and forth, amazed as she took in her surroundings. Plush carpets, silk wall coverings, priceless lamps, all reminding her of the wealth and status of the girls’ guardian. Her nose smacked into something solid as the butler came to an abrupt stop, but her body, with her two charges still dragging behind her, did not.

Lips twitching, but maintaining his austere demeanor, the butler opened a large wooden door with elaborate carvings, and sniffed before announcing, “Lady Charlotte Spencer, Lady Clare Spencer, and Miss Meredith Chambers.”

The girls moved with her, but with their heads down, staring at the floor. Breathless from her effort, she looked up into the most arresting brown eyes, with specks of gold, she’d ever seen. Above the eyes, sharp black eyebrows rose almost to the hairline of wavy black hair. Below the eyes an aristocratic nose led to sensual lips drawn into a tight line.

“Your Grace.” She puffed and attempted a clumsy curtsy.

The only sound in the room was the soft click of the door as the butler exited. Merry waited patiently to be invited to sit. Instead, the brown eyes kept staring at her, then leisurely slid their way down her person, and obviously from the additional tightening of his full sensual lips, finding her wanting.

Eventually, a long-fingered hand flicked in the direction of one of the two leather chairs in front of his desk. “You may sit.”

Merry sat abruptly, feeling like a dog panting in front of its master. The two girls ended up on her lap, still examining their shoes.

“Is there something wrong with the young ladies?” The deep voice rolled

over her, setting her heart to pounding.

Merry grasped the girls' chins and attempted to have them face their ward. Without success. She had no idea their neck muscles were so strong. "No, Your Grace. They're merely a bit anxious."

"Indeed."

How was it possible to put so much disapproval into one word?

After a moment, he settled back in his chair, his fingers clutching a quill pen he tapped on the desk. "I trust you had a pleasant journey?"

With all the liquid in her mouth dried up, she merely nodded.

"I understand from my solicitors you've had sole charge of the girls since their parents passed away a month ago?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Good. She was finally able to pry her mouth open.

"And you find it so difficult to control your charges that they do not sit as proper ladies?"

Heat rose to Merry's face and anger washed through her. The arrogant arse! "They're confused and a bit distressed. And, might I point out that there are only two chairs and we are three people." She bent and whispered furiously to the girls. "Please move to the other chair. You can sit together. His Grace is not happy with you on my lap."

"No." Two voices piped up, murmuring to their knees.

She smiled slightly at the duke and shrugged. If possible his eyebrows rose further, disappearing underneath the wave that rested against his forehead.

"It appears to me, Miss Chambers, that Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare have arrived into my keeping just in time." He pushed his chair back and stood. "I arranged for a governess to train them in proper behavior. She will instruct the girls in the skills necessary for a lady of their station." He waved his hand. "Sewing, French, watercolors, manners, rules of Society, and so forth."

Merry stared at him, her jaw slack. Well over six feet, David, Duke of Penrose, was a sight to behold. Every inch the lord of the manor, his coat fit him as if it had been painted on. His white-on-white waistcoat hugged his impressive body above well-fitting tan breeches tucked into shiny black Hessian boots. A snow white, intricately tied cravat stood in stark contrast to his lightly tanned skin.

His Grace slowly rounded the desk like a lion stalking its prey and rested one hip on the edge, peering down at her, his foot swinging back and forth. "I

shall allow a bit of transition time for the young ladies. You may stay on for a week or two. Then I will see you receive a generous stipend to tide you over until you can secure another position.”

Two young faces looked up and shook their heads in disagreement. “No!”

PENROSE STUDIED the two tiny anxious girls in front of him. So these were the children that might have been his, had Eleanor chosen him instead of Bedford years ago. He stopped his thoughts from wandering in that direction. He’d gotten over the defection of the lovely Lady Eleanor, but found it ironic that it was he who would raise her daughters, see them presented to Society, and married. *Life takes interesting twists and turns.*

Miss Chambers presented a whole other issue. Although pretty in a common sort of way, with her huge blue eyes and less than tidy golden blonde hair, her inability to handle the most minor directives to his wards did not bode well. In fact, it appeared he was about to face a mutiny before he’d even had the chance to speak to the young minxes.

“So you do possess faces. And voices.”

“Girls, curtsy to His Grace.”

Studying him with suspicion, they did a quick bob, then took the chair next to Miss Chambers. The older girl studied her lap, and the younger one began to chew on her fingernail.

Penrose’s gaze shifted to Miss Chambers, who had the grace to blush.

“They’re not usually this shy, Your Grace, but it has been a difficult month for them.”

“Take your finger from your mouth.” The order, coming out a bit stronger than he’d intended, had two sets of young eyes peering at him in terror.

“Young ladies do not chew on their fingers or speak to their shoes.” He shifted his gaze to Lady Charlotte. “And girls who will one day be presented to the queen do not mumble or refuse to look in the face of the person addressing them.”

Both girls returned to staring at the floor.

Penrose sighed. “Miss Chambers.”

The woman raised her chin, eyes flashing, and regarded him. “Yes, *Your Grace.*”

He chose to ignore the sarcasm in her voice. “I would be remiss in my duties as guardian to allow you to continue to supervise their activities. It is

clear to me you have no control over them. They do not possess even a hint of good manners, and certainly not the demeanor required of their station.” He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to speak.

“As I mentioned before, you will be permitted to remain here at Penrose Hall for a week or two until the girls are settled in. I will be more than generous, so you will be able to take time in securing a new position.” He slid off the desk, and moved to return to his chair.

“Wait just a minute, *Your Grace*.”

Penrose came to an abrupt stop. No one in his life had ever addressed him with such derision. And to think it came from a governess. Horror gripped him as he swung around. “You are an American!”

Miss Chambers stood. “Yes. I am an American. And you, *Your Grace*, are an arrogant Englishman.”

Blood rushed to his face, his heart thumping at the insolence. Then, without thought, he threw his head back and roared with laughter. This sprite of a woman—this *American*—had just insulted him as no other in his entire life. Used to bowing and scraping from his peers, and flirting and admiration from women, he felt as though someone had opened a window and let in fresh air. However, as amused as he was at her behavior, she would still have to go. His charges needed a good, English governess to bring them to right.

“Miss Chambers, I will overlook your outburst and attribute it to your lack of proper upbringing. Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare are in dire need of direction that you apparently have not provided. As grateful as I am that you took them under your wing when their parents died suddenly, I must insist on you leaving them into the care of the governess I have secured for them who will arrive on the morrow. Once your presence is no longer needed to secure the cooperation of my wards, you will be released.”

He walked to the far right corner of the room and pulled the bell. Miss Chambers studied him as they waited for the servant he’d summoned. Within minutes, a young nursery maid entered the room and bobbed. “*Your Grace*?”

“See that Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare are settled. I believe Miss Chambers has been assigned the room adjoining theirs for the time being.” His arms crossed, he looked at the woefully inadequate governess. “The young ladies will have dinner in the nursery. I will expect you to present yourself in the drawing room at precisely eight o’clock to join myself, my brother, Lord Brandon, and my mother, the Duchess of Penrose, for dinner.”

With that command, he strode from the room.

MERRY TOOK a deep breath to keep from racing after the prig and giving him a piece of her mind. *Lack of proper upbringing*, indeed. Duke or no duke, Penrose was arrogant, condescending, and contemptuous. He'd frightened the girls and affected a most unpleasant welcome. She glanced at them still huddled together in the large chair.

"Come, let's get settled in the nursery, and see what fine books and toys are there."

Charlotte and Clare stood and took her hands. The trio followed the maid out the door and up the stairs. Wherever the contemptuous man had gotten off to, she didn't see him the entire trip. And a trip it was. Even though her former employers, Lord and Lady Bedford, had an impressive home, this dwelling put it to shame. It would take her weeks to learn all the hallways, wings and sections of the place. Except, she reminded herself, the *lord of the manor* would be tossing her out on her arse in a week or two.

She sighed. Charlotte and Clare had been her charges for five years, and leaving them in someone else's care troubled her. They'd been a mere one and three when Lord and Lady Belford hired her during their trip to America. Their nanny had succumbed to a fever, and Merry was only too happy to leave her home behind, where all the young men who had paid her addresses had married elsewhere.

As the daughter of a professor, she'd been educated beyond the expectations of most young ladies, and in fact, most men as well. Although the young bucks who attempted to court her were charming, they lacked the spark she desired in a lifetime mate.

She'd spent hours discussing books, plays and music with her father. Proud of her sharp mind, he'd taught her philosophy, economics, history, and languages. She'd picked up French and German quickly. A duck out of water in her circle of female friends, who only conversed about the latest gossip, gowns, and young men, the chance to travel to England shortly after her father passed away seemed her salvation. At one and twenty, it had been time for a new direction.

"Miss, this is the nursery. If you will follow me, I'll show you to your chamber next door." The young maid swung open the door to a brightly colored schoolroom. Small wooden tables and chairs took up the center of the room. A bookcase lined the walls, with puzzles, games and slates stacked on

the shelves. On the far side of the room, a door led to what appeared to be a sleeping chamber.

The girls left her side for the first time since they'd alighted from the carriage earlier, hurrying to discover the wonders of the bookshelves.

"I'm going to get settled in my bedchamber, which is right alongside this one." Merry addressed the girls, amused to see they barely acknowledged her as they flipped through books and pulled out puzzles.

The governess's room was as large as the nursery. Blue and white striped silk covered the walls, broken up by windows on two of the four walls, bathing the area in bright sunlight. A large canopied bed with a flowered quilt and numerous pillows caught her eye as she viewed the room. Her shoes sank into plush carpet. The huge fireplace stood cold, causing her to run her hands up and down her arms against the chill.

"I'll light a fire for you right away, miss," the young maid assured her.

"Thank you. That will be nice."

Merry wandered about the room, examining the dressing table and chair, the empty wardrobe, and more bookcases filled with books. Penrose might be an overbearing brute, but the family certainly took very good care of their governesses. Well, no matter, she wouldn't be here long. Since the new governess was due to arrive tomorrow, this would probably be Merry's only night in this splendid room.

Her stomach clenched as she recalled the conversation with the duke. He obviously held little regard for Americans. Well, this American was not going to bow and scrape. Let her English counterparts do that. She sniffed. The aristocracy meant nothing to her. Her previous employers had allowed leniency in their daughters' upbringing, and having them now subjected to all the mores and strictures of Polite Society almost brought her to tears.

MERRY SAT on the floor of the nursery, legs crossed, Charlotte and Clare on either side of her, the three heads bent over the storybook Merry read. This was her favorite time of the day, when dinner was over, the girls washed and dressed for bed, and an engrossing story holding them hostage until time to sleep.

A maid had come to assist her to dress for dinner earlier, but she told the girl she would eat with her charges, and would not be joining the duke's family in the dining room.

“And the prince charming swept her into his strong arms, and twirled her around the dance floor. ‘Will you marry me, my princess?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ she responded, much to his delight.”

She paused for effect, then sighed. “After the royal wedding, they lived happily ever after.” She gently closed the book. “The end.”

“I like that story,” Clare said as she rubbed her eyes.

“Me, too,” Charlotte added, dreamy-eyed. “One day I will meet a prince charming, who will twirl me around the ballroom.”

Her younger sister nodded, enthralled with Charlotte’s dream.

“I will wear the most beautiful gown, with matching—”

Merry jerked her head up as the door to the nursery flew open and slammed against the wall. Like the wrath of God, the Duke of Penrose stood in the doorway, fire in his eyes, his hands fisted at his sides.

“Miss Chambers, I *ordered* you to join my family for dinner.”

CHAPTER 2



Penrose couldn't believe his eyes. The termagant sat crossed-legged on the floor, her skirts halfway up her limbs, practically to her knees. The hair that had begun its descent earlier now fell in clumps around her shoulders. Miss Chambers hadn't changed from her travelling gown, and as one stockinged foot peeked out at him, she'd apparently removed her shoes. A total disgrace, and completely unacceptable as an influence on his wards.

"Now you've gone and frightened the girls again." She regarded him from her position on the floor, not making the effort to stand and re-arrange herself.

Penrose drew in a deep breath through his nostrils and attempted to soften his expression. It wouldn't do for the young girls to fear him, or he'd never be rid of Miss Chambers. "I apologize, ladies, I did not mean to startle you." His eyes shifted in the direction of the governess. "May I have a word with you, Miss Chambers? Outside." He turned on his heel and left the room.

He paced the corridor waiting for her to join him. Hands behind his back, he tried to calm himself. She was an American, the land of savages. It would bode him well to remember that in his dealings with the woman. Why his friend, and, of all people, Lady Eleanor, had seen fit to allow Miss Chambers anywhere near their daughters was a mystery.

Finally, she stepped from the doorway, her hair pinned up, and his quick glance at her feet showed she'd put on her shoes as well. At least the woman had a smidgen of dignity.

"Is there a problem, Your Grace?" She stiffened her shoulders and regarded him.

"The problem, madam, is I instructed you to join my family tonight for

dinner. At exactly eight o'clock." He withdrew his pocket watch. "It is now sixteen minutes past eight. And my maid tells me you informed her you already took your dinner with the young ladies."

"Correct. They are trying to get used to their new environment. I felt it would be in their best interests for me to forego a formal dinner with your family tonight, and spend the time with the girls."

"Whether that was a good decision or not is irrelevant since I requested you join us."

"Ah, Your Grace. That is where the problem lies. You see, you did not *request* that I join your family. As you stated a few moments ago, you *ordered* me to join you."

His eyebrows rose. "What is the difference?"

Miss Chambers sighed. "Exactly."

"What the devil does that mean? You are speaking in riddles, madam." He bent close to peer directly into her eyes. "I will allow this one bit of defiance, as it might have been wiser for you to share their dinner tonight." He rose to his full height. "However, in the future, I will decide what will be done with the young ladies, and you, Miss Chambers, will abide by my wishes as long as you are under my roof."

By God, it actually looked as though she fought to keep from smiling. The woman had managed to rile him up more than anyone else in his life thus far. Not wishing to give her any more time to vex him further, he pivoted and strode down the corridor.

MERRY RETURNED TO THE NURSERY. Neither girl had moved an inch. Charlotte stared at her lap, and Clare chewed on her fingernail, her other hand busy twirling a lock of hair that had come loose from her braid.

"Does the duke dislike us?" Charlotte asked.

Merry smoothed back the young girl's hair. "No, of course not. The duke was your father's dear friend. Most likely he is not used to young ladies."

"He sure doesn't like you, Miss Merry." Clare mumbled.

"It is not that he doesn't like me, exactly. He wants what's best for you, and we disagree on what that is."

"Will he really make you leave?" Charlotte studied her with wide eyes.

"All right, girls. I think we've had enough conversation about the duke. It's past your bedtime, and we're all tired from our trip today. Let's say our

prayers and off to bed with you.”

THE DUCHESS OF PENROSE, known as Kitty to her close friends and family, glanced up from her place on the settee in the drawing room as her son entered. Eyes flashing, his body held rigid, he extended his arm to her. She rose and laid her hand on his arm, then they walked toward the dining room.

“Are we not waiting for Miss Chambers?”

He glared in her direction. “She will not be joining us this evening.”

Lord Brandon, her younger son, chortled. “Don’t tell me Miss Chambers has defied your edict?” As they settled in their places, he reached for his glass of wine, drained it, and held it out toward a footman.

“She has already taken dinner with her charges. I’m afraid you will all need to wait until tomorrow to make her acquaintance.”

“What? She didn’t grovel at your feet and scurry down here to do your bidding?” Lord Brandon’s eyes danced with mirth. “I am truly anxious to meet this woman.”

“She’s an American,” Penrose said through tightened lips, as though that explained it all.

“How very interesting.” Kitty took a piece of roasted salmon from the serving plate the footman held. “I wonder what possessed Lord Bedford to hire a foreigner?”

“When he and Eleanor visited the colonies a few years ago, their nanny caught a fever and died. I imagine they must have felt quite desperate to engage the likes of Miss Chambers.”

“Is she that bad?”

“Remarkably unsuitable. She has no sense of propriety, no appreciation for the world the girls will enter in a few short years. She’s opinionated, stubborn and impertinent.” He took a deep breath and attacked his food.

“Well. She has certainly gotten under *your* skin.” Kitty smiled at the pique she rarely saw in her always-in-control eldest son.

“Nonsense. The woman doesn’t trouble me at all. In any event, she’ll be leaving soon.”

“Leaving? Has she another position already?” Lord Brandon pushed away his half eaten dinner and signaled for more wine.

Penrose glared at his brother’s actions. “Not that it is necessary to keep you apprised of my decisions, but to quell any curiosity on your part, Miss

Chambers has a week or two to see the girls settled into their new routine. At that point I will give her a stipend sufficient enough to tide her over until such time as she can secure a new situation.”

“Dear, do you suppose the girls will feel secure enough in that short period of time? I believe you told me this governess has been with the family for some time now.”

“Don’t concern yourself, Mother. Now let us enjoy our dinner with a more pleasant topic.”

Kitty smiled behind her wine glass. Whatever or whoever this Miss Chambers was, she’d gotten more of a reaction from Penrose than anyone she’d ever seen. At four and thirty, her son, very much *the duke*, kept his feelings and emotions well hidden. Even as a child, he’d been like his father, pompous and haughty, always aware of his station. She’d been waiting for years to see a crack in that armor, and it seems a cheeky American governess was the one to do it.

Yes, she definitely would need to meet Miss Chambers, and as quickly as possible. She took another sip of her wine and listened to Lord Brandon and Penrose argue over her younger son’s latest escapade.

THE NEXT MORNING Merry summoned a maid to help her dress. After assuring the girls were busy with their meal under the watchful eye of the nursery maid, she left with instructions on how to find the breakfast room. She could probably wander around a bit and get there, but with her luck she would run into the duke who would find another reason to chastise her. What a stiff-necked man. Lord Bedford had been warm and friendly, Lady Bedford the same. But this man—this aristocrat—embodied everything she disliked of the upper crust.

She and Lord and Lady Bedford had agreed the girls would enjoy a carefree childhood. In a few years Lady Charlotte would begin preparations for her coming out, but until then the girls enjoyed the activities all young children should be allowed to engage in.

Once she arrived outside the breakfast room, Merry took a deep breath to quell her thumping heartbeat, then slowly opened the door. The duke sat at the head of the table, with a plate filled with kippers, eggs, fruit, toast and bacon steaming in front of him. A folded newspaper was positioned at his elbow. Aside from him, the room was empty. Her stomach tightened.

He rose at her entrance. "Miss Chambers. I hope you had a comfortable night's sleep."

"Yes, Your Grace. The governess's room is quite comfortable, a lovely room. Quite pleasing and cheerful. Shall I be vacating it today? Is this not the day the new governess arrives?" Good heavens, she was babbling. One look from those penetrating eyes and all rational thought left her head.

Penrose held out a chair for her, and after she slid into it, he returned to his seat. "Why don't we enjoy our breakfast, and then we will discuss the plans for the day?"

An older woman swept into the room, nodded at the duke who stood as a footman pulled out a chair. She sat across from Merry. "You must be Miss Chambers."

The duke regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Mother, I haven't seen you at the breakfast table in quite a while."

The woman dismissed him with a flick of her fingers. "I rose early and decided to join the family." She turned her attention to Merry, ignoring Penrose's stare.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Miss Chambers."

"It's Your Grace" Penrose said.

"I am the Duchess of Penrose, and I am delighted to meet you." She cast a bright smile and glanced in the direction of the duke who regarded her through slitted eyes.

The duchess was pale where Penrose was dark, her features striking rather than pretty. The enthusiasm in her expression brought beauty to her face. A light fragrance had emanated from her as she'd moved from the door to her seat, settling in comfortably. After what Merry had witnessed of the duke thus far, it was hard to reconcile this lovely, charming woman as his mother.

Merry sighed in relief. At least the entire family wasn't as arrogant as the duke. "And it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace."

"Ho. It appears our little governess has deigned to join us this morning." A man, perhaps a few years younger than the duke, but bearing him a striking resemblance nevertheless, strode into the room. He stopped before Merry, bowed slightly before taking her hand, and raising it slowly to his mouth as he stared into her eyes, kissed it. "I am Lord Brandon Worthington, brother, and unworthy heir apparent, to Penrose. At your service." He winked at her and moved to the sideboard to fill his plate.

“Another surprise visit at the breakfast table,” Penrose mumbled.

“My dear,” the young man spoke as he took the chair next to Merry, “I am delighted you are with us. You must tell me all about America. Is it true the savages run amok, killing people at will?”

Her smile vanished. The misconceptions she’d run into during her years in England amazed her. She thought of Boston, with its maze of streets, hundreds of shops, as much a bustling city, if perhaps a bit smaller, than London.

“No, my lord, the savages do not kill at random. In fact, I come from Boston, which is a thriving city, even more so since we drove out your Redcoats.”

The duke’s head jerked up, his lips tightening. Lord Brandon choked on a bit of food, and the duchess grinned.

“Miss Chambers, you are indeed a breath of fresh air,” the duchess said, patting her lips with a serviette. “I shall enjoy meals all the more in the days to come.”

“When you are through entertaining my family, perhaps you will join me in the library?” The duke addressed Merry as he stood, and then turned on his heel, not waiting for her reply.

Indeed, why would he wait for my response?

Merry decided to eat her breakfast as slowly as possible.

KITTY’S GAZE followed her son as he left the room. Yes, the young woman definitely rattled him. For years she’d watched him view the world from his self-imposed tower. Women had fallen at his feet practically since he was out of leading strings. He’d treated them all the same. With respect, and a bit of condensation. The mamas of unmarried *ton* daughters chased him down shamelessly, which resulted in his avoidance of London during the Season.

She noted Miss Chambers and Lord Brandon as they conversed about horses, about which Miss Chambers was quite knowledgeable. The girl was very pretty. Soft blonde curls resting against her face brought creaminess to her skin. A light blush on her cheeks and full red lips gave her just enough color. Her son could certainly do a lot worse.

Once Lady Eleanor had surprised them all, and accepted Bedford years ago, Penrose had taken himself off the market, and named Lord Brandon his heir. Kitty was never sure if Penrose’s feelings had been so engaged with

Lady Eleanor, or his pride merely stung. Her son didn't like to lose. And when he'd told her younger son he expected him to marry and produce the heirs to the dukedom, Kitty had been enraged.

As much as she loved both her offspring, Brandon did not possess a single attribute to be a duke. Penrose was born and bred into the role, and only *his* son would be an acceptable heir. But her stubborn eldest refused to listen to reason, and instead attempted to make Brandon into the sort of man he could never be. This American woman might very well be his unknown salvation, and Kitty's dream come true.

Penrose needed to be shaken up, challenged. Everyone deferred to him, did his bidding without thought. As lovely as Lady Eleanor had been, she would never have been an acceptable mate for him. Too blasé and conciliatory, he would have despised her weakness after a few years.

But this woman, who apparently had a mind of her own, would have him dancing to her tune. Not right away, of course. Arrogance was too deeply bred in her son for a sudden change. But change he would.

"We shall arrange for a mount while you are visiting us." Brandon wiped his mouth and leaned back in his chair.

"Oh, thank you, but I need to spend my time here with the girls."

"The duke has hired another governess, I understand, which should leave you with quite a bit of free time."

"I certainly appreciate the offer, Lord Brandon, but if I'm to help the girls with the transition to a new governess, I won't have time for much else."

He shrugged. "Nonsense. Even though my older brother is an ogre, I doubt even he would object to you taking a half hour or so to ride. We shall plan to venture out each morning before breakfast. Certainly he doesn't expect you to begin your duties at the crack of dawn."

"If I am able to obtain his permission, I will be more than happy to accompany you on a ride."

Kitty regarded them with pursed lips.

PENROSE STRODE BACK and forth in front of the fireplace, his anger growing. Where the devil was the woman? All she had on her plate was a piece of toast. How long did it take to eat that? He checked his timepiece again. Almost twenty-five minutes since he left the breakfast room with instructions for her to attend him in the library.

Just as he moved to ring the bell to have a servant summon her, the door opened and Miss Chambers floated in like a queen ready to address her subjects. However did an American develop the haughtiness the aristocracy took generations of breeding to achieve?

Her blue and white striped morning gown hugged her figure a little too well for his comfort. Although he had to admit she presented an inviting picture, he knew the minute she opened her mouth, the image would shatter like so much broken glass.

“Miss Chambers. Please take a seat.” He motioned to one of the chairs in front of the fireplace, and sat across from her.

She smoothed her skirts over her plump derrière and sat. Fascinated at the movement, he didn’t realize he stared until she addressed him.

“Your Grace?”

What was the matter with him? He mentally shook himself and cleared his throat. “I think it would do us well to outline your duties regarding my wards so there is no confusion when the new governess arrives.”

She dipped her head slightly.

Expecting an argument of sorts, he found himself at a loss as to how to go on. He jumped up and leaned an elbow on the fireplace mantle. “Miss Sarah Jennings will arrive today. She will take over the duties you’ve held until now. The girls need to be instructed in appropriate decorum, how to conduct themselves in Society, and the proper forms of address.”

He clasped his hands behind his back, and staring at the carpet, paced in front of her. “It’s obvious their education to this point has been seriously lacking. Why Lord and Lady Bedford saw fit to allow such behavior on the part of their daughters will always remain a mystery to me. However, that will end today...” He glanced at Miss Chambers, who had risen from her seat, hands fisted at her sides, her face flushed a bright red.

“How dare you!”

Penrose stiffened his shoulders, his eyes wide. “I beg your pardon.”

“You should. Beg my pardon, that is.” She rested her hands on her hips. “You are the most pompous man I have ever met.”

“Madam, please remember to whom you are speaking.”

“Excuse me? I know precisely to whom I am speaking. Lord and Lady Bedford understood the importance of a happy childhood for their daughters. They allowed them freedom, the opportunity to be little children.” She raised her chin. “Despite what you think of me, I do know the importance of the

station Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare were born into.

“Despite your obvious disdain for Americans, we do have manners, and treat *all* people with respect. Not just a chosen few who demand respect for no other reason than the circumstances of their birth.”

She took a deep breath, obviously attempting to gain control. Her voice softened. “I also understand they will need to be taught how to conduct themselves. And, perhaps with my limited knowledge of your world, *Your Grace*, I am indeed not the best person to continue with governess duties. But I will not allow you to malign their wonderful parents who loved their girls very much, and wanted the best for them.”

As if all the air in her let out, she collapsed into a chair in front of the fireplace, and touched the corner of her eyes with her knuckle.

Is she crying?

Penrose returned to his seat behind the desk, allowing Miss Chambers time to compose herself. After a minute or two, she rose and joined him. The tip of her nose was bright red, as were her cheeks. Tears clumped on her eyelashes. She looked barely older than her charges. “Please excuse my outburst.”

He raised his eyebrows. The last thing he expected from her was an apology. Deciding to be gracious, he bowed his head. “I fail to understand Lord and Lady Bedford’s reasoning, but I didn’t mean to distress you. If I did, then I also apologize.”

A slight smile tilted her lips. “You say that as though you seldom offer apologies.”

“I rarely find it necessary to do so.” He smiled back at her, annoyed that her smile lit up her countenance so, turning a pretty face into a beautiful one. Small lines at the edges of her eyes crinkled, making him wonder at her age. Obviously out of the school room for years, he couldn’t help but dwell on her lack of a husband.

Although he found her brash and outspoken, her beauty and feminine curves had definitely caught his attention. And that little bit of vulnerability when she cried over her employers had touched his heart. The heart he’d had under lock and key for years now, ever since Lady Eleanor had spurned his suit and chose Bedford as her husband.

He and Bedford had both danced attendance on the young debutante for the Season. She’d been named an Incomparable that year, and no one was more surprised than him when she decided on an earl instead of a duke. In

retrospective, he often wondered how they would have gone on, had they married. Certainly her strange ideas on raising her daughters would have become a point of contention between them. But then, it would have been his decision in the end, anyway.

A knock at the door drew both their attentions.

A footman stood in the doorway. “Your Grace, Miss Sarah Jennings has arrived. Shall I send her in?”

Penrose glanced at Miss Chambers. “The new governess. I would prefer to speak with her alone, at first. If you would please leave us, and wait in the drawing room, I will summon you when needed.”

A bright smile lit up her face. “An apology and *please* all in the same morning. This must be a record for you, Your Grace.” She dipped into a slight curtsy and left the room just as the new governess entered.

CHAPTER 3



Penrose eyed the woman the footman ushered in. He nodded in approval. Here was someone, who by her presentation alone, would be much better for Lord Bedford's daughters than the vixen who'd arrived with them.

Definitely of an age considered 'on the shelf,' Miss Jennings marched into the room, her spine as stiff as a board. Her high buttoned gown, severe knot, and no nonsense attitude reassured him of the agency's choice. He couldn't imagine for one minute this woman allowing her charges to stare at the floor in the presence of a duke.

"Your Grace," she curtsied gracefully.

"Miss Jennings," he nodded. "Please take a seat."

Penrose picked up the paper in front of him and perused it. "You come with high recommendations."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

He leaned back, and cupped his chin with his thumb and index finger, resting his elbow on the arm of the chair. "Your charges are my wards, Lady Charlotte Spencer and Lady Clare Spencer. They are the daughters of Lord and Lady Bedford, who passed away recently. The girls are eight and six years of age."

She nodded.

He pushed his chair back and stood.

"I'm afraid the young ladies have not been schooled in proper etiquette or demeanor thus far. I would say your arrival is most timely." He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded her. "The woman who has been their governess for the past five years is an American."

Miss Jennings sniffed.

“My thoughts exactly. Lord Bedford was my close friend, but for a strange reason, he and Lady Bedford allowed their daughters to run amok, with Miss Chambers—their present governess—their leader.”

Miss Jennings tsked.

“I expect you to school the girls in feminine pursuits, preparing for their station in life, and eventual marriage to a peer. In my estimation, at the present time the girls are only prepared to marry a chimney sweep.”

Miss Jennings shook her head, her lips pursed.

Penrose returned to his seat. “I have agreed to allow their present governess to remain, for a brief time, in order to help my wards adjust to their new surroundings.” He leaned forward. “However, I wish to make it perfectly clear that you are to supervise their daily routine, and Miss Chambers is to hold no further influence over them.”

Miss Jennings inclined her head in acquiescence.

“Do you have any questions?”

“None, Your Grace. I will take charge immediately so the poor young dears can start on the correct path.”

The duke nodded. “Then I will ring for someone to show you to your chamber.” He crossed the room and rang for a servant.

Miss Jennings stood as a young maid entered.

“Escort Miss Jennings to the governess’s room. If Miss Chambers has not yet been relocated elsewhere, do so immediately. Also, Miss Chambers awaits me in the drawing room. Tell her I am ready to see her.”

The girl bobbed. “Yes, Your Grace.” She addressed Miss Jennings. “If you will follow me, miss, I’ll accompany you to the nursery.”

Miss Jennings turned to the duke. “Your Grace, I am pleased to be here, and sure we can undo whatever damage the American has done to the poor little girls.” Two bright spots rose on her cheeks, and her long nose twitched. Straightening her already stiff shoulders, she exited the room.

Penrose moved to a chair in front of the blazing fireplace, waiting for Miss Chambers. After several minutes, a footman entered the room.

“Your Grace, the downstairs maid indicated you wished to receive Miss Chambers. However, she is not in the drawing room.”

“Not there?” Where the devil did she hie off to now? He distinctly told her to wait there to be summoned. “Have you any idea where she is?”

“Cook said she went out the back door a bit ago, with the young ladies, and appeared to be heading to the gardens.”

The duke frowned, his jaw tightening. "Thank you. That will be all."

The woman dared to defy him again? He slammed his chair back and strode from the room. This situation would not continue. His long legs ate up the distance through the house and out the back door to the garden. Cook jumped in surprise when he sailed past, not having seen him in the kitchen since he'd outgrown his short pants.

Off in the distance, Miss Chambers, Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare strolled along, hand in hand. They chatted, livelier than he'd seen them until now. Just the sight of her meandering along, without a care in the world, had his heart thumping. They stopped and examined one of his mother's prized Winter Jasmine plants. Miss Chambers pointed excitedly as she spoke to the girls.

"Miss Chambers." The voice that had caused grown men to shake in their boots reached the wanderers. All three turned. Their joyful expressions collapsed.

"Did I not tell you to await my summons in the drawing room?"

"How pleasant to see you in the gardens, Your Grace. Perhaps you would like to wish a good morning to your wards?"

Penrose jerked at the distinct reprimand in her voice. Good God, the woman had audacity. To think she'd taken him to task. He opened his mouth with a rejoinder, and glanced at the two girls clinging to Miss Chamber's skirts. The younger one slipped her finger into her mouth and began to chew on the nail. Both looked up at him, eyes wide in terror.

This would not do. The woman caused him to upset the girls again. Drawing in a deep breath, he attempted to put a smile on his face. "Good morning, Lady Charlotte, Lady Clare."

"Answer His Grace," Miss Chambers urged.

They buried their faces deeper. Helplessly, he glanced at Miss Chambers, who regarded him with raised eyebrows. His blood pounded through his body, no doubt a precursor to the apoplexy she would soon cause him.

"Miss Chambers," he began.

"Yes, Your Grace." She smiled at him as if in possession of a great secret.

"Miss Jennings, the new governess will now be in charge of the young ladies' daily routine. I demand, no, *request*, you to escort them to the nursery so they may make her acquaintance."

"Very good, Your Grace." She smirked and turned the girls toward the house.

What the devil did that mean? Was she obeying his command, or complimenting him on his wording? If he didn't get Miss Chambers out of his house soon, he would be a candidate for Bedlam.

Penrose inhaled deeply to recover his control as he watched them return to the house. Miss Chamber's hips swayed gracefully beneath her pelisse, causing a different type of roaring blood to race through him. The creamy skin of her elegant neck begged to be kissed and nibbled. Wisps of golden hair teased her shoulders, released from the not-so-neat topknot. Even if his body recognized a beautiful, sensual woman, his mind put an immediate stop to that nonsense. The sooner she packed her bags and left, the better for his frame of mind. He shook his leg to adjust his breeches and followed them.

THE DUCHESS OF PENROSE greeted Merry as she started up the massive staircase with the girls. "Miss Chambers. When the young ladies are settled, may I have a word with you, please?"

Merry curtsied. "Of course, Your Grace."

"Excellent. I will be in the morning room. You may ask any of the staff to direct you."

What was that all about?

If she hadn't witnessed the woman's pleased expression and mirth-filled eyes, she would expect another dressing down. Whatever Her Grace had to say, it didn't appear to be of an unpleasant nature.

She and the girls chatted as they ascended the stairs and headed down the corridor. A patterned Brussels carpet underfoot silenced their journey. They passed through the main part of the house, and climbed another flight of stairs to where the nursery rooms were located. The girls grew quiet as they approached the end of the corridor.

Once more she had to almost drag them into the room to meet the new governess. Merry's heart bled for her charges. Prior to the carriage accident that had taken their parents so abruptly, they'd both been happy, lively young girls. After the tragedy, Merry comforted them, sang them to sleep, and held them when they sobbed. They had just reached a point where their normal exuberance for life had returned when the summons from the duke arrived, and the girls were yet again thrown into chaos.

Now they would be forced to accept a new governess, who from the look of her, had all the softness and warmth of an iceberg. Miss Jennings stood

erect, hands cupped together in front of her body as if she stood on a stage about to sing an aria. Her lips were pursed in disapproval, and her hair so tight it pulled her eyes back, giving her an oriental appearance.

The governess eyed the two girls, but her stare displayed a strong censure for Merry. Her dislike was palpable. Goodness, what had the duke told her that caused the woman to dislike her so upon sight?

“Miss Jennings?” Merry smiled, attempting to make this easier for her charges. Her stomach muscles clenched. Wrong. No longer her charges.

Miss Jennings inclined her head.

Merry decided not to extend her hand since the woman would probably view it as a breach of manners. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Indeed.”

The governess’s gaze scanned Merry from the top of her head to her shoes, tightening her lips all the while.

Merry felt her face flush. Who was this woman to judge her? Drawing herself up, Merry said, “May I introduce you to Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare.”

Both girls peered at Miss Jennings from Merry’s skirts.

“They are a bit overwrought at the moment. All the changes.”

Under Miss Jennings’ relentless gaze, Merry’s anger grew. “Perhaps if you read them a story to start, it would ease them a bit.”

Much to Merry’s amazement, Miss Jennings walked up to the girls and bent. “Would you like to hear a story? I see His Grace has plenty of books to choose from.”

“May Miss Merry read it to us?” Charlotte mumbled.

Miss Jennings smiled tightly. “Of course. Why don’t you both pick a book from the shelf, and Miss Merry and I will join you at the table.”

The girls released their grip and hurried to the bookcase. Miss Jennings turned to her. “Perhaps it would be of assistance if you read them a story. It’s important for them to adjust to my direction since His Grace wishes to make the transition quickly and smoothly.”

Merry nodded, the pain at losing her girls tugging at her. If she had not argued with the duke, perhaps he would have allowed her to remain their governess. But then she remembered he mentioned having engaged a new governess before she’d had a chance to even meet him. She sighed and wandered to the table, then pulled out one of the child-sized chairs and sat.

Two stories turned into four, but eventually the girls seemed to relax

enough to allow Merry to leave them in Miss Jennings's care. Merry assured them she would be in the house, and would join them for luncheon.

The young maid she summoned escorted her to the morning room. The duchess sat behind an escritoire, a stack of pressed paper at her elbow. The soft ticking of a delicate white and blue china clock on the corner of the desk was the only sound in the room.

As Merry entered, the duchess put her quill pen down and smiled. "Thank you so much for joining me, Miss Chambers."

Merry curtsied. Her Grace caused her to feel welcome, so unlike the duke, who made no secret he could hardly await her departure.

"Please, have a seat." The woman indicated a chair near the fireplace, where a low table held a teapot, flowered cups and saucers, and a plate of biscuits. Rising gracefully, she left her desk and joined Merry. The bright sunlight reflected off the rings on the woman's fingers as she poured tea. "Milk and sugar?"

"Yes, please." Merry studied her, wondering the reason for this meeting. The duchess was as cordial as she was graceful. Her startling blue eyes looked out from a face that had seen a few years, but still remained youthful in its expression. Her dark brown hair, sprinkled with gray, gave her countenance a mature loveliness.

The duchess sipped her tea, and closed her eyes, relishing the bracing liquid. "No doubt you wonder why I asked to see you."

"Yes, Your Grace."

The older woman leaned forward, placing her cup on the table. "I'm sure you've discovered by now that my son, the duke, is a bit pompous."

Merry choked on her tea, and coughed until tears ran down her cheeks. Of all the things she'd imagined the duchess would begin the conversation with, this was not one of them.

"Well, Your Grace, he is a duke." She patted her mouth with a snowy serviette and set it alongside her cup.

The duchess gestured with her hand. "Nonsense. His father was the same way. Always thinking everyone should fall at his feet and tremble with fear at his mere presence." She glanced at Merry and smiled. "It took me a few years, but I brought him around." Looking off into the distance, she mused. "Life among the *ton* can be difficult. My husband and I had an arranged marriage. I must admit, at the beginning he did frighten me. I was a young girl, barely out of the schoolroom, and he was Penrose's age now, two and

thirty.”

The duchess brought her attention back to Merry. “We eventually fell in love. He was such a handsome man. Penrose takes after his father with the swarthy skin, dark hair, and deep brown eyes. I was the envy of so many of the young girls that year. He was considered quite the catch, you know.

“Our two sons were our greatest joy, and I was unfashionable enough to want to spend time with them. When they were young, my husband would roll on the floor with the boys, playing games and being silly. But, when Penrose reached an age where his father felt it was time to train him for his station in life, all the games and fun ceased.”

She sighed. “I’m afraid the late duke did too good of a job. Penrose has become much too stiff. He needs to be shaken up a bit.”

Merry listened, unsure of the woman’s intentions in relating this story.

“No doubt you’re wondering why I’m speaking thusly.” The duchess seemed to read her mind. “I think you bring a breath of fresh air to Penrose Hall. I’m not happy that my son wishes to send you on your way. I also think the girls would feel much more comfortable with you in residence.”

The woman certainly had her attention now. Her heart sped up in anticipation of what would come next. “What are you saying, Your Grace?”

“Why, I want you to remain with us.” She raised her hand when Merry opened her mouth to speak. “Not as charity, of course. What I am asking is if you would consider accepting a position as my companion.”

Merry’s smile grew as she considered the idea. To be near the girls, continue to watch them grow into women. Something that up until a few minutes ago, seemed far beyond her reach. To not have the need to seek another position, possibly not as satisfying as this one had been. Then her stomach clenched, and a cloud passed overhead. *The duke.*

“While the situation you offer is most appealing, I doubt very much that His Grace would approve.”

The duchess raised her chin. “I make the decisions as to whatever staff I chose to engage. I retain my own funds, so Penrose has no say in how I spend it. If I wish to employ you as my companion, then that’s precisely what I shall do.

“Think,” she urged, “you will see the girls daily. It will be so much easier for them to adjust to the life my son is preparing them for with you nearby. I have not met this Miss Jennings, but knowing Penrose as I do, I can well imagine what she is like.”

Merry didn't answer, but smiled her agreement. "I would be honored to act as your companion, Your Grace."

"Then, if you accept, it is settled." The duchess rose and moved to the bell cord. After a few minutes, a footman appeared and bowed.

"Maxwell, please see that Miss Chamber's things are moved from the nursery wing and placed in the room across the hall from my apartments."

The duchess returned to the chair and picked up her tea cup. "We will have such good times."

Merry smiled. "I hope so, Your Grace."

"From now on, you must call me Kitty. It is how my family and friends address me, and I hope you and I will be friends." The glint in her eyes said a great deal more than Merry was comfortable with.

CHAPTER 4



That afternoon, after returning from a visit to a tenant, Penrose drew on the reins of his horse, Tafoya, and rested his hands on his thighs as he observed his estate. Being up high like this, above his land, always gave him a sense of flying, of freedom. The weight of his title rested heavily on his shoulders today, more so than usual. Many times over the years he had wanted to throw it all off, and like his brother, just go about enjoying life with no accountability, no restrictions.

Now he had the added responsibility of two young girls who needed guidance into womanhood. He had no doubt Miss Jennings would see to their training, but he needed to encourage his mother to take them under her wing as well, to provide the gentle hand all young girls needed. It was certainly unfortunate that Miss Chambers was such a poor influence on them. The children certainly seemed attached to her.

His chest tightened. Never in his life had he met a woman who'd gotten under his skin as the American did. Women were supposed to be soft, gentle, and defer to men's wishes and commands. In return, ladies received security and protection from men. Those tenets had been drilled into him since childhood. Then along came Miss Chambers with her soft, sensual body, creamy skin, and outlandish impertinence.

When she left the garden earlier, those plump lips smiling at what he thought was a joke on him, he wanted to snatch her back and kiss her senseless. Show her who was in charge, run his hands over those delicious curves.

He brought himself up sharp. It appeared Miss Chamber's quick departure would be best for more than one reason.

Reluctantly, he returned to the stable, his time of freedom behind him. His steward was to meet with him, and then his solicitor had sent word there were papers he still needed to sign to present to the court for the girls' guardianship.

His heart warmed at the sight of Penrose Hall rising before him as he approached from the winding path. Built from stone over one hundred years before, the home he loved always bolstered his spirits when he returned. Now with the sun dipping below the slate roof, an ethereal glow surrounded it, creating even more of a welcome.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace." Ballard, the stable master, tugged on his forelock as Penrose dismounted.

He nodded at the man. "Tafoya needs more exercise. Have him ready for me in the morning—say seven o'clock. I'm going to try to work in a ride each day."

"Will ye be joining the others, then?"

Penrose frowned. "What others?"

"Yore brother and the new lady."

"Lord Brandon is planning on riding in the mornings?" Penrose smiled and shook his head as he turned to head to the house. His younger brother rarely saw the light of day before noon. He came to an abrupt halt as the rest of the man's words penetrated his brain. "What lady?"

Ballard yanked the saddle off the horse. "That new one what's come with the little girls."

"Miss Chambers?"

"If that's her name. Don't think yore brother said."

Penrose strode away. Why would the governess be going for rides in the morning with Brandon? Of course with Miss Jennings taking over the girls' schedule, Miss Chambers would have time for a ride. Even with that justification, a sense of foreboding swept over him. She should be furiously writing letters to secure a new position. He needs remind her that her tenure here would soon come to an end.

"Have my brother join me in the library." Penrose tugged off his gloves and handed them to the footman at the door.

He crossed to a side table and poured brandy into a crystal glass. Swirling the amber liquid, Penrose settled behind his desk, noting he only had about fifteen minutes until his steward arrived for their meeting.

"I hear I've been summoned by The Duke." Brandon sauntered into the

library with the perennial smirk on his face and headed directly for the brandy.

Penrose waited until his brother lounged in the chair in front of his desk, glass in hand, before he spoke. "I understand you have decided to take early morning rides."

Brandon's eyebrows rose. "I'm flattered my comings and goings are of such interest to someone as overburdened as Your Grace."

Choosing to ignore the sarcasm, Penrose took a swallow of his drink. "I'm interested enough to wonder about the identity of the young lady accompanying you."

"Ah, Ballard has been talking again." Brandon stretched out his long legs. "Give over, Penrose, you already know it's Miss Chambers, so why the games?"

"I merely wish to warn you, Miss Chambers is a governess. A temporary one at that."

"Surely you don't begrudge the woman a mount?" Brandon crossed a booted foot over his other knee, swallowing the last of his brandy. He set the glass on the desk, disregarding Penrose's frown at the wet spot under the goblet. "As for her being short-lived, I suggest you seek out Mother for enlightenment." Brandon smirked and stood, then bowing slightly, quit the room.

Mother?

Unable to spare any more time to the mystery, Penrose retrieved ledgers from the bottom shelf of the bookcase, then flipped through the pages as he waited for his steward.

"BUT MISS MERRY always lets us go for a walk in the afternoon. She says it is part of our education." Charlotte stood with her back straight, arms crossed over her chest, a mulish expression on her face.

"Miss Chambers is no longer your governess. We will abide by my schedule which does not allow for strolls outdoors during regular schoolroom time." Miss Jennings raised her chin a notch, her face red.

"Lady Charlotte!" Merry entered the nursery in the midst of an apparent mutiny by her former charges.

Both girls hurried to her side, hugging her fiercely.

"Miss Jennings doesn't do things the right way. She won't let us go for a

walk.” Clare gazed up at Merry, tears rimming her eyes. She began to chew on her fingernail and rested her head along Merry’s hip.

“Miss Jennings is now your governess, and she will surely do things differently, pet.” She ran her fingers through the young girl’s silky curls. “But it’s part of your growth, and journey toward womanhood, to be exposed to other routines.” She bent and eyed Charlotte. “And I believe you owe Miss Jennings an apology for the way you spoke to her just now.”

The governess moved forward, lips in a thin line. “Thank you Miss Chambers, but I am capable of handling my charges.” She turned her attention to the girls, still clinging to Merry. “Ladies, you will write a composition on proper manners. I will expect to see the finished essay before dinner.”

Heat flooded Merry’s face at the dismissal. Was the woman purposely attempting to make Merry dislike her? Or was it just her nature to be so abrupt? Someone else besides the girls needed to do an essay on proper manners.

At a nudge from Merry, Charlotte mumbled “Please accept my apology, Miss Jennings.” The girls released Merry and trudged toward the table.

“Miss Chambers, may I speak with you outside, please?”

Merry gave her a curt nod and spun on her heel to leave the room. She waited on the other side of the doorway for Miss Jennings.

“I understand the young ladies have an attachment to you, however, now that I am in charge, I would appreciate you only coming to the nursery upon invitation. Perhaps you may join them for their afternoon tea each day.”

All manner of insulting words raced through Merry’s head, but realizing Miss Jennings only spoke the truth, albeit in a not very nice way, she merely nodded. “I apologize for disturbing you. I shall return for afternoon tea.”

“Not today,” Miss Jennings said.

Merry raised her eyebrows, afraid to open her mouth, lest her vicious thoughts spew forth.

“They are being punished for poor manners. Although, I don’t expect their manners to improve until they’ve had good *English* lessons on deportment.”

After a moment of stunned silence at the woman’s impudence, Merry asked, “Do you speak German, Miss Jennings?”

The woman’s eyes widened. “No, I do not. Every properly brought up young lady should know French and Italian. It is not necessary for one to

acquire knowledge of the more advanced languages.”

“Good. *Wünsche ein tausend Floh zum ihrem Bett kommen.*”

Leaving the confused governess not understanding Merry just wished her a thousand fleas in her bed, Merry hurried away from the nursery, taking gulps of air to control her anger.

She charged down the stairs, muttering to herself until she reached the bottom of the staircase, swung left, and walked into a brick wall.

Penrose grasped her by the arms to keep her from falling backwards. Merry yelped and tried to retreat, but he held her firm.

“Are you all right, Miss Chambers?”

She looked into those deep brown eyes, now full of concern. The hint of Bay rum and brandy drifted toward her. Plus another scent that she’d already identified as Penrose. Merry struggled to contain her emotions, and replied in a shaky voice, “I am perfectly well, thank you, Your Grace.”

He released her, still watching her with a guarded expression. With trembling fingers, she patted the sides and back of her hair, barely noticing it had almost fallen completely down again.

“You don’t look well. Your face is flushed, and your breathing is quite rapid.”

“I just came down the stairs too fast. If you will excuse me.” She shifted to go around him, but he stepped into her path.

“It’s more than you hurrying. Something has upset you.”

Reconciled to having this conversation, Merry drew back and crossed her arms, still shaken from her encounter with Miss Jennings. “I’m afraid my attachment to the girls is stronger than I realized.”

Then to her abject horror, she burst into tears.

Penrose placed his hand on her lower back and moved her toward the library. “Send some tea in, Jasper.” The footman standing at the door nodded and headed in the direction of the kitchen.

The duke drew a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Merry. He led her to a comfortable chair in front of the fireplace where she sobbed into the cloth. The anger and embarrassment of Miss Jennings’ set-down was nothing compared to the complete humiliation of succumbing to female hysterics before the duke. Sobbing like a schoolgirl, she cried for her dear friends who’d died too young, for the beautiful daughters they left behind, and for the sadness in the girls’ eyes when she left them at the nursery just now.

After a few minutes, her sobs turned to soft hiccups, as a tea tray was carried in and placed on the table before her. The duke, who sat in the chair across, eyed her carefully.

She peeked at him over the handkerchief wondering if she could run from the room without making a complete cake of herself.

“No, don’t leave. Have your tea, it will calm your nerves.” His deep voice, kinder than she’d heard thus far, soothed her, and then immediately put her on guard.

The man was a mind reader, or was it so easy to discern her thoughts? Merry took a deep breath and cleared her throat. “I apologize, Your Grace, for that outburst.”

He abruptly nodded and glanced at the teapot. Merry attempted to pour, but her shaking hands spilled the hot liquid over the tray. Penrose stilled her hand with his warm one, and took the teapot from her, pouring for both of them. “Milk and sugar?”

“Yes, please. Two lumps.” Her voice came out stuffy from crying. She must look a mess. With her fair skin, red blotches generally appeared on her face when she cried. Once again she attempted to smooth her hair, but gave up. She reached for her tea, and immediately felt calmer when the warm liquid slid down her throat. One thing the English had over the Americans, and that was their belief in the restorative powers of a cup of tea.

PENROSE STUDIED the woman alongside him. Despite her disheveled appearance, he was once again struck by her beauty. Tears gathered on her full eyelashes, giving her a waiflike look. Every once in a while, she took a shuddering breath, still attempting to get herself under control. White even teeth chewed on her lower lip. Lips he would love to cover with his own, then slide his tongue along the seam until she opened, allowing him to plunder the depths of her warm, sweet mouth.

What the devil is wrong with me? The woman is a termagant, and will, thankfully, be gone very soon.

“Perhaps you can visit with the young ladies more often until both they and you are ready to go your separate ways.”

Miss Chambers shook her head sadly. “Miss Jennings has set a new schedule, and I’m afraid their time with me is quite limited.”

“I shall speak with her. It will certainly benefit Lady Charlotte and Lady

Clare to have an easy, smooth transition.”

She reached out and touched his hand, then drew it back as if burned. “I prefer you do not, Your Grace. I don’t wish to cause problems.”

His skin tingled where her fingers had rested. Before he had time to consider that, a light tap on the partially opened door caught his attention.

“There you are. I wanted to speak with you, but since Miss Chambers is here as well, I can talk to you both at the same time.”

Penrose stood and waved his mother to his seat.

“Tea?” Miss Chambers asked.

“Yes, dear, that would be lovely.”

He moved to the fireplace, resting his arm on the mantle, waiting for his mother to continue.

“With it being the beginning of December, I would like to start preparations for our Christmas Eve ball.” She leaned closer to Miss Chambers. “We always have a lovely ball on Christmas Eve. We invite all the gentry in the county, and several peers who are within driving distance. It’s such fun. The decorations are a huge undertaking, but I engage a few of the tenants’ sons to accompany our footmen to gather greens and berries. Then their wives and daughters supply baked goods from ingredients made available to them. Some of them even help in the kitchen. But, Cook is very fussy as to whom she lets into her domain.” The duchess laughed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“That sounds lovely.” Miss Chambers’ blotches had faded, but now a flush of excitement decorated her cheeks.

“I don’t wish to dampen your spirits, Mother, but Miss Chambers will most likely be at her new post by Christmas.”

His mother’s eyes gaze slid from Miss Chambers to him. “No, dear. Miss Chambers will definitely be here for the Christmas Eve ball.”

Penrose raised his eyebrows. “Indeed? Am I mistaken that Christmas is more than four weeks away? Surely you don’t think it would take Miss Chambers longer than that to secure a new post?”

“Of course not. Miss Chambers already has already accepted a new situation.”

His gaze swung to the governess. “You already have a new position?”

“Yes, indeed,” the duchess beamed. “I’ve hired Miss Chambers—Merry as she’s asked me to call her—as my companion.”

His jaw tightened as he glared at Miss Chambers who shrugged and tilted

her lips in a slight smile.
The devil take it!

CHAPTER 5



Merry entered the drawing room to the sound of Miss Jennings, tittering. Everyone had already gathered to await the dinner announcement.

“Miss Chambers, would you care for a sherry before dinner?” Lord Brandon sauntered over to her. Dinner hadn’t even started, yet it was apparent he was already in his cups. Bloodshot eyes and a slight hesitation in his gait told the story.

“Thank you, no, my lord.”

Miss Jennings let out with another giggle at something the duke said. Merry glanced in her direction and swallowed a laugh. The woman wore a pink gown more suited to a young miss. Rosy cheeks on her otherwise sallow complexion grew as she flirted—there was no other word—with Penrose.

Heavens, where was the very proper governess who’d disparaged her? Merry’s gaze moved from the pink nightmare to His Grace. Her heart almost stopped. No man should be that handsome. His dark brown eyes above a strong jaw almost had her giggling like Miss Jennings. No padding had been necessary in the jacket that fit him like a glove, and his snug breeches outlined the taut muscles of his legs.

“They make quite a pair.” Lord Brandon leaned close to her ear, his brandy-laced breath wafting over her.

Merry started at his words, then chastised herself for staring. “Whatever do you mean?”

Lord Brandon smirked and sipped his drink. “I think Miss Jennings has her eye on my big brother. Although, with you in the room, I don’t see how the poor woman has a chance.”

Heat rose from her middle and shot up to her face. Scanning the room for something else to comment on to calm herself, she caught His Grace staring at her, his look so intent she thought perhaps she'd forgotten to put on her gown. Her face grew warmer.

"Excuse me. There is something I must discuss with your mother." She hurried away from Lord Brandon, the sound of his chuckle in her ear. Before she reached Kitty, speaking animatedly with a middle-aged man unknown to her, one of the footmen announced dinner.

"Here she is now, Lord Moreland." Kitty took the arm of the man and joined Merry. "Lord Moreland, I would like to introduce you to my companion, Miss Chambers. His lordship is one of our neighbors who occasionally grants us the pleasure of his company."

"Delighted," the man said, bowing slightly.

Merry curtsied. "A pleasure, my lord."

He extended his other arm to her, and she placed her hand there, and the three sauntered into the dining room. Miss Jennings had a firm grasp on His Grace's arm, and Lord Brandon viewed them over the rim of his glass as they quit the room. He winked at her as she moved past.

Once they'd settled into their places, footmen began pouring wine and serving the soup.

"Miss Chambers, am I to assume from your accent you are American?" Lord Moreland smiled at her as he raised his wine glass to his lips.

"Yes, my lord. I am from Boston."

"Sir, I must commend you on your astuteness," Miss Jennings said. "I believe Miss Chambers has tried, although unsuccessfully, to adopt proper English speech. 'Tis a shame my young charges have picked up some of her American vernacular."

Oblivious to the stunned silence following her words, she cast a smile at the duke, who frowned, then glanced at Merry.

Is he frowning because the girls are worse off than he thought?

She swallowed her annoyance as Lord Brandon leaned toward her. "Don't let her get away with that."

Merry shook her head and spooned the delicious pheasant soup into her mouth. She would not involve herself in a war of words with the governess. At least not in front of the duke. He already held Miss Jennings in high regard, and Merry would merely come across looking churlish.

After the second course had been served, and the footmen stationed at

their places against the wall should anyone require their assistance, Lord Moreland turned his attention once again to Merry. “Tell us about Boston, Miss Chambers.”

Merry beamed. “Boston is a wonderful city, my lord. It has a long history, being one of the first cities settled after the colonists arrived. But now it is a bustling place, comparable to London.”

“Certainly nothing in the Colonies can compare to London?” Miss Jennings’ whiny voice grated on her ears.

Merry smiled at the governess. “Miss Jennings, you do remember we are no longer the Colonies? We defeated your countrymen—for the second time—a few years ago.”

The duke affected a choking sound, and Lord Brandon once again leaned toward her. “Bravo, my girl.”

She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. This was neither the time nor place to indulge in petty bickering.

Lord Moreland saved the day. “What were some of your favorite places in Boston?”

Relieved, she happily returned her attention to him. “I loved every part of it, my lord. I enjoyed walking to Dorchester Heights and gazing out over the sea. We also have a new Science museum, and a wonderful library for the public where I spent a great deal of time.”

“You are interested in books?”

“Oh, yes. My father was a professor at Harvard.”

He frowned. “What encouraged you to travel to England?”

“Lord and Lady Bedford had just lost their dear nanny. She contracted a fever while traveling in Boston and died. My father had recently passed, and I thought a change of scenery would be beneficial, so I agreed to accompany them to England as their governess.”

“And how do you find England, my dear?”

“I’ve been here five years and grow to love it more each day.” Merry’s natural enthusiasm took over. “Everything is so green and lovely. I even enjoy the foggy and rainy days. When Lord and Lady Bedford were in London for the Season, I was permitted to visit the theater, museums and symphony.”

“I wonder why it is that a woman as lovely as yourself has not been snatched up by some young buck?” Lord Moreland cast her a warm smile.

Merry raised her chin. “I prefer to marry for love, my lord. And thus far

that has not come my way.”

Miss Jennings snickered. “Miss Chambers, certainly you don’t believe marriage requires love?”

Merry gritted her teeth. It was apparent that Miss Jennings was trying her best to have Merry act the part of a shrew. “Marriage perhaps doesn’t require love, but certainly makes the union more pleasant.”

With a wave of her hand, Miss Jennings dismissed her. “Such an American viewpoint. Marriages are to form alliances, strengthen the bloodlines, create heirs.” She smiled in her direction as if Merry were an unsophisticated child, attempting to discuss adult matters.

“I’m afraid I must agree with Miss Chambers.” The duke spoke to Miss Jennings, but his eyes never left Merry. “If one must spend the rest of one’s life with a woman, why not have it be someone you care deeply for?”

“Surely you jest, Your Grace?” Miss Jennings chided, her hand at her throat. “Someone in Your Grace’s position knows the duty in marriage.”

A few seconds passed, and then the duke directed his attention to Miss Jennings. “Of course. Every peer knows what marriage is all about.”

Miss Jennings threw a smug look at Merry.

The rest of the meal passed in pleasant conversation. The few times Merry glanced at the duke, his eyes were on her, assessing, causing her to want to squirm in her seat.

After the final course had been removed, Kitty stood. “I believe the ladies will retire to the drawing room and leave you gentlemen to your port. Ladies?” The duchess moved to the doorway, Miss Jennings and Merry in her wake.

PENROSE STUDIED the women as they left the room. His gaze drifted to Miss Chamber’s slender back, then slid down to her lovely derrière and the gentle sway of her hips. He felt a tightening in his groin at the sight.

Miss Jennings might hold her counterpart in disdain, but Miss Chambers had shown more character and intelligence than three of Miss Jennings. He still thought Miss Jennings was the better governess for his wards. But his mind and body knew who he’d prefer to have underneath him in his bed, and alongside him at the dinner table.

Merry Chambers had passion. When she baited him, and when she spoke of Boston, it was there in her eyes. To unleash that passion would be a man’s

pleasure. But with her notions of marriage with love, it would be best to stay far away from her.

He hadn't loved Lady Eleanor all those years ago when he'd lost to Bedford. He'd merely decided she would make an excellent duchess. Her family was an old, respected one. She was graceful, charming, and beautiful. He would've had no problem bedding her, but in no way did she stir his blood. The only woman who had ever done that had just left the room.

Drat his mother for employing Miss Chambers. As delightful as she was to look at and daydream about, she still possessed those odd ideas about her station in life. She certainly had no regard for the difference in classes. She felt free to bait him whenever the mood struck her. Never had anyone, particularly a woman, stood up to him the way she did.

Perhaps her reaction to him came from the same fire that burned *in* him. He smiled. They certainly did seem to rile each other.

Suddenly he looked forward to having Miss Chambers about for a while. Life had become too dull and predictable.

MERRY TOSSED IN HER BED, attempting to get comfortable enough to sleep. Finally realizing that comfort wasn't the problem, she threw off the quilt and swung her legs over the edge. Feeling around with her toes, she slid her feet into her slippers and grabbed the wrapper at the foot of her bed.

Perhaps if she had a book she could read until she felt sleepy. Every time she closed her eyes, a vision of Penrose, with his deep brown eyes and wicked smile, tortured her. How could a man be so comely and have such arrogance at the same time? She didn't want to be aware of his presence, his scent. Nor to think on how his large hands would feel touching her skin, or his lips closing over hers. The man was a duke for heaven's sake, and even she, an American, knew he was well beyond her.

Goodness, now I'm beginning to sound like Miss Jennings.

Merry quietly slipped out of her room and descended the stairs. The door to the library stood partially opened, but no candlelight glowed. She entered the room and inhaled deeply of the comforting smell. How she loved being surrounded by books, and the inevitable scent of brandy. The air in her father's library had always carried the same mixture.

She found a small candelabra with a flint alongside it on a table near the door. With the lighting in front of her, she headed to the bookshelves and

began to peruse the titles, looking for something uninteresting enough to lull her to sleep. Her gaze wandered over volumes of history and science.

“Ah, another nighttime wanderer.”

Merry yelped and jumped as that deep voice rolled over her. She spun around, the movement causing the candles to snuff out. “Your Grace, you scared me to death!”

“I apologize, Miss Chambers.” He must have moved in her direction because she could sense his presence. “Here, allow me to re-light your candles.”

A flash of light, and his face appeared above the flint he held. With the shadows cast upon his countenance, he looked almost sinister. He smiled, white teeth flashing, and the picture of the devil himself was complete.

Merry’s mouth dried up, and she eased back, hitting the bookcase behind her. “I’m...I hoped...I was looking for a book.” She ran her tongue over her lips. What sounded like a growl emanated from deep within Penrose’s chest.

“Do not let me keep you from your search.” He touched the flint to a candle he held in his hand and moved away. Penrose made his way to the sideboard. “I merely came for a bit of brandy to aid my sleep.” Though she couldn’t easily see him in the dark shadows beyond the circle of candlelight blinding her, the sound of the liquid hitting the glass played over her ears.

“May I pour you some sherry?”

Her heart thumped in her chest, and not all from the fright he’d given her. Here she stood in her nightgown, with only a flimsy wrapper over it. Instead of rushing from the room to protect her virtue, she seriously considered accepting his offer. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Why in heaven’s name did I say that?

“Excellent. Come join me by the fireplace, and I’ll soon have a blazing fire to warm us.”

She took a step, then hesitated. “I’m not really sure which way to go.”

“Wait. I’ll come to you.”

His warm hand reached out and grasped her elbow. She drew in a sharp breath as her skin heated where he touched. After a short walk, she was relieved to reach the chair and break the contact. She took the glass of sherry from him with a shaky hand. Penrose studied her for a minute, the sharp planes of his face mimicking a drawing of the devil she’d seen as a child.

“Do you often have problems sleeping?” He settled in the chair next to her and regarded her over the rim of his brandy glass.

Now more clearly visible with the glow from the fireplace, the duke mesmerized her. He'd removed his jacket and cravat, exposing the tanned skin at his throat, wisps of dark curls peeking up from his shirt opening. A brightly colored banyan covered his white shirt and breeches. His dark hair fell over his forehead in waves, causing her fingers to twitch with the desire to smooth it back.

"Sometimes." She sipped her sherry, already feeling lightheaded, but not, she suspected, from the wine.

He swallowed a bit of the amber liquid, closing his eyes briefly as he did. She watched, fascinated, as his throat muscles worked. Her body warmed and softened, parts of her she never thought about tingled, inducing her to shift in the seat. This was preposterous. If she didn't leave soon, her body would slide to the floor in a puddle. She placed her glass on the table between them and stood. "I must be off to bed now."

"Please don't go, Miss Chambers."

Merry hesitated, but reluctantly sat. "The two of us being here together, alone, is not proper."

"You are correct, but who's to know, except us?"

"That's not the point, Your Grace. What would Miss Jennings say?"

"Ah, Miss Jennings." He slanted Merry a look. "The perfect governess."

She gave an unladylike snort. A glance at the duke caught him in a smile.

"It appears Miss Jennings does not quite approve of you."

"Neither do you, Your Grace."

His brows drew together. "Please stop with the 'Your Grace.' It gets burdensome after a while."

Merry's lips quirked. "I have the feeling you rarely find your title burdensome, Your..."

"Penrose. Why don't you call me that instead?" When she inclined her head, he remarked, "So you believe love and marriage are compatible?" His intense gaze encompassed her as if she were a bug under glass. She felt exposed and smothered at the same time.

Nonplussed by his quick shift in conversation, she raised her chin. "Yes, I do. My parents had a love match, and I will not marry without love."

"Foolish child." He shook his head as he studied the brandy he swirled.

"I beg your pardon!" Merry felt the heat rise to her face.

He glanced quickly at her. "Once again I must apologize. I meant no insult."

“Her Grace told me she and your father were in love.”

“That’s true. However, it didn’t start that way, and they were lucky love remained. Things could turn messy if a couple fell out of love. Better to marry without that expectation.” He drained the last of his brandy and set the glass aside. “To me marriage is all a business arrangement, nothing more.”

“And at four and thirty you have not been successful in securing a *business arrangement* for yourself?”

“Ah. Straightforward speaking. A trait of the Americans.”

Since her brash statement didn’t have him ordering her to her room, she continued. “You are a duke, with responsibilities. Surely someone as dedicated to his title as you are would have ensured the continuation of the Penrose line and filled his nursery by now. An *heir and a spare*, is that not the accepted vernacular?”

“Lord Brandon is my heir.”

“And it appears he has done nothing to secure the title, either. So neglectful, Your Grace.”

He grinned. “You do realize how far over the line you have stepped, Miss Chambers?”

She inclined her head. “Yes, please excuse my *straightforward* speaking. I am afraid it doesn’t bode as well here in England as it does in America.”

“Which Americans have in abundance.”

“As you say.” She sighed and stood. “That little bit of sherry has rendered me drowsy. I’m sure I will be able to sleep now.”

Penrose stood at the same time she did. “Alas, I find the brandy did not soothe me as much as I’d hoped.”

“Perhaps a book?”

“I have a better idea.” He moved toward her and set his hands on her shoulders. “Do you know why Miss Jennings dislikes you so?”

Merry shook her head, the ability to speak having fled. Her skin burned where his warm palms held her, his strong fingers kneading her flesh. She should not allow these liberties. But it was, oh, so hard to move away from his commanding presence. His eyes held her prisoner. She moved her gaze to his sensual lips.

“Because you’re a beautiful woman—Merry.” He edged her closer. “Isn’t that what the girls and my mother call you?”

His eyes danced with mirth and something else. Undefined, and fleeting. Her senses were awash with his smell, touch, warmth. The dark

room, lit only by the glow from the fireplace, with his strong body blocking out the darkness, enveloped her with an aura of peace and danger all at the same time. She tried desperately to remember his question. “Yes.” Her voice, having recovered, decided to only whisper. “Your Grace...”

“Shh.” His head descended and she closed her eyes. Before she could process what was happening, he slid his warm palm against her cheek and cupped her chin, stroking her jaw with his thumb. Tugging her lightly, he pulled her closer and took possession of her mouth. Sparks exploded behind her eyelids. Heat rushed from her belly up to her face, stopping along the way to set her heart to thundering. She slid her palms up Penrose’s chest, resting her hands on his shoulders. Firm and warm.

In a quick move, he crushed her breasts against his hard chest, shifting his head, allowing him better access to slip his tongue into her mouth as she gasped. Had she not been holding firm to him, she would, indeed, have melted to the floor in a puddle of hot liquid.

After plundering her mouth, he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers, his fingers playing with the soft skin behind her ears. “As a gentleman, I should apologize, but I hope I haven’t frightened you.”

Merry drew her head back. “I don’t frighten easily.”

His hands dropped to his side. “I’m sure you don’t, but perhaps in this instance you should.”

She turned and fled the room, her emotions in a turmoil.

WHAT HAVE I JUST DONE?

Penrose slumped in his seat, his member rock hard from the kiss he’d shared with Merry. She was everything he was afraid she’d be. Warm, soft, and passionate. Her huge blue eyes, darkened by desire, stared into his before she’d run from him. Despite her enthusiastic response to his touch, she was an innocent. And not someone he should be trifling with.

I will not marry without love.

Too bad she wasn’t suitable, she would make a wonderful duchess. Proud, courageous, and graceful. He grinned. As long as she kept her mouth closed in public. But, oh, how he’d like to rile her in private, and watch all that anger turn into passion.

For him.

He stretched his long legs out and crossed his arms. Her comments about

his duty stung. If he truly intended to never marry, he needed to take his brother in hand and prepare him for his role as duke should something happen to him. Brandon also needed to be encouraged to marry and fill the nursery, as Miss Chambers had so untactfully noted.

If he'd thought it a mistake to rely on Brandon when he'd first approached him about his decision not to marry, over time his brother's lack of interest in the estate confirmed his suspicions. Perhaps he should reconsider and find a wife for himself. Someone befitting the title duchess, who already had a place in Society.

He groaned at the idea of presenting himself in London, and making the rounds of balls, musicals, and routs next Season to find a suitable bride. Giggling girls just out of the schoolroom would be dragged across the floor by their determined mamas once he appeared. Could he subject himself to several months of that?

Once more, Miss Chambers invaded his thoughts. She of the beautiful face, fine figure, and outspoken manner. Since she'd been the girls' governess for five years, she was no young giggling schoolgirl.

He sighed and picked up the candle next to him for his trek upstairs to bed. It was best to forget about the woman. She was not the mistress type, and he would never consider marriage to someone as audacious as the former governess.

But with the state she'd left him in, perhaps it was time to make a visit to his widow friend sometime soon.

CHAPTER 6



Early the next morning, Merry hurried to the stables to meet Lord Brandon for their outing. Having practically been raised on a horse, she was thrilled to have the chance to ride once again. Bedford Hall had an impressive stable, and she often rode when she had the chance. But amid all the upheaval with Lord and Lady Bedford's deaths, and preparations for the move to Penrose, she'd hadn't ridden in weeks.

Ballard led a dark grey mare from the stable as Lord Brandon joined her.

"Oh, what a beauty!" Merry ran her gloved hand over the magnificent horse's velvet nose. "What is her name?"

"Aphrodite, miss."

She beamed. "A perfect dub."

"Good morning, Merry. I must admit this is not my favorite time of day." Lord Brandon's drawn face and bloodshot eyes confirmed his words.

"I could ride by myself. I'm an experienced horsewoman." Her gaze roamed his face. "You do look as though you could use more sleep."

"No. It would not be a good idea for you to ride alone. You're not familiar with the land, and I would hate for something to happen to you."

"Don't concern yourself, brother, I will be more than happy to escort Miss Chambers on her ride." Dressed in the height-of-fashion riding clothes, Penrose strode toward them, pulling on tan leather gloves.

Merry's stomach clenched. The light of day only intensified his good looks. Had those full lips actually ravished hers last night? His glance at her was warm, without the hint of disapproval she'd always seen before.

Be careful. He is a duke, and you can't afford to allow your thoughts to wander in that direction.

“Miss Chambers would you mind terribly if I excuse myself?” Lord Brandon’s eyes pleaded with her.

“Of course she doesn’t mind. You best search out Cook for one of her tonics.” The duke turned to Ballard. “Is Tafoya ready?”

Merry stood, her mouth agape, as Lord Brandon gave her a short two-finger salute and hurried to the house.

“Excuse me, Your Grace, but I would prefer to answer for myself.”

He frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t even know, do you?” She shook her head. “Lord Brandon just asked me if I minded him not riding with me, and you answered.”

“Do you mind him not accompanying you?” He looked genuinely confused.

“That is not the point.”

His eyes flashed with annoyance. “What is the point?”

“Never mind. This conversation is a waste of words.” Before he could assist her, she stepped on the block and settled on the sidesaddle, adjusting the deep blue skirts of her riding habit over her legs.

Penrose gracefully mounted his horse and took up the reins. “Are you ready? I wouldn’t want to start off without asking.”

Merry smirked. “Yes. I’m ready.”

They rode side-by-side down the path leading from the house, neither one aware of the narrowed eyes watching them from the schoolroom window.

DESPITE THE COLD, late fall air, the sun shone in the rarely clear sky, reaffirming Penrose’s decision to begin taking morning rides. Lord, he missed this. For a while he could forget his duties and just enjoy a ride with a beautiful woman at his side.

And beautiful she was. Her velvet riding habit hugged her curves delightfully. The deep blue brought out the color of her eyes, which sparkled with pleasure as she inhaled deeply, causing his attention to shift to her breasts. Just the right size for his hands, he imagined their silky softness.

“Do you ride every day, Your Grace?”

Her question drew him from his reverie. “No. In fact this is the first time I’ve ridden for pleasure in a while.” He slanted a look at her. “I thought we agreed last night to dispense with ‘Your Grace’?”

“’Tis not proper. You are my employer.”

“Not so. You are employed by my mother who, as I’m sure she’s told you with a great deal of satisfaction, has her own funds to do with as she wishes.”

“True. But I am not of your world.”

He grinned. “You sound like Miss Jennings.”

“The perfect governess?” Her eyebrows rose, one side of her mouth tilted.

Ready to take umbrage at her remark, instead he threw his head back and laughed. “Miss Jennings may be aware of your position in life, but I believe you are not.”

She bristled. “I understand your class structure, I’m no fool. However, as I was not raised with all the nuances your way clings to and being from America where one is judged by what one does, not by one’s birth, which they have no control over, I find it hard to swallow.”

“Ah yes, the American method. Anyone of ability may rise to the top.”

Merry drew her shoulders back. “And a fine system it is.”

He grinned. “As you say.”

God, how he loved baiting her. She was all spit and fire. Right now her eyes flashed and two bright red spots appeared on her cheeks. Her chest heaved, bringing his attention once again to those delectable breasts. If he didn’t get himself under control soon, the ride would be a tad uncomfortable.

All the women of his acquaintance, including the young misses of the Marriage Mart he stopped visiting a few years ago, fell at his feet and agreed with everything he said. He was used to tittering, flirting, adoration, and admiring glances cast above silk fans. Merry Chambers did none of that, and he found the change refreshing. Frustrating as the devil, though. The woman did not know her place.

“Shall we give the horses their head?” Merry asked, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

He swept his arm out. “Lead on.”

Merry took off at a gallop, almost leaving him behind. He squeezed his knees and Tafoya burst forth, soon overtaking the mare. Merry grinned as he passed her, and then urged her mount to catch up. He held Tafoya back so they could race alongside each other. The bracing air rushing past his face invigorated him, producing a sense of rightness and peace he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Eventually, they slowed and brought the horses to a canter, then a trot. “That was wonderful!” Merry exclaimed.

He agreed for an entirely different reason. Her topknot had come loose,

with tendrils of curls surrounding her face. The exertion of running in the cold air had put color into her face. She licked her lips and he groaned under his breath, once more wanting to cover those luscious lips with his own.

Suddenly, Aphrodite reared. Merry yelped and attempted to control the beast, but the horse bucked again, throwing her to the ground. Within seconds, the mare turned and raced back toward the stables.

Penrose jumped from his horse and hurried to where Merry sat on the ground. "Are you all right?" He squatted and studied her face.

"I think so." Merry took a deep breath. "I'm not sure what happened." She shifted to rise.

"No, don't move just yet. You've had quite a fall, and you need to be sure you didn't break anything."

She extended her arms and legs. "I don't think so. I'm actually sorer on my.... Never mind."

Penrose helped her gain her feet. When she stumbled against him, he scooped her into his arms.

She gasped, her eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

"I don't think you're in any condition to walk." He strode to his horse and lifted her to the saddle. With one quick motion he mounted behind her.

"This is most improper." She attempted to cover herself with her skirts, but they'd been twisted underneath her, exposing the bottom half of her legs.

"Don't concern yourself. We need to get you home and send for the doctor."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I'm fine. I don't need a doctor."

"That's my decision to make." Urging his horse, they cantered forward.

Penrose tried desperately to ignore the soft body resting on his. Her lemon scent drifted to him, tempting him further. His arm burned where it wrapped around her middle, his fingers itching to ease upward and embrace a warm breast. Thankfully, the ride didn't take too long, since he feared she could feel his throbbing desire pressing against her bottom.

They entered the stable yard. Aphrodite stood panting, her mouth wet with white foam. Ballard ran his hands over her. "What happened, Your Grace?"

"Something hurt or spooked her, and she threw Miss Chambers. See if you can figure out what caused her to bolt like that. I'm taking Miss Chambers to the house."

Penrose slid off the horse and reached for her.

“I can walk.”

“Not until the doctor has seen you.” He settled her in his arms.

“You are being ridiculous. I know I’m not injured.”

His lips tightened. “You are my responsibility. You will see the doctor.”

“I am not your responsibility. Furthermore, I know if I can walk or not.”

She raised her voice.

“As long as you reside under my roof, you will abide by my wishes.”

“You mean orders. You, sir, are an impossible man.”

“I agree.”

The footman opened the door at their approach, his eyebrows raised at Penrose carrying Merry, with both of them snarling at each other.

“I’m taking Miss Chambers to her room. Please send for the doctor, she’s had a spill from her horse.”

Merry crossed her arms over her chest. “I do not need a doctor.”

“Nevertheless, he will be sent for.” He started up the stairs.

“I protest.”

“Excellent. You may protest in bed while you wait for the doctor.”

“You may not carry me into my bedroom.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Says who?”

Merry lowered her voice. “Miss Jennings.”

“She is the governess. I, on the other hand, am the duke.”

As they reached the top of the stairs, his mother came from her sitting room. “What in heaven’s name is going on? My poor ears have been tortured with bickering from all the way outside.”

“Miss Chambers took a fall from her horse. I’m taking her to her room while we wait for the doctor.”

“Oh my goodness. Is she badly hurt?” The duchess hurried behind them.

“I’m not hurt at all,” Merry called over his shoulder. “But His Grace is too stubborn to listen to me.”

As his mother stepped in front of them to open the door, she covered her mouth with her hand, looking suspiciously as if she tried to hold back a laugh.

“The doctor will determine if you are injured or not,” Penrose growled. He swung past the duchess and strode to Merry’s bed where he deposited her gently.

“Dear, you must leave us now.” His mother looked from him to Merry.

“Fine. Stay with her Mother, and make sure she doesn’t move until the

doctor sees her.”

She smirked. “Yes, dear.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” Merry called to Penrose’s retreating back. He slammed her door.

MUCH TO MERRY’S DISGUST, and even though he’d found no injuries, the doctor ordered her to stay in bed for the rest of the day. Nonsense. She felt fine and had been thrown from a horse more than once. There was no doubt in her mind that Penrose ‘encouraged’ the doctor to say that. Everyone, it seemed bowed down to that man’s wishes.

That arrogant, stubborn man who insisted on sending for the doctor annoyed her to no end. Why she ever thought him attractive remained a mystery.

Shortly after noontime, Kitty entered the chamber, followed by a young maid carrying a tray containing soup and bread. “I brought you the lovely soup Cook fixed for luncheon.”

“You should not be waiting on me. For goodness sake everyone is acting like I’m some sort of invalid.”

Kitty directed the maid to set the tray on the table next to the bed. “I’m afraid when Penrose gets something into his mind, it doesn’t leave easily.” She snapped open the snowy white serviette and handed it to Merry. “And I have an ulterior motive. I want to begin making the plans for the Christmas Eve ball.”

“Of course. I’ll be happy to take notes.” Merry shifted to lean against the pillows.

“Eat your meal first, and then we can work.”

The duchess talked as Merry ate the delicious thick soup and fresh bread.

“The Penrose Christmas Eve Ball has been a tradition for generations. In fact, the original ball was held the Christmas after the first King George had assumed the throne. The story is passed down that he actually attended, but there has never been anything written to prove that.”

Merry laid her spoon alongside her bowl. “I am looking forward to it. Lord and Lady Bedford hosted a very small gathering on Christmas Eve each year, because they included the girls. They also had what they called a “Christmas Tree,” a tradition they learned from their German cook. Several footmen cut down a pine, and they set it up in the house. They the girls would

make paper dolls, stars, and such, to hang on the tree. It was quite entertaining and brought a wonderful smell to the drawing room.”

“I have heard of that. Maybe we should do the same here. I’m sure the girls will love it.”

“I agree. That activity might bring a little bit of their parents back.” She wiped her mouth and placed the tray away from her. “I’m finished with my soup, and ready to plan the ball.”

MERRY’S EYES shot open at the sound of young voices. “Miss Merry! We’ve come to visit with you.”

Apparently her sore body had needed the rest, for she had fallen asleep. Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare raced into her room, with Miss Jennings following behind. “Ladies always walk,” she scolded.

“His Grace wished for the girls to call on you since you won’t be able to join them for afternoon tea.” Miss Jennings’s lip curled and she looked so far down her nose, Merry thought the governess would become permanently cross-eyed.

“Thank you very much for bringing them.”

“It was His Grace’s wishes.” She sniffed, all her displeasure in the sound.

“What happened, Miss Merry? The duke told us you were injured in a spill from your horse.”

Merry sighed. “No, pet. I was not injured. I did fall from my horse, but aside from a few aches and—mostly in the area where I sit down—I’m fine.”

At Miss Jennings’ sharp inhale, Merry glanced at her.

“This is not proper conversation for young girls.”

Merry raised her eyebrows. “What did I say?”

Miss Jennings drew herself up. “A properly brought up lady never mentions any part of her body.”

Biting back a retort, Merry returned her attention to the girls, encouraging them to tell her all about their lessons.

After about fifteen minutes of visiting, Miss Jennings reminded the girls the time drew near for their tea. Hugging Merry fiercely, they left to return to the nursery. Their governess remained behind.

Once the latch on the door caught, Miss Jennings moved closer to Merry’s bed. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Her eyes grew to slits. “I thought you claimed to be an experienced rider?”

“And if I did?”

“Then how is it you came to *fall* from your horse?”

Merry’s jaw muscles worked. The nerve of this woman! “Not that it’s any of your concern, but my horse unexpectedly reared and threw me.”

“Right into His Grace’s arms?”

Stunned into speechlessness, Merry didn’t move a muscle as the governess hissed.

“You can forget what you’re thinking. The Duke of Penrose will never stoop so low as to marry a commoner. And from America, no less,” she sneered. Pacing in front of the bed, she slapped a fist into her hand. “If he were to select a wife not a member of the *haut ton*, he would surely choose me. I’m English. My father was a member of the gentry.”

Recovering her voice, Merry said, “How exceedingly pleasant for you.”

“Don’t condescend to me. I see the way you look at His Grace, and he may be attracted to you. But be assured, a quick tumble in his bed is all he is interested in.”

Merry drew in a sharp breath at the woman’s crudeness. “From what I understand, His Grace is not in the market for a wife. In fact, if you are wishing to secure a husband, I advise you to look to his brother. Lord Brandon has been named the duke’s heir.”

“Nonsense. No duke would ignore his duty. And Lord Brandon is sorely wanting in so many ways.”

Merry thought of the young man with the sparkling wit and charming ways. The man who befriended her from the first. “Miss Jennings, you are unpleasant and rude. Please leave me.”

“I will. As soon as I finish.” She came to stand directly over Merry, her face in a vicious snarl. “You may have cajoled Her Grace into hiring you as a companion so you don’t have to leave, but you’ll never get your hands on her son. He is a duke, and you are a nobody.”

Quelling the unladylike desire to rip out the governess’s hair, she gave a tight smile. “Thank you for your kind words. Now please leave me in peace.”

Miss Jennings patted her hair and tugged on the sleeves of her gown. Turning on her heel, she headed to the door. She gripped the door latch and viewed Merry over her shoulder. “Just remember what I said. I can assure you if anyone in this house is to be the next Duchess of Penrose, it will be

me.”

Merry blew out the breath she held. Miss Jennings was more than welcome to the duke. His arrogance was something she would never put up with.

Then she touched her lips with her fingertips. Remembering...

CHAPTER 7



Penrose blew on his hands, biting cold, even though he wore gloves. He glanced out the window at the darkening sky. Definitely snow in the air.

The crested coach stopped in front of the Hall, and the butler had the front door open before Penrose alighted from the conveyance. He gathered up his satchel, full of papers he'd acquired on his five-day trip to Lord Smithfield's estate.

Twice a year he and Lords Smithfield and Eastlake met at one of their homes to discuss bills they wished to sponsor in the Lords, and to compare notes on estate matters. When the duchy had been unexpectedly thrust upon him at a young age, the lords, who had been his father's peers and close friends, had provided him with a steady hand in the old duke's place. After years of running his own estate, Penrose now made as many helpful suggestions as the others.

As he strode to the front door, his thoughts, as had many times during his time away, drifted toward Merry. He chuckled when he remembered the morning he'd left, and how enraged she'd become when he'd sent word that she had his permission to leave her bed after her injury. She'd tore down the stairs and let him know she had every intention of being up and about and certainly did not need his permission to do so. With all that fire and wrath, he wanted nothing more than to drag her to him and conquer her mouth as he wished to conquer her body.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace." His butler, Jones, bowed. "It looks like we're in for a bit of nasty weather." He helped Penrose off with his greatcoat.

"Yes it does. Where is my mother?" The woman he really wanted to see

would most likely be with her.

“I believe she and Miss Chambers are working in the dining room.”

Already an air of festivity surrounded him. Girls from the village, who only came during the holidays to help out, were busy decorating the Hall. Someone had gathered greens, and their scent brought him to where his mother and Merry—*sitting on the floor at his mother’s feet*—chatted and laughed.

“Penrose, you’re home!” Mother rose from her chair alongside Merry and embraced him. He returned her hug, glancing over her shoulder at the vixen sitting in a most unladylike manner on the floor. His eyebrows rose.

Merry regarded him, a slight smile on her lips, her head tilted.

A challenge?

Her slender fingers brushed back the wisps of blond hair that had fallen on her forehead. A smudge of dirt dusted her cheek, and she wore an old gown with a soiled apron over it. She never looked more beautiful to him. His groin tightened, and the sight of her pitched him into the whirlwind of emotions brought on by the minx.

“Miss Chambers.” He released his mother and nodded in Merry’s direction.

“Your Grace.” She moved to rise, and he extended his hand to help her. Despite his cool and logical mind, the jolt he felt was real. Merry jerked her hand back as if she felt it, too.

Penrose’s gaze roamed the women’s work area. Stacks of linens sat alongside plates, cups, saucers and chests of silver. He directed his attention to his mother. “What are you doing? It looks to me like you’re preparing for a feast.”

The duchess smiled brightly. “Exactly, my dear. Since you’ve been gone, Miss Chambers and I have been busy getting ready for the Christmas Eve ball. And the rest of the holidays, of course.” She took him by the arm and headed toward the doorway. “Perhaps we could all use a respite. I’ll send for refreshments.”

He turned. “Will you join us, Miss Chambers?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Grace. Please excuse me while I freshen up.”

His mother smiled fondly at Merry’s back. “Miss Chamber has been working very hard. We’ve just about finished the counting of linens and dinnerware. Merry also supervised the young girls from the village since Mrs. Bond was busy with her housekeeping duties.” She squeezed his arm. “Oh I

do love the holidays, Penrose. We should entertain more often.”

Her excitement was contagious. He found himself smiling along with her. “Would you really wish to take on all this extra work several times a year?”

She waved her hand in dismissal as they entered the drawing room. “Miss Chambers is such a help, I feel as though I’m doing nothing at all.”

“But Miss Chambers may not be with us forever. Some young man may catch her fancy and she’ll be off planning her own parties.” His gut clenched at his own words.

His mother glanced at him, a mysterious smile on her face. “Yes. Perhaps Miss Chambers will catch the eye of a young man. Or, maybe she already has.”

Penrose’s heart sped up, but he kept his voice cool. “What do you mean? Have there been callers in my absence?”

The duchess sighed. “Sometimes I do wonder at your intelligence, my son.” She turned to the maid she’d summoned and instructed her to fetch tea and sandwiches.

They moved further into the room, settling on the settee near the warming fireplace.

“You still have not answered my question. Has Miss Chambers been receiving callers?”

“No, my dear. No one outside the family has been to see her.”

“Brandon?” He would never allow Merry to seriously consider his brother. As much as he loved the younger man, he had quite a bit of growing up to do before he took on a wife. Although, as the heir apparent to the dukedom, he should be encouraging Brandon to marry. Just not Miss Chambers. He pushed the *why not* question from his mind.

She shook her head. “Tell me about your trip. Did you, Smithfield, and Eastlake come up with new ways to torture Parliament?”

Not satisfied with his mother’s evasive tactics, but acknowledging her wish to change the subject, he went into more detail about his meetings with the lords.

Tea arrived at the same time as Miss Chambers. She’d changed into another gown, and had fixed her hair. The smudge of dirt was also gone. Too bad, he would have liked to use his thumb to run over her soft cheek to erase it.

Merry sat across from them and poured. He leaned back and watched her graceful hands as she performed the duty. When she wasn’t spewing forth

outlandish opinions, she was really quite charming and sophisticated. She glanced up as she handed him a cup, and her smile warmed him for more reasons than where his thoughts normally wandered.

Miss Chambers was kind, intelligent, and from all indications, loved fiercely and protectively. She would be a stalwart wife, and a wonderful mother.

“I see you’ve done quite a bit already to prepare for the Christmas season.” He took the cup from Merry’s hand.

“Yes. We’ve been very busy. I just love the holidays. All the preparations never seem like work to me.” Her eyes danced with glee.

“Did you and your father entertain a lot?”

Merry nodded. “We did. He oftentimes had students over for dinner, and we would all discuss politics or some other subject of interest.”

Penrose’s eyes widened. “You sat in on those discussions?”

Her eyes snapped. “Of course.” Then her defiant chin rose. “And why wouldn’t I?”

God, he loved how quickly she went from sweet little miss to a tigress. “I don’t mean to disparage you, or your father. I’m merely surprised a woman would be interested in such things.”

“Oh, I suppose it would make more sense to you if I preferred to merely discuss gowns, slippers, and gossip?”

He could no longer hold back his chuckle. She narrowed her eyes, and then her lips tilted, turned into a smile, and finally she laughed.

“Ah, see, Miss Chambers. We are able to laugh at ourselves, are we not?”

“And when will it be your turn?” She smiled sweetly and took a bite of a watercress sandwich, as the duchess grinned behind her cup of tea.

MERRY’S HEART hadn’t gone back to its normal rhythm since Penrose first walked into the dining room. His presence had sucked out all the air. He’d towered over her, staring down with those riveting deep brown eyes that always caused her to feel as though she’d forgotten to put on her gown.

Now with him sitting across from her, his large frame dwarfing the settee, she had a strong desire to whip out a fan to cool her heated skin. With the blood pounding in her ears, she barely heard what he and Kitty discussed. This would not do. The entire time he was gone he’d invaded her thoughts, even while she’d slept.

But, oh, how he vexed her with that superior attitude. She studied him from beneath lowered lashes. His attraction lay not just in his good looks, but the way he held himself. The way he moved across a room like a panther seeking its prey. She shivered. Would that she were his prey.

“Are you cold, Miss Chambers?” Penrose regarded her.

Cold? She was ready to rip off her clothes. “No. I’m fine.”

Penrose stood. “Ladies, as much as I’ve enjoyed your company, there are things I must attend to before dinner.” He bowed to his mother and kissed her hand, then turned to Merry. With that predatory look in his eyes, he took her hand in his, and brought it slowly to his mouth, all the time staring in her eyes. Her breath caught. He rested his lips on her hand, casting a devilish smile he did so well. “Until later.”

Merry was both angry and about to self-combust. She did not want him to affect her in this manner. As he continually reminded her, he was a duke and she not even a member of the *ton*. But did he ever say that, or had she gotten that impression from Miss Jennings? She chided herself. No matter. The fact remained there could never be anything between them. And she didn’t need the governess to remind her of it.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON Merry tapped on the library door.

“Enter.” The duke’s deep voice rolled over her.

He sat behind his massive desk, papers scattered about, a quill pen in his hand. He glanced up as she entered, a smile gracing his lips. “Good afternoon.”

“Your Grace,” she curtsied.

“Merry, please stop. You keep bobbing up and down every time you see me, and I’m becoming dizzy.” He grinned. “And I’m dismayed to find we’re back to ‘Your Grace,’ again.”

She felt the blush rise to her face. “I would ask a favor, Your...”

“Yes?”

“I seek permission to allow the girls to join me outside.”

“Outside? There must be a foot of snow out there.” He jerked his head in the direction of the window displaying a fairyland of white glistening on tree branches.

“That’s precisely why.” She swallowed a giggle at his puzzled expression.

“I’m afraid I’m confused. Why would you all go out into the snow?”

“To play.” She dragged out the last word.

“Play?” His puzzled expression made her laugh.

“Yes. Cavort. Have fun. Run around in the snow. Throw snowballs. Slide down the hill.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Don’t tell me you’ve never played in the snow.”

He bristled. “Of course. When I was a boy.”

“Ah. Maybe it’s time to put all those papers aside and become a boy again.”

Penrose shook his head. “Nonsense. I haven’t time for that.”

“In any event, may I invite the girls to go outdoors with me?”

He leaned back in his chair, eyeing her carefully. “That is Miss Jennings’s territory. You should be asking her permission.”

Merry’s shoulders slumped. “I’m afraid Miss Jennings is not too receptive to my requests. Things would fare better if you gave permission. I would hate to see the girls excited and then have their hopes dashed if she says no.”

He pushed back his chair and stood. “Come. We’ll go to the nursery and fetch the girls. I need to stretch my legs anyway.”

The sound of young voices repeating multiplication tables greeted them as they opened the school room door.

“Your Grace,” Miss Jennings tittered, smoothing back her hair. Her cheeks flushed as she curtsied. “What a pleasure to have you join us.” She turned to Charlotte and Clare. “Ladies, please, remember your manners. Stand and curtsy to the duke.”

Both girls curtsied gracefully and wished Penrose a good day. Merry was impressed. Perhaps Miss Jennings *was* better for the girls. Merry always had too soft of a heart to discipline them.

“Miss Jennings, Miss Chambers would like to have the girls join her outside to play.”

“Play?” Miss Jennings glanced at Merry, her eyes wide.

“Yes. In the snow.”

Both girls jumped up and down and clapped. “Oh, please, we haven’t played in the snow in ever so long,” Charlotte said.

“If that is your wish, Your Grace. I don’t like having their routine interrupted, but of course, I bow to your wishes.” The governess’s pinched face and tightened smile communicated her disapproval.

“Wonderful.” He faced Merry. “They are free to join you in the snow.”

“Thank you.” She turned to the girls. “Come, get dressed in your warm clothes, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

They quickly curtsied once again and raced from the room.

“Your Grace, if you have a moment?” Miss Jennings stopped him as he meant to leave with Merry.

“Certainly.”

Merry hurried to her own chamber to put on her outdoor clothes. One of her favorite things to do was frolic in the snow. Perhaps it was a bit undignified and unladylike, but nevertheless, she indulged whenever she had the opportunity.

Still tugging on woolen gloves, she descended the stairs and greeted the girls as they hopped from one foot to the other at the front door. Even the footman’s lips inched up slightly at their exuberance.

“Look what I found in the attic.” Penrose walked up to them, holding two wooden sleds.

“Oh, Your Grace, thank you so much,” Charlotte cried.

Each girl took a sled and disappeared through the door. Merry tightened the scarf around her neck.

“You are really going to play in the snow?” Penrose regarded her, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes I am, and if you had anything left of the child inside you, you would join us.”

“Madam, I am a duke, not a schoolboy. I plan to stay right here where it is dry and warm.”

“Coward.”

He merely responded with raised eyebrows.

The sounds of the girls yelping and racing around in the snow as children had done for ages, greeted her as she stepped through the door.

Merry stood and breathed deeply of the bracing cold air. Everything always seemed magical when it snowed. Lights burning within the house, with snow decorating the roof and windowsills, soothed her with a sense of peace. The dreariness of winter would vanish and turn everything into a sparkling white play land.

The first order of business was building a snowman. Charlotte requested a hat, scarf, carrot, and two pieces of coal from the footman, who supplied them with a full grin on his face this time.

They all diligently rolled three different sized balls and stacked them, then decorated their effort with the supplies. The exercise warmed her, as did the lighthearted expressions on the girls' faces. Children needed to be young and carefree, even when they were *ladies*.

Once the snowman stood proud in front of the manor, Charlotte and Clare spent time on the sleds, whooping with laughter when Merry took a turn and tumbled into a snow pile.

"Bravo, Miss Chambers." Penrose leaned against the front door, dressed in his greatcoat, scarf and hat. He crossed his arms and grinned as she stood and swiped snow from her pelisse.

"Have you decided to join us?" She dragged the sled toward where he stood.

"Merely to observe, I assure you."

"Sir, you need to recapture your youth. You've told me to remember my place, but it appears you need to forget your place once in a while."

"Indeed? I can assure you I never forget my place. And I find it's much wiser to enjoy watching all of you get wet and uncomfortable."

"Your Grace, we're going to make snowballs and have a snowball fight." Charlotte shouted from her position where she formed the small white balls, stacking them into a pile.

"And will Miss Chambers be joining you?"

"Of course. I always engage in the snowball fights." Merry slogged through the snow to where Clare also produced snowballs and knelt to help her. "In fact, I am the snowball queen."

"Aren't you cold, Miss Chambers?" Penrose spoke from his safe spot, a smirk on his handsome face.

Merry studied him—all stiff and proper. Dry as a bone and watching them from his comfortable perch at the front door. A tiny niggle of awareness settled in her middle. The cold brought out the color in his cheeks, his eyes snapping with his usual arrogance. Once again she remembered the kiss in the darkness of the library. How soft and warm his mouth had been, how hard his body felt against hers.

Now he appeared lofty, above her, a reminder of how far apart they stood. Before she could even form the words for what she planned to do, she picked up a good-sized snowball, and pulling her arm back, let it fly.

The snowball whacked the duke square in the head.

"Miss Merry!" Two astonished young voices screeched.

CHAPTER 8



The cold, wet mess slid slowly down Penrose's forehead, over his nose, to his tightened lips, then dripped off his chin onto his coat. He dragged his hand down his face and headed toward his nemesis.

Eyes wide, but with a huge grin, Merry rose to her feet, and turned to run. His long legs ate up the distance to her. Her skirts dragged in the snow, hampering her escape. Penrose wrapped his arm around her middle from behind. "No one has hit me in the head with a snowball in over twenty years," he growled in her ear.

Merry tugged free of his grip and promptly fell face-first into the snow when he released her. She jerked her head up, spitting out clumps of slush, still laughing. "I'm sorry." Wiping her face, she attempted to stand and instead landed on her bottom. Tilting her head she regarded him. "No. I'm not sorry."

"That does it. This time, Miss Chambers, you have gone too far." Penrose wheeled and strode in the direction of the house but made a quick detour to the pile of snowballs alongside Lady Charlotte. The young girl stared at him open-mouthed. He dropped to his knees alongside her.

"Madam, this is war," he shouted at Merry. He picked up a well-shaped ball of snow and hurled it in her direction. And hit her flat on the shoulder.

"Clare, some help, please," Merry shouted in the direction where the girl stood in stunned silence.

Clare hurried to her side, and within minutes snowballs flew back and forth between the two pairs, the sound of shrieks and laughter filling the afternoon air.

THREE DAYS after the snowball fight, which Penrose took a lot of teasing about from both his mother and Brandon, the skies dumped another foot of snow.

The duchess, Penrose, Merry, Lord Brandon, and Miss Jennings gathered for dinner, the dining room warm and glowing from candles and the fireplace. Footmen scurried back and forth, serving curried rabbit and pouring wine until retreating to stand quietly against the wall.

As Penrose spooned fragrant clear soup into his mouth, he regarded Merry, who looked particularly delightful tonight in a pale aquamarine silk gown. The flames from the fireplace behind her cast a shadowy mystique over her face. Then she would turn her head to comment to another diner, and the radiance of her creamy skin and full lips tempted his senses. No matter how hard he tried, she was never far from his thoughts. Nor was his desire for her.

He smiled, remembering the audacity of her dragging him into a snowball fight. It was even worth the indignity he'd put up with since that eventful incident. For the first time in more years than he could remember he hadn't felt like *the duke*. Just a man, playing in the snow with two young girls and a beautiful, mischievous woman.

That could be my family.

He shook his head. No. He liked his life just the way it was. No wife to bring complications into it. Especially one who scoffed at marriage being a business arrangement. Let Brandon produce the necessary heir. His gut tightened. As long as his brother didn't set his sights on Merry.

"Penrose, with all this snow keeping us indoors, I'm feeling a bit restless. It's a lovely, clear evening. Perhaps you could have the sleigh brought 'round, and the horses hitched? I'm sure Miss Chambers and Miss Jennings would enjoy a ride in the night air. I know I would."

"Mother, I haven't thought of that sleigh in years. I wonder if it's still serviceable?"

"There's only one way to find out."

Penrose signaled for the footman to have the stable master locate the large sleigh and prepare it for a ride.

"I'm afraid I must decline, Your Grace. My delicate constitution doesn't allow for rides in the night air." Miss Jennings raised her chin.

"As you wish," he nodded in her direction.

"Indeed. A true lady must guard against taxing her system." She looked

down her nose at Merry, then turned to smile at Penrose, and missed the way Merry glanced up at the ceiling.

He coughed to cover his laugh.

HIS MOTHER and Merry stood in the entrance hall, bundled up against the cold, when Penrose jogged down the stairs. “Excellent. Are we ready?”

“My dear, I was about to mention to Miss Chambers that it appears something must not have agreed with me at dinner, and I must bow out of our little ride.” His mother touched her stomach briefly and smiled sadly.

“Oh, I will stay with you.” Merry immediately looked concerned.

She flicked her hand in dismissal. “Nonsense, you must both go and enjoy yourselves. I don’t want to spoil the fun. Just an old lady’s troubles.”

“Are you sure?” Penrose regarded the rosy cheeked, very healthy-looking duchess with skepticism.

“Absolutely, my dears. I will have Cook send up a tonic. Go off and have fun. It’s a lovely night for a ride.” She glanced out the small window above the hall mirror. “Look at all those stars. My goodness, there must be millions of them.”

“It really isn’t proper for me to ride alone with His Grace,” Merry said.

“Don’t be silly. Who could possibly object to you both enjoying a ride on our own land in an open sleigh? Things in the country are a bit more relaxed than in Town.”

Still looking askance at the duchess, Merry allowed Penrose to take her elbow and escort her out of the house.

The shiny red sides of the conveyance gleamed in the moonlight. His heart lightened just looking at it. So many happy memories rose as he grew closer and helped Merry in. As excited as a boy, he hurried to the other side and climbed into the seat. Reaching behind him, he pulled out a large fur blanket, and tucked it securely over the two of them. “Ready?”

Merry nodded, and he picked up the reins, the jingle of the bells music to his ears. “It has been a very long time since I took a sleigh ride.” He cast Merry a grin.

“It seems to me there are many things you haven’t done in some time. And all of them fun.”

“That’s right. The duties of my title have been foremost in my life for so long, I’ve forgotten how to enjoy myself.” He glanced at her. “But you

apparently have no trouble remembering.”

She shook her head and pulled the fur up to her chin. “We must always keep part of the child within us alive.”

“Such philosophy. One of your father’s quotes?”

Merry smiled. “No. My very own.”

They flew past barren trees, ice glistening on branches that stretched upward, reaching for the multitude of stars overhead. The sound of the sleigh bells echoed in their ears, soon followed by Merry’s laughter.

“This is wonderful. How could you not do this every time it snows?”

“Now with you here, you must remind me.” He tugged on the reins, directing the sleigh to the left. “I want to show you something.”

After about ten minutes he pulled up and brought the conveyance to a halt. The horses snorted and stomped, their warm breath visible in the cold night air. In front of them sat a frozen pond, tucked away amidst a circle of bare trees.

“My brother and I used to skate here all winter when we were youths.”

“How lovely!” Merry leaned forward, taking in the ice sparkling in the moonlight. She turned to him. “We must come back here and skate.”

“Oh, no thank you.”

“Why ever not?” She shook her head. “Perhaps because you haven’t done that either in years?” Her lips tilted in a smirk.

“You are correct, and the last thing I want to do is break my neck.”

He laid his arm along the back of the sleigh and tucked an errant curl behind her ear. The moonlight on her face brought attention to her comely features. “Aren’t you afraid of anything, Miss Chambers?” He lowered his voice.

She swallowed, the delicate muscles in her neck working, causing blood to race to his groin.

“Yes. There are some things I’m fearful of.”

“Such as?”

Merry licked her lips, conveying images of what he’d like her to do with that sensuous mouth. He shifted and drew her closer. “I’ll wager there is nothing that scares you.”

“Not so, Your Grace.” The words slid from her mouth on a whispered breath.

“Penrose. We dispensed with *Your Grace* a while ago.” He bent toward her, leaning his forehead on hers, his hand cupping her cheek. “Do I scare

you?”

She shook her head in response.

Had she discerned his thoughts at the moment, she would be petrified. Despite claiming he didn't scare her she was certainly not unaffected by his closeness. Her pulse raced, evident by the throbbing in her neck that appeared almost painful. She drove him mad with her scent, her obvious arousal. He had to taste her, feel those soft lips under his. Gripping the back of her head, he gently rested his mouth on hers.

PENROSE MUST'VE CERTAINLY HEARD her heart thundering in her chest. Was she afraid of him? Yes. Afraid of how he made her feel. And wish for things beyond her grasp that one only found in fairy tales.

As his warm lips covered hers, the light of a thousand candles burst behind her closed eyelids. She whimpered, and he pulled her closer. Everything inside her body throbbed. Her nipples ached where they pressed against her layers of clothing. The woman's place between her legs throbbed, then moistened. What was happening to her? She'd never felt this before, and although it frightened her, her traitorous body longed for more.

Penrose drew back and held her face gently, brushing his thumb over her heated cheek. “I want you, Merry. Very much. And *that* should scare you.” Once more his head descended and he reclaimed her lips, crushing her against him. He slipped his tongue in, sweeping over the inside of her mouth, stroking, seeking all the sensitive parts. She tentatively used her tongue to meet his, spurring a groan to rumble from his chest.

He released her mouth and brushed kisses over the sensitive skin behind her ear. Shivers ran down her body.

“Are you cold?”

Quite the opposite. She wanted to remove every layer of clothing. And heaven help her, she wanted Penrose to do the same so she could rub her sensitive skin against his. Nothing in all the books and learning she'd had, prepared her for these feelings. “No, not cold. Quite the opposite, in fact. I am much overheated.”

Penrose chuckled and pulled back to stare into her eyes. “You never do or say what is expected.”

“'Tis a gift, Your Grace,” she whispered.

“We'd better get back.” He slid over and reclaimed the reins, and

coldness replaced the warmth his body had provided. When she clasped her arms around herself, he pulled her to him, tucking her snugly into his side.

The ride home was swift, seeming to take much less time than their venture out. Her emotions were tumultuous, questions swimming around her mind. What would happen when they arrived home? Could they continue this back and forth dance without coming to the obvious conclusion? And what would happen afterward? Did she want to take the chance?

Penrose hopped from the sleigh and tossed the reins at the stable master. Taking Merry by her elbow, he escorted her to the house.

“I think a bit of brandy would warm us both up. Care to join me in the library, Miss Chambers?” Penrose shrugged out of his coat and peeled off his gloves. The footman helped relieve Merry of her cloak and pelisse she’d worn to keep warm. The house stood silent, a testament to its residents having retired for the night.

Although still confused by the kiss, and not sure where this would all lead, the thought of ending the night now dampened her spirits. “Yes, I think I could use a small drink.”

They entered the library, and Merry rubbed her hands together and headed toward the blazing fireplace. Her heart thumped, and with the silence in the room, felt certain Penrose could hear it, and would know how he affected her. She should leave, save herself from what she wanted so badly.

“Miss Chambers.” The duke’s deep voice rumbled behind her as he held out a crystal glass of sherry. Her heart pounded double time as her senses came alive at his scent. She stared at his strong hand, mesmerized. What would those hands feel like against her naked flesh? She closed her eyes, but the image stayed with her.

“Thank you.” She turned and cleared the squeak from her throat.

He gently touched her cheek, tenderness in his eyes.

Once they sat in front of the fire, a warm rush of memories from the other night raced through her. Only this time she wore clothes. She blushed. Why were her thoughts so wanton?

She slanted a look at Penrose, his long legs stretched in front of him. Generations of aristocracy had been bred into those features. Broad forehead, high cheekbones, and a straight nose above full lips. He studied the fire, taking unhurried swallows of brandy. Every time her gaze wandered to his mouth a spark of awareness clenched her stomach.

He’d said he wanted her. For what? Certainly she would never suffice as

his duchess. Did he intend to seduce her, and then like so many aristocrats, send her on her way, or offer her *carte blanche*? She best be on her guard where the Duke of Penrose was concerned. Perhaps Miss Jennings had been correct, and all he would seek her from her would be a quick tumble.

Frustration mounted as she dwelled on how foolish she'd been already to allow his kisses. With his attractive looks, title, and money, the man before her could have any woman in England.

She dragged the remnants of her pride around her like a comforting wrap. Once Kitty's Christmas Eve ball was over, she would leave. Perhaps if Penrose decided to take a bride, it would be the governess. He seemed to hold the woman in high regard, and the girls had adjusted well to her tutelage. Although no beauty in the classic sense, Merry didn't imagine a man with Penrose's sexual appetites would find it hard to bed Miss Jennings. And produce the heir and spare.

Penrose didn't seem too interested in the usual way men of the *ton* pursued a wife. Kitty had confided that he hadn't attended *ton* activities in years. As a duke, it was his responsibility to provide the heir, not leave it to his brother, as he intended. Surely he would eventually come to that decision. And Miss Jennings agreed with his assertion that marriage was no more than a business arrangement.

Penrose drained his glass, and then set it down, pulling her from her musings. He studied her for moment, a hungry look in his eyes. Then he rose and pulled her up with both hands, wrapping his arms around her waist. "I can no longer fight this." Without further warning, he took possession of her mouth, gently at first, and then with power and persuasion. All her senses screamed, warning her to flee.

He released her lips, his warm breath causing her skin to tingle as he placed short, feathery kisses behind her ear, down her neck to her jaw. She tilted her head to give him greater access.

"Day and night, thoughts of you in my bed consume me," he murmured as he continued his assault on her senses. "I never lose control. Never." He drew back and looked in her eyes. "Until now."

Merry licked her dry lips and Penrose groaned. "I want to make love to you, breaking one of my strictest rules about bedding women under my employ."

"I am not in your employ, but your mother's," she breathed.

He cupped her chin, and brushed his thumb over her lips, his eyes

darkened with desire. “What are you saying?”

Indeed. What was she saying? Was she prepared to be bedded and discarded? Could her heart take the blow? She needed to flee from this room, this man. Run as far away as she could from him and the power he held over her. Her newly formed plan to leave after Christmas must stay foremost in her mind.

Then she made the mistake of gazing into those passion-filled eyes, and inhaled deeply, opting for honesty. “I’m not sure. I’ve never felt this way before, and I don’t know what to make of it.”

He took both of her cold hands into his warm ones. “Are you aware of what I’m asking of you?”

She nodded. It was too easy to get lost in the way he looked at her. Her inner voice urged her to leave. Quickly.

His mouth took hers hungrily and she surrendered. Whatever this man wanted from her would be his. She could no longer fight it, either. The passion he elicited was more powerful than all the brandy she could consume.

He ran his hands over her back, massaging, kneading her flesh. He pulled away, and leaned his chin on the top of her head, his thumb stroking her cheek. “Tell me no now, and I will let you go. Or yes, if you wish this as much as I do.” He tilted her chin up.

She hesitated only a moment. “Yes.”

He swept her into his arms and strode to the door. Merry buried her face into his chest, inhaling deeply the scent that was only Penrose. Leather, brandy, and Bay Rum.

BLOOD POUNDING IN HIS EARS, Penrose sprinted up the stairs. He made short work of the distance to Merry’s room. He shifted her in his arms to open the door, then closed it with a swift kick of his foot. Thank God his mother slept like the dead and wouldn’t hear them.

Merry slid down his body, every delectable inch of where their bodies touched setting him on fire. He was drunk on her nearness, scent, and warmth, overwhelming him like no other woman in his life. She shuddered, reminding him he held an innocent in his arms.

He kissed her first with his eyes, then slowly with his mouth, nibbling at her lips. Her slight moan sent all his blood to the one place in his body he wanted to join with hers.

Merry slid her palms up his chest and held onto his shoulders as if anchoring herself. He prodded her lips with his tongue, and she opened, allowing him to sweep her sherry-flavored mouth. He leaned back. "I want to see you."

She drew in a breath, drawing his glance to her full breasts, the nipples prominent against her gown. Quickly his nimble fingers untied the back of the garment, drawing it down her shoulders. Two perfect orbs, their surging peaks barely hidden behind a linen chemise, dried up all the moisture in his mouth.

"You don't wear stays?"

She shook her head slightly, a slight smile gracing her lips. "No."

"What am I to do with you, Miss Chambers?" he murmured against her forehead.

She drew back and regarded him with half closed eyelids, her voice deepened with desire. "Take me to bed?"

With no idea how sensuous she sounded, she'd almost brought him to his knees. He released the grip he had on her gown and it hit the floor in a rustle of fabric. A flick of his fingers, and the straps of her chemise slid down her arms. He sucked in a breath at the creaminess of her skin, the pouting of her rose-colored nipples.

Gently he eased her onto the bed, stretching out alongside her. He fondled one generous breast, its nipple marble hard. When she arched her back in response to his touch, his tongue licked a path from her neck to nip at the rosy peak. She drew in a sharp breath as he suckled.

He shifted his head to nuzzle and kiss her other breast. "I love your response to me." He eased up on his elbow and tucked a loose tendril behind her ear. "I don't want to frighten you, sweetheart. Do you know what will happen?"

"I think so. Will it...will it hurt?"

Penrose ran his fingertips over her forehead, down her cheek to her chin. "Since you are an innocent, it will hurt a bit at first. But then I assure you, the pleasure that awaits you will more than make up for it."

"Why am I the only one with no clothes on?" The mirth in her eyes eased his concern about her fears.

"I'll correct that situation right now." He stood and tugged his shirt from his breeches.

MERRY'S EYES widened at the sight of the bulge in the front of Penrose's breeches. Then her gaze drifted up to his chest where he'd unbuttoned his white linen shirt and pulled it over head head. Her breath hitched and her stomach slid to her feet. All that golden skin, with lightly feathered dark hair down the center, leading to a place below his waist like an arrow. She didn't realize she'd licked her lips until she heard his groan.

"Don't do that, or this will be over before it starts." His voice sounded strained.

Her eyelids snapped open and she stared at his flushed face. A sense of power rushed through her to know she could wring such a response from this confident, arrogant man.

He stared at her for a moment before shoving his breeches down.

Oh my God. That will never fit!

"Yes it will."

She felt the heat rise to her face, not realizing she'd spoken aloud.

Penrose climbed on the bed and ran his hand down her cheek. "Don't think so hard. Let me be concerned about how this will happen." He gathered her into his arms, once more kissing her with enough passion to turn her brain into mush and force any thoughts about size and fitting, to flee from her mind.

His strong hands skimmed up the sensitized skin of her back to grasp her shoulders, bringing their bodies together to rub her soft breasts against his hair-roughened chest. He nuzzled her neck, and she could feel his uneven breathing as he held her close to whisper into her ear. "You set me on fire, my beautiful vixen."

In a feathered touch, his fingers drifted over her ribs from under her arm to her hip, where he kneaded the globes of her bottom. No longer able to deny herself, she slid her hand to Penrose's waist, her hand wandering below until she reached that part of him that throbbed, almost as if had a life of its own.

She gasped at the feel of silk over steel. Her eyes met his as he groaned.

"Do you see what I mean? This is what you do to me."

His hand caressed the silky skin of her thigh, moving slowly up until he covered her mons. His thumb circled her most private place, and her legs fell open almost of their own accord, wanting more of the delicious feelings he evoked. He slid his finger into her body. "You're so tight."

"I told you it wouldn't fit." Would they have to stop? Maybe Penrose

could think of something to make it work, for she didn't want this to end yet.

He added another finger, stretching her. "Don't worry, sweetheart."

Her body seemed to be melting down there. The sound of his fingers working her opening brought a moan from deep inside her.

"Stop thinking," he whispered before taking possession of her mouth again. Passion pounded the blood through her heart, chest and head. And where his fingers worked their magic, something began to build.

He pulled back and regarded her from under heavy-lidded eyes. Her fingers traced the beauty of his face. Scratchy along his jaw, smooth over his cheeks, and strong everywhere. When she reached his silky hair, she ran her fingers through it, urging his head back to her mouth.

"I'm sorry, love, but I need you now." He spoke against her lips.

Penrose shifted and covered her body, settling between her legs. Rising on his elbows, he brushed the damp hair from her forehead, and brought his head down in another soul-searing kiss.

She ran her hands over the sleek, smooth skin of his back. His muscles rippled under her palms as he moved. He was all hardness where she was soft. A lithe and powerful animal.

His engorged flesh prodded the area where his fingers had just been. She tensed as he edged into her channel. Surprisingly, it didn't hurt, only gave her a sense of fullness.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but it won't hurt for long."

Not sure what he meant, she jerked as he thrust into her body, burying himself deep inside her. Two tears leaked from the corners of her eyes at the intense sting.

"Shh, love. I hate causing you pain. Lie still for a moment and it will ease." He fingered the tears away.

As the tenderness eased, she drew in a deep breath. "It doesn't hurt anymore," she said in wonder.

Penrose withdrew his shaft almost all the way out, and then pushed back in again. He quickly set up a rhythm she picked up, meeting him thrust for thrust, flesh to flesh.

Merry moaned and licked her dry lips, unable to control her body's reaction to the wonder of their joining. Yet again the area between her legs tightened, and the sense of something wonderful awaiting her swept from her pounding heart to her very core.

He grasped her right hand with his left, keeping his weight off her with

one elbow.

She tossed her head back and forth, straining, whimpering.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know. I feel strange, as if I need something. Something that’s out there that I can’t reach. Please, help me.”

Penrose released her hand and reached between them to once again fondle the part of her that brought a sigh to her lips. “Yes.” Her labored breathing matched his as he worked his fingers and pounded into her.

All of a sudden Merry exploded into a thousand pieces, a downpour of fiery sensations. Her entire body throbbed as pleasure washed over her with each and every wave. Surely these feelings were not human, but mystical.

Within seconds, Penrose gave one final thrust and threw his head back with a groan, his magnificent body trembling before he collapsed over her.

They both panted as if they’d run for miles. She took in deep gulps of air and licked her dry lips. The intimate feeling of him lying on top of her as their hearts beat in rhythm lulled her into a sense of comfort and peace. She ran her fingers through his damp hair, reluctant to let him go. She savored the feeling of satisfaction, of having the weight of his body pressing hers into the mattress. Too quickly, he kissed her cheek, shifted his body, and then drew her into the pocket of his shoulder.

She closed her eyes, her breathing beginning to return to normal as a disturbing thought flitted through her mind like an epiphany.

Dear God, I’ve fallen in love with him.

CHAPTER 9



“*M*iss Merry, are you even *listening* to me?” Charlotte huffed, with arms crossed, and eyes narrowed. Merry smiled. Her former charge was growing into a young lady, with all the foils and foibles of that tumultuous age.

“I’m sorry, dear, I was woolgathering.” Merry ran her fingers down the girl’s smooth cheek. “What did you say?”

“I asked if you thought His Grace would permit me to attend the Christmas Eve ball?”

“Oh, sweetheart, I don’t believe so. You are much too young.”

“Could you ask him? He likes you.”

Merry felt the heat spread from her middle to her face. All morning she hadn’t stopped thinking about last night, and *what they’d done*. After a brief kiss on her forehead, Penrose had crept from her bed in the middle of the night, leaving her bereft and hugging the pillow that still held his scent.

She had no idea how she would face him today. Would he regard her as a wanton who gave her favors freely? Nonsense. He’d been fully aware of her innocent state. She sighed. So many feelings and thoughts kept her tied in knots. As much as she wished to see him to assure herself he didn’t hold her in contempt, the fear of seeing derision on his face ate at her.

Fortunately she’d been granted a reprieve since he had not appeared at breakfast. Lord Brandon informed her Penrose had left early to settle a dispute at one of his tenant’s homes that had turned dangerous.

“I will ask him, darling, but don’t count on it. I’m sure he will agree you are much too young for such activities.”

Charlotte’s face fell.

“Come, let’s enjoy the freedom from your studies, and help with decorating the ballroom.”

Miss Jennings had allowed both girls the afternoon off to join in the preparations for the ball and Christmas Day. Despite Merry’s invitation to the governess to join them, she’d declined and murmured something about servants being available to do that type of work.

“It looks like Christmas in here.” The duke’s rumbling voice, along with a gust of cold air, carried from the front door, to where Merry stood in the ballroom. She immediately lost interest in directing the placement of greenery and other festive decorations.

Her stomach clenched and her heart sped up. With shaky hands, she smoothed her skirts and took a deep breath.

“So here is where you’ve all gathered.” Penrose entered the room in a whirlwind. He kissed his mother on her cheek and glanced over at Merry, his face impassive. “Miss Chambers.” He nodded.

The clenching in her stomach grew into slight nausea. Where was the warm and tender lover from last night? The man who whispered to her in the dark, who brought her to heights she’d never imagined? Sadly, the stiff and formal duke had taken his place. Then she chided herself. What did she expect him to do? Rush across the room and sweep her into his arms in front of everyone? Fall to his knees and profess his undying love?

Yes.

“Ladies, you are doing a wonderful job. The ball tomorrow night will be a huge success thanks to all your efforts.” He smiled broadly at Charlotte and Clare who tied ribbons onto greenery.

Their young faces flushed in pleasure. Did he have that effect on every female—young and old?

“My, Penrose, you are certainly in high spirits today.” Kitty regarded him with amusement.

“I’m afraid I’ve caught your enthusiasm.”

A footman entered the ballroom. “Your Grace, Miss Jennings awaits you in the library as you requested.”

“Ah, yes. Miss Jennings. Thank you.” He turned to the women. “I will see you all at dinner. I have several things to catch up on this afternoon.” Bowing slightly, he left the room, his departure leaving her bereft.

Why would he request to see Miss Jennings?

The relief she’d hoped to feel at confronting Penrose fled. He’d treated

her with the same reserve he had when she'd first arrived. Instead of the warmth from a lover, it was as if he hadn't even remembered their time together.

The beginnings of a major headache tickled the back of her neck. As soon as the work in the ballroom was finished, she'd lie down with a lavender cloth for her head.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Penrose strode into the drawing room as Brandon poured himself a brandy. He glanced at Penrose over his shoulder. "Care to join me, brother?"

"Yes. Please." Penrose walked further into the room and took the glass. "I'm glad you are the only one here. I wanted to speak with you before dinner."

His brother raised his eyebrows. "Sounds serious."

Penrose drank from his glass and motioned to the two chairs in front of the fireplace. He settled into one, and leaned forward, his elbows braced on his legs, the glass dangling from his fingers. He studied his brother. "I have decided to take a wife."

Brandon made a choking sound, then coughed and wheezed for a few minutes. Once he had himself under control, he put his glass down, and took in a deep breath. "You said you would never marry."

"I've changed my mind."

"So it seems." Brandon shifted in chair. "Miss Chambers?"

Penrose smiled. "Is it so obvious?"

"Only to everyone who has observed the two of you pretending to ignore each other."

"Ah, yes. Well, you may chide me now. To your way of thinking the giant has fallen."

"I knew it would happen one day. You never meant for me to be the heir. It was only a matter of time before you came to your senses. I am not, and never will be, fit to be the duke. I'm just surprised it has taken you this long." He raised his glass in a salute. "And may I say I congratulate you on your choice. Had you not spoken up, I would have paid my own addresses to the woman."

"Hands off, brother." Penrose narrowed his eyes.

Brandon threw up both hands, palms face out. "I would never tread on

your territory.”

They grinned at each other.

MERRY CLOSED the door to her bedroom and headed to the stairs. Her headache had diminished somewhat, but she'd spent the time lying in the darkened room, remembering. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so easy to do if Penrose's scent still didn't linger on the pillow where he'd slept. She had quickly changed her own sheet that the morning, horrified to see the smear of blood. The evidence of her indiscretion staring her in the face.

Her confusion at his reaction this afternoon remained. Hopefully sometime tonight they would have a few minutes alone, and she could talk to him, determine his feelings.

What feelings? You allowed him to take you to bed. You are certainly old enough to know what men think of those kinds of women.

She reached the partially open drawing room door to hear Penrose and Lord Brandon speaking. Knowing she shouldn't, nevertheless she halted and listened.

“I will announce our betrothal at the ball tomorrow night.” Penrose's voice reached her ears, causing her to take in a sharp breath.

Betrothal?

“Well done for my future sister-in-law. From governess to duchess,” Brandon said.

Miss Jennings? Everything inside Merry dissolved into pain. The woman had been right. With her *English* background, the duke would select Miss Jennings if he ever decided to marry. Apparently his meeting with her in the library was to propose a *business arrangement*.

Oh, how stupid she'd been. She'd given herself to a man who had no regard for her, who probably thought since she was an American, she had no morals. *Is he right?*

Merry's knees went weak. He hadn't lied. Marriage was merely a way to gain the perfect duchess, with no consideration of love. She shook her head and fought down the bile that rose to the back of her throat.

“What about the other one?”

“I have plans for her. I don't want any complications her presence would cause in my marriage. I'll see she is well taken care of and settled elsewhere.”

“Won't she expect more than that? I've always felt the woman was

smitten with you.”

“No matter. Her false assumptions will be dealt with.”

Smitten? False assumptions? Had the entire household noticed her attraction to the despicable man? Oh, if only the floor would open, and she could drop through.

Merry stumbled backward until her heels hit the bottom stair and she fell on her bottom. She scrambled to her feet and raced up the stairs to reach her bedroom before she shattered into a million pieces.

“OBVIOUSLY THIS WILL NOT BE the typical *ton* marriage you had anticipated. Mother and I have been aware that your feelings for the girl are beyond the affection stage.” He sobered and swirled the brandy in his glass. “Keep in mind, Penrose, you will hear comments from some members of the *ton* about Miss Chamber’s background. Don’t forget, you are considered quite the catch. I would not see her subjected to derision and heartache. I am quite fond of my future sister.”

“No one will cut my duchess.”

“See that they don’t.”

Penrose nodded as his mother and Miss Jennings entered the room.

He glanced behind them. “Where is Miss Chambers?”

“We saw her at the top of the stairs, about to return to her bedroom. Apparently she has a headache, and won’t be joining us.”

A line formed between his brows. “Should we send for the doctor?”

“No, dear. Miss Chambers did look a bit pale and shaky, but she assured me it was a minor thing.”

The four entered the dining room, taking their seats. Despite a tempting dinner of roast duck, broiled salmon, braised beef and a selection of vegetables, Penrose remained distracted throughout the meal. Merry had seemed all right when he’d seen her this afternoon. God, how hard it had been to not race across the room and pull her into his arms, right there in front of everyone. The only way he was able to control himself was to practically ignore her.

He frowned. After dinner he would go to her room and reassure himself she wasn’t seriously ill. Penrose patted his pocket to feel the sapphire and diamond ring he’d retrieved from the safe that afternoon. For generations the ring had been given to every duchess on her betrothal. It had been hard not to

confide in his mother, but as much as he loved the woman, she would likely spoil the surprise before he had the chance to propose to Merry tomorrow evening, right before the ball.

Penrose smiled to himself. He'd had no idea when his annoyance with Merry had changed to desire, and then to something akin to love. Hell, it *was* love. He loved the minx, and without a doubt her escapades would bring a certain amount of terror to his well-ordered life. He couldn't wait.

Although he tried unsuccessfully to pay attention to the conversation around him, he was blessedly relieved when the meal came to an end.

"I will see you all in the morning. I have matters to attend to this evening. Good night." Penrose pushed his chair back and left the room.

He hurried up the stairs, then strode down the corridor to Merry's room, and tapped on the door.

"Yes." Her voice sounded muffled, like she had a stuffed nose. Was she very sick?

"Merry, open the door."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, but I'm not feeling well."

Your Grace?

"That is precisely why I want you to open the door. Should I send for the doctor?"

"No!"

He rattled the latch. "Merry, can you please let me in? I won't stay, I just want to assure myself of your condition."

"I have no *condition*, Your Grace."

He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. What was going on? Had their lovemaking last night upset her? He had an almost frantic need to see her, run his hands up and down her body, make sure she was all right.

"Merry, I'm asking nicely. Now please open the door."

"I'm not properly dressed, Your Grace."

He leaned his forehead on the door. Something was drastically wrong, and unless he could actually view her, he knew sleep would not come to him tonight. A sense of dread descended on him.

"All right. Shall I have a tray sent up?"

No answer.

"Merry?"

Her sigh came through the door. "No. Please leave me."

"Miss Chambers, I am not leaving here until you open the door. If

necessary, I will have a footman remove it for me.”

After a very long minute, the lock snapped and the door opened only far enough for him to see her puffy face in the shadows.

His gut clenched. “You look as if you could use a doctor.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Can I come in and speak with you for a minute?” She was obviously very upset, and the only thing he could think of was last night. He needed to hold her, assure her all was well, and he—God help him—had fallen in love with her.

“No. I need to sleep. As you can see, I am fine. I do not need a doctor. Good night.” She closed the door, turned the lock, and he soon heard the sound of a heavy piece of furniture being dragged in front of the door.

Stunned into silence, he headed to his room.

GASPING from the effort of shoving the heavy table in front of the door, Merry slid down the wall and hugged herself, the sound of Penrose’s receding footsteps a wound to her heart. Why had he come? A man about to offer a betrothal to one woman, should not seek to enter the room of another.

Unless he expected to continue what they’d done last night? She sat up, her jaw slack. Did he intend to marry Miss Jennings, and have Merry for a mistress? Of course. Thus his comment about *having plans for her* and *seeing her settled elsewhere*.

All the agony of the past hour segued into anger. How dare the man! He intended to set her up in another house where he could visit her whenever he chose. He was by far the most vile, arrogant, miserable excuse for a human being she’d ever met. He would marry one woman, then break his marriage vows with another. Well, he would certainly get a piece of her mind the next time she saw him.

She embraced the anger that kept her misery at bay. When the man made his indecent proposal to her, she would box his ears back and walk away with her head held high and her pride intact.

Unlike my innocence, which is long gone.

CHAPTER 10



The next morning, Penrose entered the breakfast room and scowled. “Where is Miss Chambers?”

His mother looked up from her place at the table, nibbling a piece of toast. “Here and gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was finishing up her breakfast when I arrived. I had several things for her to do in town this morning, so she set out early.”

He took in a large breath and pulled out a chair. “How long will she be gone?”

“My, you’re full of questions this morning.” She shot him a curious look.

Penrose shrugged. No point in making his mother suspicious. “No matter. I only wondered how she felt this morning, considering her illness last evening.”

His mother frowned. “Actually, she was rather quiet and pale, but she said her head felt better.”

A sense of relief filled him but given Merry’s strange behavior when he went to her room the night before, he wouldn’t feel completely relaxed until he saw her. Still confused by her actions and her obvious distraught state, all he wanted to do was gather her close and take away all her fears. For it must certainly had been fear that plagued her. As an innocent, she must surely have conflicting feelings about their lovemaking.

Hopefully she wouldn’t take it into her mind that he would make love to her and not propose marriage. Perhaps she was under the impression he would ask for her hand only because he’d taken her innocence. His gut tightened in frustration. He needed to talk to her. Now.

“Good morning, Your Grace.” Miss Jennings swept into the room, her head held high as if she were the duchess. She nodded in his mother’s direction. “Good morning to you as well, Your Grace.”

Penrose stood, then held out a chair for her. She blushed and settled herself. “I’m so looking forward to tonight’s festivities.” She batted her eyelashes at him.

Good Lord. His brother had been correct. It appeared Miss Jennings was smitten with him. More likely his money and title. He recalled the meeting with her yesterday afternoon to assess his wards’ progress in their studies. At the time, his thoughts were so consumed with Merry, he never paid attention to the governess’s actions.

Considering the disdain she held for his future duchess, things would definitely run smoother if he helped her secure another position. As soon as Merry accepted his offer, he would begin searching among his acquaintances for a suitable place for Miss Jennings.

But now his attention totally focused on his soon-to-be betrothed. The passion in her, just waiting to be unleashed, brought the blood racing to his groin. A small taste of her the other night had left him craving more. Their engagement would have to be very short, lest the future Duke of Penrose make an appearance too soon after their wedding vows. He chuckled.

Never had he envisioned a woman would so possess him that he would change his mind not only about marrying but throwing the *business arrangement* part of it out the window.

“Your Grace?” Miss Jennings questioned him.

Pulling himself back to his surroundings, he glanced at her. “Yes?”

“I said, do you imagine this will be the first of many balls at Penrose Hall?”

He stared at her, running her words through his brain, still trying to figure out what she asked him. And where the devil was Merry? Why wasn’t she the one sitting here next to him, smiling, and asking about future balls? He shook his head, years of training taking over. “I’m sure my mother will enjoy planning many more festivities in the future.”

Penrose placed his serviette alongside his plate and stood. “Now if you will excuse me, ladies, I will retire to my library to finish up some last-minute items before our overnight guests arrive.”

Despite his pronouncement, when he entered the library, he headed to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. He gazed out at the dreary day.

Snow was once again in the air.

MERRY CHECKED the yellow and white flowered china clock on her dresser. Her lady's maid would arrive shortly to help her into her gown and fix her hair. She placed her hands over her middle to stop the fluttering.

She'd managed to avoid Penrose all day. When she arrived home from the small market town, he'd been behind closed doors with his steward. Breathing a sigh of relief, she scurried to her room, where she remained hidden for the afternoon.

Now with her bath over and coming to terms with her impending meeting with Penrose, all the jumbled thoughts that had raced through her mind all day began to form cohesive sentences. She would let him make his scandalous proposal. But to make certain he knew she understood what he planned to do she'd selected her most indecent gown. If he believed her to be a woman of loose morals, then she would play the part.

The low-cut white silk garment, with a wide band of red satin underneath her breasts brought attention to the creamy skin of her cleavage. The small cap sleeves emphasized her slender shoulders. As she gazed at the beautiful gown, she tapped her finger against her lips. Perhaps she would even dampen the material so it clung to her body. She shivered, reminding herself it was December.

She padded across the room to her chest and withdrew long red satin opera gloves. Perfect to finish off the outfit that declared her to be a woman of little virtue, as he apparently saw her. She would tempt the man all evening, teasing him with what he would never again have. Then when he offered to make her his mistress, she would slap his arrogant face, then storm away, her head held high.

Why didn't that make her feel any better? True, she would have her moment, but she'd have to leave her girls and Kitty. And watch Miss Jennings preen.

But worse than anything, she'd lose the man she loved. The man she'd given herself to and thought he had at least some feelings for her besides lust. *To us marriage is all a business arrangement, nothing more.*

Oh God, how am I going to get through this night?

PENROSE ADJUSTED his cravat once more, standing next to his mother in the receiving line, constantly watching the staircase, waiting for Merry to descend. His heart sped up every time he caught a flash of blonde out of the corner of his eye. When the woman turned out not to be Merry, his heart resumed its normal pattern.

Where was the woman?

For some inexplicable reason, he'd been unsuccessful in seeing her all day. Every time he asked for her, she was gone from the manor, locked in her room, busy with his wards, supervising the servants, or on some infernal mission for his mother. If he didn't know better, he'd swear Merry had purposely avoided him.

Unlike the other women, she elected to have a tray sent to her room for dinner. His stomach in knots, he ate very little, and drank too much. He grunted. Leave it to getting involved with a woman to drive a man to drink.

"You're looking quite well, Your Grace." His musings were interrupted by Lady St. James, as she eyed him, the familiar sultry look in her eyes. He'd had a short dalliance with her a few years ago, but quickly lost interest. Now her blatant tone and the possessive way she rested her hand on his chest rankled.

"My lady," he bent over her hand and kissed it.

She cast a glance at him from under shuttered eyelids, a siren's smile on her face before she moved along.

"Your Grace." He turned to encounter Miss Jennings standing beside him. Heavens, what did the woman have on? Her gown would be more appropriate for a young debutante. Did she not possess anything more suited to her age? Ever the gentleman, he bent and kissed her hand. "You're looking lovely this evening."

She tittered, and lingered, fussing with her gown. The overpowering stench of her perfume caused his eyes to water. He glanced up and came eye to eye with Merry making her way into the ballroom.

Everyone else in the room ceased to exist. He attempted to swallow with the driest mouth he'd ever had. His eyes ate her up, her cool assessment, her chin angled in arrogance. Her tongue ran over her lush lips as her gaze swung back and forth between him and Miss Jennings. She was exquisite.

And barely dressed! God's teeth! Where the devil was the rest of her gown?

His blood froze, unable to decide whether to race downward to his groin

in lust, or upward to his head in anger. If she took a deep breath and exhaled, her delectable breasts would tumble from her bodice into her drink. All the muscles in his gut tightened, and he fought a powerful desire to shrug out of his jacket, then whip it around her shoulders, covering up what no one else except he should ever lay eyes on.

He snagged her hand as she passed by.

She stopped and raised her chin. "Your Grace," she curtsied gracefully.

"Stand up," he snapped, causing his mother to glance at him. He could swear he'd gotten a glimpse of her nipples. "Do not curtsy for the rest of the evening."

"As you say." Merry rose, a sly smile on her face.

Her eyes twinkled with mirth, the cool disdain on her features a marked contrast. His grip tightened on her hand. The red satin glove on her warm fingers brought a flush to his face, sending his blood south. "Don't go anywhere. I want to speak with you."

"Indeed, Your Grace?" She tugged her hand from his. "If you will excuse me, I believe I'm being summoned." She nodded slightly and entered the ballroom.

Good lord, I can't let her parade around the room in that gown!

Twenty very long minutes passed before the last guest had been greeted, and Penrose was free to find his future duchess. After searching through the throng, he finally spotted her talking with Lord Grey, one of London's worst rakes. He headed in her direction, his blood pumping in rhythm with his steps.

SHE SHOULD NEVER HAVE WORN this gown. If one more *gentleman* talked to her breasts, she would scream. The gentleman introduced to her as Lord Grey had cornered her a while ago and kept moving closer than what was acceptable. If only she could loosen one of her hairpins to stick his hand.

Once more she edged away from him and turned her head to see Penrose striding toward them, his face a mask of fury. She stiffened her spine, ready to do battle.

Her stomach released a horde of butterflies. Why did he have to look so good? A myriad of eyes watched him from above silk fans as he strode past. Her heart hammered at the sight of his broad shoulders as he eased his way through the crowd. Dark waves of silky hair fell over his forehead, drawing

her attention to his eyebrows, furrowed above piercing brown eyes. She gulped. This would be much easier to do if she didn't have to look at him.

He gripped Grey's shoulder. "Grey. I believe Lady St. James is looking for you."

About to object, Lord Grey backed away when he observed Penrose's face. "Thank you, Your Grace."

Penrose took her gloved hand in his, kissed it, then staring into her eyes, swept her into the first dance. All the arrogance of His Grace, Duke of Penrose, emanated from his hard body.

Heat diffused her face at the memory of that arrogance cracking under the spell of their shared passion. Her flesh tingled where his palm gripped her back. As he brought them into a turn, he pulled her closer. His dancing was as graceful as everything else about him.

"It appears I will have to replace your lady's maid." His deep voice swept over her like a curtain of fire.

Unable to speak, Merry didn't reply, but merely raised her eyebrows.

His jaw worked. "She seems to have forgotten the rest of your gown."

Merry lifted her chin. All the cutting remarks she'd worked out in her mind throughout the day had fled at Penrose's touch. Why did he affect her so? Where was the anger she'd felt last night after hearing his intention to become betrothed to Miss Jennings?

After making love to me.

Gathering the mantle of righteous indignation about her, she cast him a tight smile. "This gown is precisely the way it should be. And you have no right to criticize my choice of clothing."

"And that will soon change." He moved them toward the French doors, and then grasping her hand tightly, all but dragged her onto the terrace.

"Your Grace, it's freezing out here." She ran her palms up and down her arms.

"We need a quiet place to talk, and I don't want to march you through that room with every man in there staring at your bosom." He shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around her.

She pulled the jacket closer. "'Tis *my* bosom to stare at." The warmth from his body transferred itself to her, along with his scent, crippling her heart.

"Merry." He took both her hands in his. "I've been trying see you alone all day."

“Under the circumstances, Your Grace, ‘tis very inappropriate.”

He slid his arms around her, then gathered her close. “But not for long. What I’m about to ask you will make it acceptable for me to be alone with you any time I wish.”

The blood rushed to her face. The nerve of the man. Not only was he going to expect her to be his mistress, he would also demand her time and attention any time he chose. Oh, how her palm itched to smack that smug face.

“Indeed?” She raised her eyebrows, all the time dying on the inside.

He cupped her chin. “Miss Chambers, I am requesting you do me the honor of becoming my duchess.”

Her heart pounded in righteous indignation. She reared back. “How dare you? You think because...” She stopped and stared at him wide-eyed. “What?”

“I’m asking you to marry me, sweetheart.”

Merry stared at him in shocked silence, then shook her head. “Marry you?”

“Yes.”

“What about Miss Jennings?”

“Who?”

“Miss Jennings. The perfect governess who would be the perfect duchess.”

“What are you talking about?” He cupped her cheek. “You, my love, are the perfect duchess. For me.”

When what he’d said finally sunk in, Merry realized she’d misunderstood the entire conversation she’d overheard between Penrose and Lord Brandon.

“You wish to marry *me*?” she whispered.

“More than anything.” He brushed his lips over hers. “Sweetheart, please save me from the torture I’ve been going through all day and say yes.”

She moved back, hand on her hip, her eyes narrowed. “Is this to be a *business arrangement*, Your Grace?” She tapped her foot.

He grinned and tugged her back. “No, my love.” He tapped the end of her nose with his finger. “And no more ‘Your Grace.’ I want to be your husband, your lover, the father of your children. And if you feel about me the way I feel about you, this will be a love match.”

Tears of relief and joy gathered in her eyes. This man, who she’d fallen so deeply in love with, would be hers. No matter to him that he was the duke,

and she a mere American, he loved her. Her chest swelled with happiness. “Oh yes, this will definitely be a love match.”

“Miss Merry!” Charlotte and Clare called from one of the upper windows.

Both Merry and Penrose sprang apart and look upwards. Merry gasped. “Girls, what are you doing hanging out the window in your night clothes?”

“It’s midnight, Miss Merry. Christmas Day.” They grinned at her, their beautiful young faces aglow in the moonlight.

She tried unsuccessfully to hide her smile. “Return to your room, I will deal with you in the morning.”

Penrose threw back his head and laughed.

Merry attempted to glare at him but lost the battle. “Don’t laugh. They are in big trouble.”

As the first snowflakes fell, he gathered her close yet again, then leaned his forehead on hers. “Merry Christmas, Miss Merry.”

“Look, His Grace is kissing Miss Merry,” Charlotte sighed. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

EPILOGUE



One Year Later

“*Y*our Grace, what are you doing out of bed?” The young servant hurried to Merry’s side, gripping her elbow as if she were an invalid.

“I am finished with lying about in bed. My son is two weeks old, and I refuse to spend another day staring at the ceiling.”

“I don’t know, I’m afraid His Grace will be furious.”

“Indeed he will be.” Penrose strode down the corridor, scooped Merry up into his arms, and started up the stairs.

“For heaven’s sake, put me down. I can walk.”

“No. The accoucheur distinctly said you were to remain in bed for three weeks.”

“I would love to see how you would behave if someone told you to stay in bed for three weeks.”

“I did not just deliver a baby, madam.”

“But I feel fine. I need some exercise. I can help with the preparations for Christmas.”

“No. I will settle you in bed, and have tea sent up. You must re-gain your strength so you can properly care for my son.”

She glared at him. “My son, too.”

“My goodness, what is all the bickering about?” The dowager duchess stood at the end of the corridor, her hands planted on her hips.

“Penrose insists I must return to bed.”

“Where she will remain for another week.”

With a shake of her head, the dowager duchess opened the door to the duke's apartments and Penrose marched through and headed directly to the large canopied bed in the middle of the room. He deposited his wife onto the mattress and pulled up the covers. "Stay here."

TO PENROSE'S DISMAY, Merry covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Oh, my dear," the dowager duchess soothed as she hurried forth and sat next to Merry on the bed. "It is difficult, I know." She glared at her son.

He stretched out his palms in supplication. "What did I say?"

"Miss Merry, guess what? Lord Brandon said we can all go ice skating this afternoon." Lady Charlotte entered the room, buttoning her pelisse.

Merry rolled over and cried harder.

"What's the matter with Miss Merry?" Clare followed Charlotte's footsteps.

They all stood staring at the woman sobbing on the bed. The dowager duchess cupped her jaw in her palm and shook her head. The girls clutched each other's hands.

"Everyone out!" Penrose's decree had his mother and the girls scurrying to the door.

Once the door closed, he stood, his hands clasping open and closed as he walked slowly to the bed. "Sweetheart?"

She didn't answer, just took a shuddering breath.

Sighing, he sat next to her and pulled her into his arms. "I am so sorry, my love."

She hiccupped and curled into his chest, almost as if she could crawl under his skin. "I don't know why I'm crying." She took the handkerchief he handed her and blew her nose. "I have a beautiful, healthy baby, and I feel fine. There is nothing to be unhappy about. Is there?"

He smoothed the hair back from her forehead. "Mother tells me all women have these 'spells' after childbirth. It will pass."

"If only I could feel useful. Nanny brings the baby to me a few times a day, but then whisks him right back after I feed him. She says he needs to be bundled in his bed all the time." She looked at him, tears clumping her eyelashes. "I want to hold him, play with him, count his fingers and toes. Maybe sing him a lullaby."

Gently, he rubbed the back of her neck until he felt her tightened muscles relax. Apparently the way Polite Society dealt with its children by handing them off to a nanny, then a governess, was not going to work for his wife. Thinking back, it rarely worked for his mother, as well.

“All right, let’s go.” Once more he settled her into his arms and strode to the door.

“Where are we going?”

“To make you useful.”

“Bess, fetch Her Grace’s bedding and bring it down to the drawing room.” He barked his orders at the young maid which had her scurrying to do his bid.

Once they reached the drawing room, Penrose deposited Merry in a chair next to the fireplace. She inhaled deeply of the pine scented room, smiling warmly at the tree the footmen had brought into the house yesterday. The girls had been busy making decorations and placing them on the branches.

With his wife in confinement, there would be no Christmas Eve Ball this year, but he needed to work harder to make this a pleasant Christmas for her.

“Make up the settee so Her Grace can recline there.” He motioned to Bess as she entered the room, with a footman following holding sheets, blankets and a pillow.

Once the bed was made up, and assured that Merry was comfortable, Penrose left the room. “Don’t go anywhere, I will be right back.”

MERRY GRINNED as Penrose kissed her on the forehead and strode from the room. How her opinion of him had changed since the day she had arrived with the girls in tow. At that meeting she would never have guessed what a caring, tender husband he would be. Of course, he was still arrogant and overbearing at times, but he more than made up for it in the way he tried so hard to please her.

“Well this is certainly a nice compromise.” Kitty placed a bowl of pine cones on the table near the door and surveyed the area. “This is a much more pleasant place for you to recuperate.”

“I don’t need to recuperate. I feel fine.”

“Yes, I know dear, and when I had my sons I felt fine as well, but to keep my husband happy I stayed in bed for weeks. Longer than three, it seems to me.” She tapped her lips with her index finger. “Or maybe it just seemed so

much longer.”

“Miss Merry we decided to stay with you instead of skating.” Lady Clare skipped into the room.

Lord Brandon followed. “Can I tell you, dear sister, how happy I am to be forced to stay in the nice warm house instead of freezing my—“

“Brandon!” the dowager duchess warned.

“Sorry, Mother. But I wouldn’t have said what you think.” He winked and took the seat across from Merry. “Feeling lonely, were you?”

“A bit,” she sighed.

“Perhaps we can have a game of charades later. Watching Penrose make a fool of himself will certainly entertain you.”

“Well, look who we have here.” Penrose strolled through the doorway with a small bundle wrapped in a soft white blanket. “I found this tyke lying around up in the nursery. Thought I would put him to good use.”

Merry held her arms out, her fingers flexing to hold her child.

Penrose placed the baby gently in her arms. “Here you are, Your Grace. Just as you requested. William Thomas, the Marquis of Burlington.” Penrose settled alongside his family. His large finger traced the softness of the newborn’s skin. “Merry Christmas, my son.”

“This is such a wonderful Christmas,” Merry choked. Then the tears fell as she hugged her baby close.

The End

Did you like this story? Please consider leaving a review on either Goodreads or the place where you bought it. Long or short, your review will help other readers discover new authors and make purchasing decisions!

I hope you had fun reading Merry and David’s love story. For more Regency romance, check out *For the Love of the Viscount*.

A pretend courtship can only if work if you don’t fall in love . . .

Lady Elise is a very content spinster. She holds intellectual gatherings and attends poetry readings, mind-improving lectures, and art shows. She runs her father’s household with quiet and determine efficiency, which is why she

is absolutely stunned when Papa informs his three daughters that until Lady Elise is happily settled with—gasp—a husband, he will not consider offers for his two younger daughters.

Lord Simon St. George has happily watched one friend after another become leg-shackled, taking pride in the fact that his title is secured by a brother and nephew, so there is no reason to seek a wife for himself. When he sees a woman previously unknown to him at a ball, who seems to be hiding from the rest of the attendees, he is intrigued enough to introduce himself.

A friendship forms, and Simon is thrilled to have found a lovely, intelligent woman to pass the time with, while Elise has secured a way to thwart her father by pretending they are courting. But even the best plans can go awry .

...

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A CHRISTMAS IN MANCHESTER



ABOUT THE BOOK

Miss Evelyn Allen has led a quiet life in Worcestershire all her twenty-one years as the devoted daughter of Pastor Joshua Allen and his wife. She always assumed she'd wed one day since her siblings had all done so, but no man had ever appealed to her in a way that she felt she could look across the breakfast table at him forever.

Until he came into her life...

The Duke of Manchester never expected to be left robbed and bleeding in the road miles from home. He knew his chances of survival were practically nil until an angel driving an old wooden wagon dragged him into her house where she and her mother nursed him back to health.

Even though she knows him for a lord by his manners and clothing, Eve has no idea that the man she is falling in love with is a Duke. A man so far above her she shouldn't even be speaking with him.

To him, their stations matter not, but can he convince her that she is all he wants for Christmas?

* * *

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CHAPTER 1



Worcestershire, England
October 1831

“*I*f you continue to plod along at this pace, Peony, we’re never going to reach home.” Evelyn Allen, known as Eve to family and friends, snapped the reins on the ancient horse pulling the family wagon along the road from the outskirts of the village to her home.

It had been a long day of gathering extra crops from the farms in the county to be delivered to the poor families in the village. Far too many villagers did not have enough food or clothes for their children. It was Eve’s job once a month to gather whatever the farmers could spare and bring it to her papa’s church to be distributed to the needy, along with any unwanted clothing she managed to collect.

Mama held a sewing circle every week when the ladies sewed new blankets and knitted baby clothes. Evelyn loved the look of gratitude on the young mothers’ faces when they were handed the warm blankets and knitted booties and caps for their little ones. Most of them had hard working husbands, but with so many children, it was difficult to make ends meet.

Her shoulders ached from hours of holding the reins, and her growling stomach reminded her it was well past dinner time. She only had about another two miles to go, but with Peony plodding along, as she was wont to do near the end of the day, Eve might be forced to drag the animal home.

The horse came to an abrupt stop and nickered, tossing her head. “What?” Evelyn rose to peer over the animal’s head to see a man, smack in the middle

of the path, on his knees, waving his arm.

“Oh, heavens.” She tied the reins around the dash and climbed down. The man grasped his shoulder and panted heavily as she approached him. Briefly, she considered that perhaps she should have brought her pistol from underneath the wagon seat, since highwaymen had been known to prowl the area. This man could very well be a decoy of sorts. “Are you well, my lord?”

He shook his head. “Shot.”

He’d been shot? It was then she noticed the blood oozing between his fingers where he had them plastered against his dark jacket. “Robbed and shot.” He barely got the words out.

She’d never seen him before, but given his clothing and demeanor, he was more than likely nobility. Her favorite type of people to dislike. Even kneeling in the dirt, bleeding, he had an air about him that smacked of privilege. However, her Christian sense of duty to her fellow man pushed that to the back of her mind.

“Can you stand, my lord? I can help you into my wagon and bring you home. Mama is good with healing, and I am no more than a mile or so from my house.”

Sweat beading his forehead, he grimaced and gave her a curt nod. She reached under his arm on the good side and helped him to his feet. It was auspicious that he had the ability to rise, because given his size and muscular form, she never could have lifted him. He slung his arm around her shoulders, and leaned heavily as they made their way back to the wagon.

“Did you hurt your leg, also?” He limped as they moved toward the vehicle.

“Yes.” He winced. “Tried to fight them off, but once they shot me, I was done for.”

It took some maneuvering, but with as much help as she could provide, he settled into the back of the wagon, along with all the vegetables. Despite those ignominious accommodations, it had been easier to position him there, than to attempt hauling him all the way up onto the driving seat. She began a slight apology, but he waved her away, wincing with every move. “Please don’t concern yourself, Miss. I am grateful to be out of the road.”

With renewed purpose to reach home, Eve snapped the reins, and egged the animal on, hoping his wound was not serious enough to cause the man to expire right there in her wagon. By the time they reached the cottage, he had passed out. Eve hurried into the tidy house that had been home to her family

since before she'd been born.

“Mama, Papa. I need your help.” She dashed through the back door, past the kitchen, taking a moment to sniff whatever it was Mama had cooked for dinner, newly aware of how hungry she was.

Darting down the corridor, she checked each room, until Mama met her at the bottom of the stairs and Papa stepped out of his study, his spectacles low on his nose. “Whatever is the problem, daughter?”

“There is a gentleman in my wagon.” She stopped to take in air. “He has been shot. I found him on the road home.”

All three quickly made their way out the back door to the wagon. “Is he dead?” Mother sucked in a breath and held her hand to her chest as she viewed the man's pale face.

“No, Mama. I think he has just passed out. He said he was shot in the shoulder by highwaymen.”

“Reverend, we need to get him inside so I can see to his wound.” Mama looked the gentleman up and down. “He is much too large to move him upstairs. We must use the tiny bedroom at the back, next to the kitchen.” She looked again at their patient. “I hope the bed is long enough. He is truly a large man.”

Although he remained unconscious, with Papa on one side, and Eve on the other, they managed to drag him into the house and deposit him on the bed in the mostly unused bedroom.

Mama gently rolled the man onto his side and viewed his back. “Eve, fetch me a pan of hot water, some clean cloths, my long knife, and bullet extractor. There is no hole at the back of his jacket, so there is a good chance the bullet is still embedded in him.”

Once Eve brought the supplies to her mama, Papa touched her on the shoulder. “I am sorry, my dear, but Mama and I must undress the gentleman to get to his wound. You will need to wait outside until we are finished.”

“I could hold the candle.” She had attended other patients Mama had dealt with, but she had never been present when a young man had been a victim. It embarrassed her to know how much she would have enjoyed seeing that broad chest uncovered.

She would say a few extra prayers at bedtime this night.

Papa shook his head, and pointed to the door. Although she was not surprised at his words, it still annoyed her, since even though she was an unmarried miss, there wasn't anything untoward about a man's chest. But

then, again, she would have no way of knowing that since, as the local rector's daughter, her upbringing had been scrupulous. She and her elder sister, Angeline, had been well supervised, and reminded endlessly, that as representatives of their papa, they must always conduct themselves in a proper and appropriate manner, lest any aspersion be cast on their reputations.

Angeline was now happily married to a watchmaker, residing in London, and the mother of two lively boys. Evelyn loved her nephews and wished she could spend more time with them, which wasn't possible, given their distance. Angeline's husband, Mr. Saxon, was a pleasant man, twelve or so years older than her sister. They seemed happy, but Evelyn wanted so much more when she married. From the time she was a little girl, she dreamed of finding a man with whom she would share undying love. She often chastised herself for her foolishness, but the dream had never faded.

To occupy herself while her parents worked on the gentleman's injuries, she wandered to the kitchen and dished up a bowl of stew bubbling over the fire. She sliced a wide chunk of freshly made bread and sat at the comfortable wooden table to enjoy her meal.

As she ate, she considered what she wanted in a husband. So far, she had not found it in any of the young men in her village. There were several who had asked permission to pay her court, but after one or two outings, she'd done what was necessary to discourage them.

Thanks to her papa, Eve was a smart, well-educated woman, since he felt both girls and boys should receive proper schooling. Eve believed if she married a man who only conversed about grain prices and the local weather, she would shrivel up inside and die.

She had read all the books in Papa's library, and was always eager to find something new. She made occasional visits to the small bookstore in the village, and once a year Papa took her to London to visit Angeline, and while they were there, they stopped at the bookstore where she was permitted to purchase one book. The pages of most of her books were worn thin from many readings.

The sound of her parents' low murmurs was interrupted by a loud shout, followed by a low groan, obviously coming from their patient. Hopefully Mama had extracted the bullet, and the poor man could rest now.

The warm room, her full belly, and the glass of ale she'd drunk with her dinner all worked to make it difficult to keep her eyes open. She wanted to

make sure she was here when Mama was finished, so she could attend the man. For now, however, she laid her cheek on her folded hands, and closed her eyes.

Only for a minute.

* * *

ADAM, the Duke of Manchester, let out a scream as the pain in his shoulder erupted into body-burning agony. He hoped the sucking sound he'd heard was the removal of the bullet. Sweat poured down his face as the woman hovering over him, said, "We got it, Papa."

He frowned. The woman's voice was different, deeper, and older than the woman who'd found him on the road and dragged him to her wagon. She'd been a pretty little thing, something he'd noticed even though he was fighting unconsciousness and excruciating pain at the time. He opened his eyes, and in the dim light focused on an older woman leaning over him. In some way, she resembled how he remembered the girl. Her mother, perhaps?

An older man held a candle up and looked at him. "Now you lie still, my lord. Mama will sew you up, and you'll be able to rest. She's done this many times before." The man had a pleasant, soothing face, which helped to calm him.

Adam had no idea where he was. From what he remembered, he'd been returning home to his London townhouse after negotiating marriage contracts with his soon-to-be bride's father, Lord Fenster, when he'd been accosted by highwaymen. He'd fought as best he could, but there were simply too many of them, and after one shot to his shoulder, he was down. The men took everything on him, his money pouch, timepiece, and even the ring his mother had removed from her husband's hand before he'd been buried. After slapping his horse, Dionysius, the highwaymen all took off, leaving him to bleed to death on the road.

Then the angel happened by. At least that was how he remembered her. Pale, creamy skin, with a light dusting of freckles over her nose, silky light brown hair tucked up into a straw bonnet, and hazel eyes that viewed him with concern and caring. So incredibly different from how women normally viewed him. Power and title. Avarice and desire. Not passion for him as a person, but for what he could do for them.

Inside the bedroom and out.

At nine and twenty he had finally reconciled himself to having a marriage befitting his station. He'd already dismissed all the women his mother had presented to him, save Lady Ann Benson, who he would make an offer for once the contracts were signed.

For years, he'd been subjected to one giggling, conniving, speculating debutante after another, along with their scheming mamas. The lonesome widows and bored matrons eyed him with a different sort of speculation, but he'd always depended on a mistress for his needs. No other men's wives, no messy entanglements, and no tears and hysteria when he gave them their final piece of jewelry and moved on.

On the other hand, as far as prospective brides went, he'd found Lady Ann at least tolerable. She was sweet, quiet, and skilled in manners, dancing, music, and would make an excellent duchess. That she didn't stir his blood was a concern, but he would not find it a chore to bed her often enough to secure heirs.

So went the life of the nobility.

"My lord, if I can just move you a bit, now that the sewing is done, I need to bind your wound." The older woman put some type of salve on a clean piece of fabric, that she gently placed against the wound, and then wrapped it around his chest, her husband shifting him slightly to assist her.

Once they finished, the man drew up a sheet to cover his chest. "My daughter will be wanting to check on you, and bring you some broth. She's a maiden, so you must remain covered."

"I apologize for my lack of manners. May I ask who you are? I am very grateful to your daughter, and both of you, for taking care of me."

"It is what is expected, my lord." The man smoothed out the sheet. "I am Reverend Joshua Allen, rector of Trinity Church here in this village in Worcestershire. This is my wife, Mrs. Allen, and our daughter, Miss Eve Allen is the one who brought you here."

Despite his pain, he grinned. Adam and Eve? He shook his head. No, it meant nothing. He did not believe in fate.

They obviously recognized him as a peer since they continued to address him as 'my lord'. He had no desire to correct them, and have them fawning all over him if they knew he was a duke. Instead, he said, "I am Lord Manchester. I was traveling to my townhouse in London when I was set upon by highwaymen."

Rarely did residents of small villages travel more than twenty miles from their home their entire lives and had very little reason to study Debrett's Peerage. With that in mind, there was no more than a slight chance these good people would recognize him as the Duke of Manchester.

"I will send my daughter in now to tend to you, my lord."

The couple gathered up bloody cloths, bowls, and instruments Mrs. Allen had used to remove the bullet. Adam watched them leave, wishing he could sleep to alleviate the pain. No sooner had he closed his eyes than the door opened again and the angel stepped through.

She carried a candle, a bowl, and tucked under her arm, a small brown bottle. Even though she offered no smile as she approached him, he enjoyed watching her, the slight blush to her cheeks, the way she raised her chin. "Good evening, my lord. I hope now that the worst is over, you might take a bit of broth? I also have some laudanum to help with the pain." Despite the pleasant words, her eyes were cool.

He'd never been in a position like this, lying in a bed with a lovely woman hovering over him, and unable to pull her down, remove her clothing, and kiss every inch of her body. Of course, in addition to excruciating pain and him being almost betrothed, she was the daughter of the Reverend Allen. Not someone to dally with, even if she wasn't a lady of his class.

"I will try the broth, but I'm not too sure of the laudanum. I've known those who've become addicted to it."

She finally offered a smile, changing her face from pretty to beautiful. "I do not think you need to concern yourself with addiction, my lord. Mama would never allow that to happen. She is quite knowledgeable in the dangers of addiction." Two dimples adorned the sides of her mouth.

He couldn't help but smile back at her sincerity. She was truly a charming, endearing young woman. As much as he would love to banter with her, what he needed more than anything was sleep, to escape. Seeming to sense his change in demeanor, she became all business and sat in a chair alongside the bed and spooned some of the broth into his mouth.

They didn't talk as she fed him. He hated being so helpless, but there was nothing to be done. He watched every nuance of her face and body as she went about her work. Miss Allen was so open, so easy to read. She did not flirt, tease, or in any way make him believe she was interested in anything except feeding him.

Remarkable.

To his way of thinking, women had always fallen into two categories. The ones who wanted to share his bed, and receive adequate compensation for it in the way of jewels, an expensive wardrobe, carriages, and a townhouse. Then there were those who wanted his title, money, and the power that came with marriage to a duke.

Miss Allen didn't seem to want anything from him. Only to help make him well. Then, probably, send him on his way. Of course, she did not know he was a duke, but he had a strange feeling that even if she knew, her attitude toward him would not change. If anything, she might be uneasy with his lofty title, rather than conniving on how she could trap him.

"I am glad you were able to take some of the broth." She laid the bowl aside, and picked up the small brown bottle. "Before I give the laudanum to you, is there someone you would like us to notify of your situation? A wife, or another family member?"

If she was fishing to find out if he was married, it was not on her face, and so far, he'd found her easy to read. "No. There is no one."

In some ways that was true. If he notified his mother, she would be here within a day, flitting and fussing and causing needless drama. Although he loved her dearly, she was a trial at times.

He should notify his man of business, but then, a short holiday from all his ducal duties would be nice. They hadn't expected him back in London for a while, since in addition to meeting with Lord Fenster, he would be visiting a few of his far-flung friends. He had promised Mother he would return in time for Christmas, and that wasn't for several weeks.

"No one?" She looked stricken, which made him smile.

"No wife, only my mother, who is better off not knowing of my injury."

Her face softened. "I understand. Mama would be quite distraught if one of us were shot, and far from home."

There was no point in correcting her assumption that Mother would be distraught. If anything, she would be abhorred at the humble abode in which he was recuperating, and would probably embarrass the Allens by dismissing their kindness with a wave of her aristocratic hand. No, he was better off with his mother far, far away while he recovered here with this nice family.

And their tempting daughter.

CHAPTER 2



Eve set the bottle of laudanum on the shelf over the sink and rinsed out the broth bowl. Her thoughts wandered to their patient. Lord Manchester was certainly an eye-catching man. His deep brown eyes seemed to bore into her, as if he could see her very soul. It discomfited her to imagine how that look would affect her if he weren't injured and lying flat on his back.

Then she chastised herself for her thoughts. He was nobility. Privileged, arrogant, and supercilious, as they all were. At least the one who seduced her best friend, Becky, had been, and she had no reason to believe any of them were different. They all believed they owned the world and the rest of them were fortunate that they were willing to allow them to share it.

Poor Becky had learned that lesson the hard way after she found herself with child and her lover gone. With a dismissive laugh, he reminded her she was not of his class, so marriage was not for them. It was on Christmas Day two years ago that Becky delivered the tiny wizened boy who lived for a mere few minutes. Becky followed her son in death that same day.

Eve rubbed her arms to ward off the chill those thoughts always brought on. How she missed her friend, and mourned her still. With Christmas coming up, she would once again suffer through the pain of those memories. Becky's screams still echoed in her ears, and occasionally visited her in the form of nightmares.

Once again turning her thoughts to their patient, she dwelled on how odd that there was no one he wished to notify of his wound. Of course, if his mother were the type of hand-wringing and carrying-on sort, as she knew women of the *ton* to be, it was better if he presented himself at home hale and

hearty, to ease any distress on her part.

But no wife. Why that thought even crossed her mind was puzzling. She had no interest in any man from the nobility. As a rule, she did not have to be hit over the head with something to take notice. She had learned enough from Becky's mistake. Despite the man's attractiveness, she would stay far away from him until he was healed, and on his way home. Men with a sense of entitlement, with 'lord' in front of their names, and sweet words on their lips, were a danger she planned to avoid.

"How is our patient?" Mama entered the kitchen, pulling Eve from her musings.

"He took a bit of the broth, and the teaspoon of laudanum. He should be asleep in no time." Eve took a cup down, and spooned tea leaves into the worn teapot that always sat on the table, and ladled in bubbling water from the fire.

Mama covered her mouth with her hand as she attempted to stifle a yawn. "That is good. Sleep is the best cure for any injury, or illness."

"Would you like some tea, Mama?" Eve held up the teapot.

"No. I'm for bed right now. it has been a long day." She gave Eve a quick kiss on her cheek. "Good night, daughter."

Eve moved to the table and reached for a biscuit from the plate Mama always kept full. "Do you think one of us should sit up with Lord Manchester?"

"I will check on him throughout the night. I am sure you are quite tired as well, and should find your own bed soon."

"I will. Good night, Mama."

An hour later, still sitting at the table, Eve rubbed her eyes as she closed the book she'd been reading. The candle burned low, and she didn't want to light another one. Candles were expensive, and a rector's living didn't reach far.

She stood and stretched as she heard a slight moan. Tilting her head to one side, she paused for a moment, then moving toward the small bedroom off the kitchen, she leaned her ear against the wooden door. Yes, a definite moan.

Slowly, she opened the door and leaned her head in. The scent of clean soap, laudanum, and illness greeted her. Lord Manchester thrashed about on the cot, the bed linens entangled in his legs, leaving his chest bare. She held up what was left of the candle and moved closer, and took in a sharp breath.

Now she understood why Papa told her to leave the room before, when they had to remove the lord's clothes.

His body was immense in the small bed, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Fine dark hairs covered his golden skin, with a definite streak of thicker hair running down the center in a straight line toward the top of his breeches, where it disappeared. As he moved on the bed, his stomach muscles shifted and rippled. This was no fine lord who never did more than drink and attend balls, as she thought most did.

Fascinated by the display before her, she had to shake her head to clear it. Good heavens, she was staring like a love-sick fool at a man who was in obvious distress. Sweat covered his brow, and with his thrashing about, he most likely had a fever. Hurrying back to the kitchen, she pulled out a large pan and pumped cool water into it. She grabbed a few old cloths and returned to the room.

The thought occurred to her that she should wake Mama, because Papa would not be happy to know she had touched a half-naked man, even if he was suffering from a raging fever. She eased her conscience with the thought that Mama worked hard and needed her rest.

Then she sent up a prayer for her own soul.

Smoothing the cool, damp cloth over his skin seemed to settle his fevered body and ease his thrashing. His eyelids fluttered open and he gave her a soft smile. "Angel?"

Was that someone dear to him? Someone named Angel? He said he had no wife, but there could be a sweetheart. "No. My name is Miss Eve Allen, remember?"

"Ah, yes, I do recall. Adam and Eve. But I still think of you as my angel."

Her cheeks heated at his words, then she dismissed them, not even sure what he meant. Even in ill health, men of his class flirted. She shook her head in disgust and continued her ministrations, trying very hard to ignore the warm flesh under her hands and how the cloth slid over his skin.

His hand reached out and he grabbed her wrist, surprising her with the strength of his grip. "May I have a glass of water?" He barely got the words out, his voice raspy.

"Of course, my lord." She dropped the cloth into the basin, and returned to the kitchen, startled to see how her hand shook as she filled the glass. No one had ever affected her like this, and she didn't care for the feeling. She felt vulnerable and threatened. Despite her wish to dismiss the man and her

reaction to him, her body hummed with energy she hadn't felt before. Then she chastised herself for being a fool.

They would help Lord Manchester recover from his injuries, and then he would be on his way. Back to his home, to his life. Both of which were far, far away from her, in more ways than one, which was precisely where she wanted him.

* * *

ADAM WATCHED his angel leave the room. The gentle sway of her hips fascinated him. More so than any of the silk and satin clad derrières of the *ton* ladies he'd viewed over the years. Those movements, like everything else in his world, were always calculated. To either entice a man into their bed, or drag him to the altar. Eve's movements were smooth and feminine, with no guile.

He hated being so taken with a woman while on the verge of offering for another. Bloody hell, after years of rejecting one woman after another, why did one who captivated him show up now? And him flat on his back?

Not that he could do anything about his attraction once he was well, anyway. She was a rector's daughter, and he a duke. Mistress was totally out of the question, and as far as anything permanent, even if he got past the censure of the *ton*—which would be slight, since as a duke he could fairly well do what he wanted—there was the small matter of Lady Ann and her father waiting for his signature on marriage contracts.

He laughed at where his thoughts had taken him. He barely knew Eve—in thinking of her, and addressing her as Miss Allen, to show his respect. For all he knew, she could be betrothed, or have a man waiting on tenterhooks for her to accept his offer. Had he been the one to offer for her, he would be quite anxious to hear a 'yes'. She was certainly comely enough to have any man she chose.

Large hazel eyes looked out at the world from a face that made visible her every thought. Her dark brown hair was thick and shiny, and cried out for a man to undo the heavy braid down her back and run his fingers through the silky strands.

The laudanum must be playing tricks with his mind to be so enraptured with the miss. The door opened and she returned to his bedside. "Here, I will

hold the glass while you sip. You should not take too much since your stomach is quite empty.”

She reached under his head and raised it up a bit. How he hated being so helpless before her. An encouraging smile lit up her face as he sipped and studied her over the rim of the glass. Her thick eyelashes opened and closed as he watched her. The devil take it! She had him mesmerized like an untried youth. He needed to gather himself together before he made a complete ninnyhammer out of himself.

He leaned back. “That is enough. Thank you.”

Once she placed the glass on the table next to the bed, she picked up the pan of water and dipped the cloth in. Again, she began to wipe him down. He watched her every move, and she was well aware of it. Her hands shook, her breathing increased, and a light flush covered her delightful cheeks.

Yes, he affected her. It was nice to know he was not the only one who felt this attraction. Not that he could do anything about it, of course. But at least he was not alone in his fascination. She put the bowl down, and drew the sheets up to cover his chest. She seemed to relax once he was covered, which amused him further.

“I will leave you to sleep now. I would offer you more of the laudanum, but I know you have concerns about it.”

“I do. But I believe my fever has gone down, so hopefully, I will be able to sleep and ignore the pain.” He shifted, trying very hard not to disturb the bandages Mrs. Allen had placed on his wound. “Please don’t tell me you will remain awake all night?”

She shook her head. “No, I was just finishing up a book and was headed to bed when I heard you moaning.”

“I do not moan.” He grinned at her. Actually, he did moan, and he would love to show her what he could do to make *her* moan. “What are you reading?”

“*The History of Lady Barton*, by Mrs. Griffith.”

“Isn’t that a three-volume work?”

“Yes, it is. Are you familiar with Mrs. Griffith’s writings?”

“Somewhat. I saw one of her plays in Covent Garden, *The School for Rakes*. It was very popular, and played to sold-out crowds every night.”

He was more impressed with Miss Allen each time they spoke. She might be a small village rector’s daughter, but he suspected there was much more to her than what the world saw. He hoped to get to know her better once he was

not in so much pain and recovering from a gunshot wound. To what end, he had no idea, just that he wanted to know more about Miss Eve Allen.

* * *

FOUR DAYS PASSED with Adam getting stronger each day. After the first night, he had no reoccurrence of the fever, and experienced no infection, which Mrs. Allen assured him was quite exceptional.

“You are looking better today, my lord.” Miss Allen opened the door to his tiny bedroom after knocking softly and being given leave to enter. “Mama says she has never seen a man recover so quickly from such an injury.”

“Ah, and I told her it was your superior nursing skills.”

Miss Allen blushed, again charming him. He’d seen pretend blushes and coy glances over a fan, but never an actual, genuine blush from a young lady. Every minute he spent with her revealed more of her persona. Refreshing and honest.

“I am anxious to get out of this bed. I am not one to linger about, but prefer activity.” Adam winced when he moved too quickly, and the pain reminded him he was still a bit of an invalid.

Miss Allen’s eyes grew wide and she moved forward. “No, my lord! You must not get out of bed just yet. Mama would be most upset.”

She tapped her lips with her finger and studied him for a moment. “I have an hour before I need to help Mama bake bread for this Sunday’s church supper. Do you happen to like chess?”

He perked right up at the idea of having something of interest to pass the time. “Indeed, I do. In fact, I am quite a good player. Do you play?”

She grinned. “Indeed, I do. And I, also, am quite a good player.” She tilted her head, her hazel eyes sparkling with humor. “Care to challenge me, my lord?”

* * *

EVE HURRIED from the bedroom to retrieve the worn chess set she and Papa had played with for years. He’d taught all his children to play the game, insisting it was a good way to learn how to think, and plan ahead. All four of the Allen siblings were adept at chess, and they’d spent many a night

studying the chess board and cheering when one would beat the other.

Now that her sister and two brothers were all married, and dealing with their own families far from home, it was only her and Papa playing, and he didn't always have time. She'd oftentimes played against herself which she never told anyone, feeling quite foolish and wondering how she should declare a win, when she was both sides.

But now she had a chess partner! Hopefully his lordship was, indeed, a good player, because she did not want to tromp all over him, and batter his pride.

She gathered the board and pieces and returned to the bedroom. Mama had sewn a patch over his shirt, so even though he sat up, leaning against the wall behind the bed, he was covered up. Otherwise, Papa would not have allowed her in the room. She'd never told either one of them of the night she'd wiped him down, and enjoyed watching his muscles quiver under her ministrations.

She still flushed at the memory.

"Here we are, my lord."

"May I ask a favor before we start?" He gave her a slight grin which, for some reason, made her insides flutter.

Oh, no. Please don't use your charm on me. I want a chess partner, that is all.

"Of course." She had a hard time getting the words out, with a suddenly dry mouth.

"I would prefer if you did not address me as 'my lord'. It makes me feel rather lofty, and a bit uncomfortable. Here I am, sitting with a patched shirt and feeling rather helpless. I am anything but lofty."

Ha. He was lofty, all right. No matter if the man was on his knees bleeding in the mud, or sitting on a tiny cot with a patched shirt, he exuded power and wealth.

"I do not want to make you uncomfortable." Embarrassed at not completely understanding how one treated nobility since she'd had no experience in that area, she blushed to the roots of her hair.

He extended his arm. "Come here, please."

She took a deep breath and moved closer. Truth be known, it unnerved her standing this close to him. When he was thrashing about from a fever and the room was dark, it had been hard enough, but now that he looked almost healthy, studying her with those deep brown eyes, she almost felt as though

her knees were melting out from under her. She had better get herself under control.

“I want us to be friends. I owe you and your parents a great deal for rescuing me, and treating my wound. While I am here, I am not Lord Manchester, but simply a man. Can I convince you to call me Adam? I would very much like to call you Eve, since I doubt you would allow me to call you ‘angel’, which is how I will always think of you.”

Adam and Eve? No wonder he’d mumbled that before.

She replayed his words in her mind. *Which is how I will always think of you.*

He would always think of her? Nonsense, the man was excellent at pretense, but did not fool her. Once he was gone, she doubted he would ever give her a second thought. On the other hand, she knew this interlude in her life would never be forgotten. When she was old and gray, she would remember these few days. Not because he was a lord, but because he was him. Adam.

She shook her head, more to clear it than disagree. “I am not sure Papa would approve.”

He squeezed her hand. “Then let this be our secret.”

Good heavens, his voice was deep and mesmerizing. Keep a secret from Papa? She’d never done anything in her whole life that she needed to keep secret. It made her feel wicked and excited at the same time. She would most assuredly need to spend more time with her prayers tonight. If their guest remained too long, her knees would have blisters.

“All right.” She almost giggled, feeling wanton just saying that.

“Excellent.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now let’s play chess.”

With shaky hands, she placed the board on the small table next to his bed. She set the pieces up, and dragged a chair from the kitchen to the bedroom. Once they were settled and facing each other over the board, all her unease vanished and she concentrated on the game.

It was apparent after only the first few moves that Adam—it was still hard for her to think of him by his Christian name—was truly an excellent chess player. Now her heart pounded, not with awareness of him, but with the excitement of the game. Even though Papa was an excellent player, she knew his moves, and what he would do in any given situation. Adam was an unknown.

In more ways than one she told her heart.

CHAPTER 3



A dam watched Eve as she studied the chess board, chewing her lip. He had expected to trounce her in the game, and had even decided to hold back a bit so as not to win quickly and embarrass her.

He was the one embarrassed. He'd almost lost the game at the very beginning because of his blunder in underestimating her skill. She was a powerful chess player, and he had to stay on his toes to keep from her destroying him. All thoughts of a friendly game, where he could tease and flirt with her while they moved their pieces around, vanished as he concentrated on winning. Something he hadn't had to do in a very long time.

Her moves were calculated and well-thought-out. Would the woman ever stop surprising him? He laughed to himself as he visualized initiating a conversation about Mrs. Griffith's writings or chess strategy with Lady Ann. He imagined her fluttering fan and confused expression on her young, blank face.

A very uncomfortable vision that he pushed quickly from his mind.

Yet, he was to spend the rest of his life with her. Why hadn't any of that troubled him before he approached Lord Fenster? Lady Ann had been one of Mother's choices since she was well-bred, perfect in her manners, and a superb hostess. She would also be petulant, self-absorbed, and painstakingly proper. Based on her upbringing, she would permit his husbandly attentions with suffered silence, and breathe a sigh of relief when he left her bed to allow her a full night's rest without his company.

Of course, if not exactly expected, it was at least assumed he would keep a mistress, discreetly, of course, to deal with his baser nature. He'd always known that was what his marriage would be like, so why did he now begin to

have second thoughts? Was it merely wedding nerves? Perhaps his rejection of all the simpering debutantes had been his way of rejecting the entire system.

It's too late now.

“Check.” Two bright hazel eyes, laced with humor and satisfaction, regarded him.

Bloody hell. Here he'd been ruminating on his bleak future, and Eve had moved her piece so she checked him. *Better concentrate, old boy, or you will look like a fool.*

It took some finagling, but he managed to save his king, and the game continued. Several moves later, it was determined by them both that it was a draw.

Eve sat back, a wide smile on her beautiful face. “That was an excellent game, my lord.”

He held up a finger. “Adam.”

“Oh, yes. I apologize.” She started to put the pieces into the small box she'd carried in earlier. “I would love another game, but Mama is expecting me to help her with the baking. We have a church supper most weeks after Papa's service. It helps the families who need that extra meal to fill their children's bellies.”

Here were people who, compared to him, had so little, yet they shared what they had amongst themselves. How different village life was to his world. A difference that, right now, made him uncomfortable. Despite rumblings in the House of Commons, he felt strongly that the system they lived under was best. But hearing some people had trouble feeding their children, when children in his world had so much, disturbed him in a surprising way.

“May I attend church with you on Sunday?” Now where had that come from? He hadn't been to a formal church service in quite some time. In fact, he only seemed to find himself in church at Christmas or a wedding.

“It is less than a week away. Do you feel as though you will be well enough?” Eve viewed him with raised brows. “You are only just recovering from a gunshot wound. You would not want to rip out the stitches Mama so painstakingly put in a few days ago.”

“I shall be fine. As Mrs. Allen pointed out, it is quite unusual for someone with an injury such as mine not to suffer from an infection. I think that makes me well enough to dress and attend church.”

“If that is what you want, then I’m sure Papa would be delighted to have you join us.”

“Only Papa?” He couldn’t resist teasing her. Truth be told, his reason for wanting to attend church was to spend more time with Eve. She fascinated him, and every time they were together, he discovered another facet of her personality. No woman had ever captivated him so.

A lovely red flush rose from the top of Eve’s demure dress to her hairline. Lord, she was endearing!

She raised her pert little nose in the air. “I will be delighted to have you join us, as well.” She stared at him, her expression almost challenging in nature.

Don’t challenge me, my dear, you will not win. You might be good at chess, but when it comes to seduction, I will declare checkmate in no time.

Why was he thinking along those lines? Eve might be ripe for the plucking, and she was obviously as attracted to him as he was to her, but anything between them could go nowhere. She was a lovely woman, destined to wed one of the young bucks in the village, who would fill her belly with many children.

Now that stung. The thought of another man holding her in his arms, removing her clothes, stroking his hand over her satiny skin and her womanly curves, of entering her body and feeling her moist warmth surround him, almost brought him to his knees.

He, on the other hand would have a very proper marriage with Lady Ann, and continue with his life as he always knew it would unfold. “Then I am delighted that you are delighted. I do not wish to make more work for your family, but for me to attend church I need a bath, a shave, and perhaps another patch. This time for my jacket.”

“Mama has already fixed your jacket. It does not look as it did when you first put it on, I am sure, but the dark blue fabric doesn’t show the patch very much.”

A duke attending church in patched clothes. He smothered his laugh because he did not want to offend his hostess. “Excellent.”

“I can bring you hot water in the morning for your bath.”

“No!”

She jumped at his tone.

“I am sorry, I did not mean to shout. I do not want you lugging water for my bath. You are not a maid.” It surprised him how angry the thought of Eve

lugging water made him. “I will do well with a basin of warm water and a sliver of soap. And if I could borrow a razor from your Papa, that is all I will require to present myself at church.”

* * *

EVE PUT the finishing touches on her hair before picking up her best church bonnet. She’d drawn her hair back from her face and wove a thick braid at the back of her head that ended with a lone fat curl that fell over her shoulder. The lovely low-crowned straw hat with wide green ribbons that tied under her chin matched one of the flowers on the trim of her gown.

No matter how many times she told herself there was nothing special about this Sunday’s service, and the church supper following, she knew it to be a lie. Lord Manchester—Adam—would be attending with her and Mama.

She pulled on her best white gloves with only a small stitch in one of the fingers and left her bedroom. As she walked into the kitchen, Adam was just leaving the tiny bedroom. He closed the door and turned. Her breath caught and her heart pounded. Her eyes started mid-chest and then traveled up, past his freshly starched cravat, to his wavy black well-brushed hair.

He was so tall! He’d been bent over when she helped him to the wagon, and then into the house. Since then he’d been lying down, so she had no idea of the height he towered over her.

She could barely make out the patch Mama had sewn onto his jacket, which combined with his dark trousers, light blue waistcoat, and shiny black shoes made it impossible for anyone to doubt he was an aristocrat.

“Eve?” His deep voice startled her.

Oh, how embarrassing. She’d been staring at him all this time, most likely with her mouth open. He watched her with humor in his eyes. She felt like an utter fool, and wished for the floor to open so she could fall into the other end of the earth. Pulling herself together in an attempt to recover her dignity, she said, “I see you are ready for church.”

Brilliant, Eve. Maybe if you searched your extensive vocabulary from all the books you’ve read, you might think of something more banal to say?

“Yes, I am, and may I say that you are looking quite lovely.”

“Thank you.” The words barely made it past her dry lips. None of the men in the village who had attempted to pay her court had tied her up in

knots like this man did. It was not good.

Still flustered, she turned and walked to the front door, with Adam following behind.

Once they stepped outside in the crisp morning air, she felt a bit better. Mama stood at the gate waiting for them. "Good morning, Lord Manchester."

Adam nodded to her. "Good morning, Mrs. Allen. You look as splendid as your daughter. I am most fortunate to be attending church in such lovely company."

Eve was happy to see her mama as flustered as she felt. The man seemed to have that effect on women in general, not just her. Adam placed his top hat on his head and once outside the gate, he extended his elbows to Eve and Mama. They tucked their hands in his arms, and they took the short walk to the church.

She knew with Adam alongside them, they would garner a great deal of attention, but she was not at all prepared for the gathering of young women who flocked to her side as soon as they reached the front of the church. Eve had no idea she was so popular!

"Good morning, Eve. I see we have a guest." Miss Pickering, old enough to be Adam's mother, tittered and giggled like a young girl.

"Good morning, Miss Pickering. May I present to you Lord Manchester." She no sooner got the words out of her mouth when she remembered she was supposed to introduce Miss Pickering to Adam, since he was a peer, not the other way around. She sighed, inwardly.

Blast the *ton* and their stupid rules! But then, if one had nothing better to do than study everyone's lineage and paint watercolors, those sorts of lessons were easy to fit into one's day.

If Adam noticed her *faux pas*, or even cared, he never showed it. He lifted his hat, bowed, and greeted the woman. One by one, girls and ladies waited to be introduced, until Mama moved into the crowd and reminded everyone that the service was about to begin.

Adam turned to her. "Miss Allen? May I escort you?"

All the girls who were her best friends a few minutes ago glared at her as they entered the church and found their seats. As usual, Mama and Eve went to the front, and settled in the first pew. Adam joined them, sitting on the end. He looked over at her and winked!

In church!

His wink and slight smile told her he understood what had just happened

outside. She felt a warm glow, almost as if they shared a secret. With more enthusiasm than she normally displayed for church services, she sang the first song as Papa directed the congregation.

By the time the service ended, Eve had serious concerns for her soul. She'd spent the entire hour that she was supposed to be examining her conscience and thinking about the Lord, instead thinking about another lord. The one who sat alongside her. The heat from his body had her wanting to fan herself.

The pleasant scent of soap, as well as something that she'd never smelled before, wafted over her. It seemed to radiate from his jacket, and she was afraid if she inhaled any deeper, she would black out. Every time he moved his knee, her eyes were drawn there. But the worst thing was whenever she glanced in his direction, he was watching her.

Thank goodness Papa had not paid any attention to them at all, speaking to the congregation, rather than focusing on them. Mama hadn't noticed Eve's discomfort, either, so aside from the sweat forming on her body due to the torture she'd just gone through, no one was the wiser that she had done no praying at all.

Part of her couldn't wait for Adam to fully recover and leave, and another part dreaded the day he would say goodbye and walk out of her life forever. Then memories of Becky strengthened her resolve.

* * *

NEVER HAD Adam enjoyed a church service more than he had this morning. He probably could not repeat a single word Reverend Allen had said, so focused was he on Eve. There was no denying she'd captured his interest far beyond any woman he'd ever met. Just sitting next to her, with him finally clothed and feeling more like a man than an invalid, he drank in the scent of her. Lavender and vanilla.

When she had joined him in the kitchen, in the white gown, embroidered with colorful flowers along the bodice, the cuffs of the long sleeves and hem, he wanted to pull her into his arms and ravish her mouth. Press her up against his strengthening body, feel her soft curves teasing his hard planes.

Her demure outfit, finished off by a straw hat that had to be several years out of fashion, sent his blood pumping to the wrong place. Hell and

damnation, he'd remained unmoved by flirty widows and skilled courtesans, dressed in low-cut expensive gowns, yet this innocent rector's daughter had him thinking of all the interesting ways he could take her, and introduce her to lovemaking.

All the time he sat there in church.

Before he got himself into trouble, he had better take his leave of the Allen family. His good sense kept telling him if he was well enough to go to church, he was well enough to travel home. Get as far away from Eve as he could before he made a major mistake. He would write to his man of business, today if possible, and have him send a carriage to collect him.

Grateful when the service ended, he stood and escorted Eve and Mrs. Allen from the building. A flock of women descended upon them, vying for his attention, and requesting introductions. Eve handled it all gracefully, as she did everything else.

"My lord, will you be joining us for our church supper?" A young woman, who had been introduced to him as Miss Grace Monroe sidled up to him, effectively replacing Eve at his side.

He tamped down his annoyance, and gave her a warm smile. "Yes, indeed. Miss Allen has graciously invited me, and I am anxious to taste the tempting mutton stew she brought with her."

More so, he was anxious to taste her, but that thought was best kept to himself.

"Oh." Miss Monroe's smile faded. Then she leaned toward him. "I brought a lovely pea salad that I'm sure you would enjoy." She flicked her eyelashes, and he was almost tempted to laugh, but did not want to embarrass the girl.

"Yes. I am sure I will." He turned to Eve and extended his elbow. "Are you ready?"

He would love to spend the rest of his life watching that smile light up her face.

The rest of his life? Where the devil had that thought come from?

As they walked slowly from the church to the small building next door, where everyone was headed, he enjoyed the feeling of Eve at his side. So much better than her bent over him while she tended to his injury.

The building slowly filled with members of the congregation, the women carrying plates and hampers of food they transported to a long table set at the front of the room. He and Eve were certainly the center of attention, which

was no surprise since he doubted small villages saw strangers amongst their midst very often.

“My lord, I saved a seat for you here.” Miss Appleby waved in his direction, while Miss Grace glowered at her. “I have a seat saved for his lordship here.” The other girl patted a chair next to her.

Botheration. He didn’t want to insult either woman, but he had no intention of sitting anywhere except next to Eve. He was finally able to present himself to her as a whole man, not a helpless invalid.

Luckily, Mr. Allen stepped up and clapped his hand on Adam’s good shoulder. “Ladies, I’m afraid as our guest, his lordship will be sitting with me, Mrs. Allen, and our daughter.”

Several young, female faces fell as they watched him and the Allens move toward a table near the front of the room and settle themselves. The reverend gave him a slight grin. “I hope you are not too disturbed by all the attention, my lord. New faces tend to do that to the members.”

“You mean to the female members, in this case,” Mrs. Allen smirked. “I believe his lordship is feeling quite pulled in several directions at once.” She shook her head. “Could you imagine the reaction at the church social next Friday night?”

Adam turned to Eve. “Are you attending the social?”

She looked quite surprised. Perhaps she expected, or wanted, him to be long gone by then. He probably should be, but right now he was more interested in learning all about this fascinating woman buried here in a small village, and needed to write to his man of business for a carriage home, anyway.

“Yes.” She looked a bit flustered, and bit her lower lip. “I generally do.”

“Will you save a dance for me?”

Mr. and Mrs. Allen traded glances.

Picking up on their silent message, he said, “I do not intend to impose upon you any longer. You have been most gracious, and welcoming, and I sincerely appreciate your assistance with my injury. However, I thought perhaps there is an inn where I can let a room for the rest of my recovery, since I don’t think it’s a good idea to travel just yet.”

“That is not at all necessary, my lord. We are more than happy to have you stay with us.” Mr. Allen studied him carefully. “I had assumed you would have many duties which required your attention.”

“Although, I agree that it is probably not a good idea to travel any length

of time with you still healing,” Mrs. Allen added.

Adam nodded. He dared not tell these lovely people he was quite interested in their daughter right now. Much more so than he was in any duties requiring his attention. The dukedom and his duties there could wait. His interest in Eve could not.

You are an arse and looking for trouble, old boy.

CHAPTER 4



Three days had passed since the church supper. Since then, Eve had become the most popular woman in all of Worcestershire. She hosted at least two or three women every afternoon for tea. So much so, that she was behind in her work, and was feeling frustrated with the entire mess. She'd yet to have time to distribute the food and clothes to the families in need.

She jammed her loose curls into the sides of her bonnet, mumbling to herself, when Adam walked through the front door. He had been helping Papa unpack a shipment of prayer books from the Ladies League in London, to replace some seriously worn ones in the church.

"Well, I would say you look lovely, Eve, but you also look as though you would like to bite someone's head off."

Tying the ribbon on her bonnet, she turned to him, attempting to smile through her frustration. It wasn't Adam's fault he was tall, handsome, titled, and wealthy. Nor was it his problem that every woman in the village had her eye on him. Why didn't the foolish women realize he was above their station, and they had no chance with the man?

Another reason to dislike the nobility. They attracted women like bees to honey, all interested in their lofty position.

She finished tying the bow, and bent to pick up the basket of breads she and Mama had baked. "I am behind in my normal chores, is all. I should have delivered food and clothing to the families in the village a few days ago."

He offered a teasing smile and leaned against the doorway, folding his arms over his chest. His very impressive chest.

Stop, Eve. Remember who he is.

"Ah, but you have been inundated with visitors." His brown eyes

twinkled. "I assume you do not ordinarily have so many callers?"

She placed her empty hand on her hip. "No. I do not have time to sit around and gossip, and sip tea. I am not a useless London socialite, like the . . ." She covered her mouth with her hand, horrified on two counts. One, she almost insulted most likely every woman in his family, and circle of friends. Two, for some unaccountable reason, she felt tears clogging her throat. Her emotions had been unsteady since Adam had risen from his bed and she'd seen him as a man, not just a patient.

Adam reached out for her, and batting his hand away, she hurried past him to the door before she made a complete cake of herself.

"Eve." His deep voice resonated against the walls.

She stopped, but kept her back to him, blinking furiously at the tears that had gathered in her eyes. "What is it?"

"Look at me." His voice slid over her like warm honey, causing her to shiver. Oh, goodness. She was in deep trouble here. However, like a small, stubborn child, she shook her head.

His large hands covered her shoulders as he gently turned her toward him. Quickly, she dashed the tears from her cheeks, but given her coloring, she knew the tip of her nose was probably redder than Mr. Langford's cherries.

He pulled her against him, and used his knuckle to raise her chin so she was forced to look at him. "It's my fault you've been having more visitors, and neglecting your work, is it not?"

She glanced to the side, unsettled with his piercing look. There was no point in denying the obvious since he'd been subjected to more than one deep sigh from a young woman. "A bit."

Adam tilted his head to catch her eyes. "How about if I help you?"

"What?" Her eyes snapped back to his. "Help?"

"Yes. I am unable to drive a wagon just yet, but I would be happy to accompany you on your rounds, or however it is you distribute the goods." He shrugged. "If for no other reason than the company."

An entire afternoon spent with Adam all hers? No simpering females practically drooling into their laps? No Mama and Papa watching every move they made, wondering, she was sure, if this suave aristocrat would ravish her should they turn their backs.

Despite her aversion to men of his class, she'd oftentimes thought of what it would be like to have Adam pull her into his arms and kiss her. Not the sloppy, quick, attempted-grope ones she'd received over the years, but the

ones that made up young girls' dreams.

"If you don't mind wasting your afternoon, I would be happy to have your company." She felt her spirits lift.

He let out a huge sigh. "Eve, never would I think any minute spent in your company wasted." He studied her, then tightened his lips, as if he'd intended to say something else. Taking her arm, he moved them forward. "Let us venture into the wilds of Worcestershire and distribute food and clothes to the needy."

She mentally shook her head. His smooth words certainly did not mean what her fluttering heart thought he meant. She reminded herself almost hourly that Adam was not for her. As a member of the aristocracy, this interlude for him was no more than a way to rub elbows with the lower class. Most likely to help him with his work in Parliament. Or to look for an easy miss to take a tumble with, and then escape back to his real life.

Pushing aside those unpleasant thoughts, she determined to accept his company, keep him at arm's length, and relegate their time together as 'pleasant encounters to recollect on a cold winter's night'.

Adam helped her into the wagon, then swung himself up beside her. The wagon had already been loaded, and the horse stood ready to go. She snapped the reins, and they were on their way.

The afternoon was sunny despite the chilly air, immediately cheering her. She glanced sideways at him, to see him grinning at her. "What is it?"

"I know very few women who could handle a horse and wagon like you."

"Is that good or bad?" She grinned back.

"Oh, have no doubt Miss Eve Allen. Everything about you is good." He lowered his voice and looked away, but she distinctly heard him say, "Much too good."

* * *

YES, everything about Eve was good. In fact, wonderful. The last several days had been the most pleasant he'd spent in his adult life. No ducal duties, no constant barrage of visitors demanding his attention, needing his advice and help. No simpering debutantes thrust into his path at every social event he attended. No Mother glowering at him over his desk, demanding to know why he'd rejected the latest bit of fluff she'd presented.

He had intended to end all that nonsense by offering for Lady Ann. Here he was, merely a signature away from a betrothal, and Miss Eve Allen enters his life. A fascinating woman who was very different from the ladies of his class, and a woman who would never bore him.

Life here was basic and simple. Certainly not something he would want for the rest of his life. He had duties and responsibilities, after all, and a certain way of life he rather enjoyed. But being here with Eve by his side, with the sun breaking through the clouds, everything felt right.

“How do you make your deliveries?”

Eve maneuvered the horse around a large mud-filled hole in their path. “I park the wagon near the Common, where several people know to stop by. I generally have little John Macon, who lives a few cottages down from us, notify the villagers when I will be there. Those that can’t come by, the elderly, infirm, and young mothers with busy husbands, I will travel to their residences, when my time at the Common is finished.”

“You do this by yourself?”

“Yes.” She turned to look at him. “Why?”

“I’m just a bit concerned. It was along this road where I was attacked by highwaymen. I don’t like the idea of you traveling about by yourself.”

She grinned and reached under the bench and brought out a pistol and waved it around.

“Hell and damnation, woman. Is that a Sharpe Model 1760?” Bloody hell, she handled it as if it were a flowered parasol.

“It is.”

“And you know how to shoot it?”

She nodded. “I’ve been shooting since I was a young girl.”

He grew somber. “Just remember, I also had a pistol with me when I was set upon by highwaymen. I still think it is foolish for you to be traveling this road by yourself. I am surprised your papa allows it.”

The thought of what could happen to her if she were to be attacked had sweat breaking out all over his body. Women were so vulnerable. He thought of the women of his acquaintance who never left their house without a maid and footman, and that was in the middle of London, in the best neighborhoods.

“These roads have always been safe.” She slid the pistol back under the seat.

“Need I remove my jacket and shirt to remind you of how unsafe this

road was about ten days ago?”

That might not have been the right thing to say, since Eve flushed, and he entertained visions of him removing his shirt and breeches, along with Eve’s dress and undergarments. Kissing her all over, caressing her soft skin, hearing her slight moans, then covering her mouth with his as she reached her release.

He shifted on the bench, no longer comfortable as his erection grew. What the devil was wrong with him? Why did he have to keep reminding himself that Eve was just a simple rector’s daughter, slated to marry a dull village man and spend the rest of her life raising a family and doing good deeds?

As planned, he would return to London where he would resume his ducal duties, marry the benign Lady Ann, and live the life for which he’d been raised. Mother would get off his back, he would be seeing to his responsibilities, and life would continue just as he had always expected.

Until he met Eve.

They burst through the last of the wooded area, the village Common about a quarter mile down the road. There were little shops surrounding the Common, a blacksmith, cobbler, baker, and a dressmaker on one side, with a row of trees blocking the other side, although he did get a glance at an inn, and bookstore.

“You have a bookstore?”

“Yes, we do.” She lifted her chin. “Do you think we are all illiterate?”

“No, not at all. I just assumed, wrongly it seems, that small villages such as this would not be able to sustain a book shop.” He was, indeed, impressed. Books were expensive, and few people could afford the luxury. Eve had already told him how her papa took her on a trip to London once a year to visit her sister, and while they were there visited the bookstore to purchase a book. He assumed that would be the only place she could acquire new reading material.

“Miss Allen.” A young woman waved her arms, causing Eve to pull on the reins of the horse and stop the wagon.

“Good afternoon, Miss Davis.” Eve’s greeting was far from friendly, although not ill-mannered.

The young woman hurried across the Common and stopped in front of the wagon. Perhaps she thought Eve would roll away before she had her say. She looked up at Adam. “My lord. Good afternoon.” She curtsied and smiled

brightly.

Eve snorted.

“Good afternoon, Miss Davis.” He bowed from the waist and removed his hat.

The girl giggled. Lord deliver him from giggling misses. Apparently, they were not confined to the London ballrooms.

“Yes, Miss Davis?” Eve’s not-too-friendly voice had grown chillier.

“Oh, nothing very important. I wondered if you were attending the assembly on Friday evening?” Since Miss Davis would not be so bold as to ask him outright if he were attending, she directed her question to Eve, but kept glancing in his direction.

“Yes, I am attending.”

When Eve said nothing further, Miss Davis stepped back. “Oh, well that is nice. I will see you there, then?”

“Yes.” She snapped the reins and moved forward, her face flushed, and her lips tight.

Adam smiled to himself. Being very attuned to women, and with all his experience over the years, he was certain Eve was showing signs of jealousy. Why that amused and encouraged him was best left unexamined for now. But, truth be known, it left him with a warm glow.

* * *

AS IF MISS DAVIS cared if she was attending the assembly or not? Eve snapped the reins with a bit more vigor than necessary. All these women falling all over themselves trying to attract Adam’s attention was wearing on her nerves. Of course, he was new, and interesting, and handsome, and everything else. But why didn’t they realize he was beyond them. And most likely a cad like poor Becky’s gentleman.

Weren’t they all?

Adam’s warm hand covered hers where she held the reins. “Are you well?”

“I am perfectly fine.”

No, I am not perfectly fine. I want you to go back to where you belong, so I can forget you, and resume my normal life before you came into it, and turned it upside down.

She arrived at the spot where she generally met the villagers, and pulled the wagon to a stop. Already several people had gathered, awaiting her arrival. She plastered a smile on her face and greeted them as she wrapped the reins around the dash. Before she even moved, Adam had jumped from the seat, and rounded the wagon.

Raising his hand to her, he said, "I would love more than anything to scoop you into my arms and lower you to the ground, but for now this must suffice."

She took his hand, and used it to steady herself as she climbed from the wagon. He gave her hand a squeeze, and she looked up into those beautiful brown eyes and her heart thudded.

Yes, please return to your life before you destroy mine.

* * *

LATER THAT EVENING, Eve and Adam sat across from each other with the chess board between them on a low table. Their game was reaching a draw once again. Of the five games they'd played so far, Adam had triumphed once, Eve once, and the rest had been draws. It amazed her how evenly matched they were.

Adam studied the board, then looked up. "Do you want to call it a draw again?"

Eve sighed and nodded. "Yes. There is no way either of us can win."

He stood and stretched. "I believe I would like a short walk in the night air before bed." He held out his hand. "Care to join me?"

Mama and Papa had retired over an hour ago, with Mama drawing her aside to remind her that God was in the room with them. Apparently, she had assumed a deity chaperone would suffice since she and papa were too tired to sit up and watch their every move. It appeared Mama did not trust the nobility any more than Eve did.

"Yes, in fact. I believe I would like that." They walked toward the door, and she retrieved her cloak from the hook by the front door. Adam took it from her hands and placed it over her shoulders, pulling her close to his chest for a moment before he let go.

Her knees grew weak and she began to think maybe a walk in the dark with his lordship was not a good thing. Pushing the traitorous thought from

her mind, she took in a deep breath and they left the house. “Don’t you want a coat over your jacket?”

“No. I tend to do better when it’s cold than when it is overwarm.” He cast a sideways glance at her, a smirk on his full lips. “Hot blood, don’t you know.”

Oh, dear. Yes, perhaps she should have stayed in the kitchen where God was looking over her shoulder. She offered up a quick prayer.

Adam took her hand, and instead of tucking it in his arm, he kept their fingers linked. Somehow that seemed a much more intimate contact, even though with her arm tucked into his, their bodies would be closer together.

They strolled for a while, the only sound their boots crunching on the dry ground. Puffs of mist came from their mouths, turning silver in the moonlight. Adam came to a stop just as they reached the end of the row of cottages. The wooded area that led to the Common loomed before them.

“I don’t feel safe walking any farther with you.”

“Yes, I don’t have my pistol.”

Adam threw back his head and laughed. “I have this image of you whipping out your pistol and protecting the two of us. Is there nothing of which you are afraid?”

Good Lord, yes. I am deathly afraid of you, and the feelings you cause. Of how easily you have fit into my life, how frightened I am of when you leave. But mostly I’m afraid of not remembering Becky’s mistake.

“Some things.”

He glanced over his shoulder, almost as if to see how far from her house they were. The curve in the road blocked them from view. He turned, as if to retrace their steps. Instead, he pulled her into his arms and looked down at her. “A beautiful woman, standing in the moonlight here in my arms. That is of what I am afraid.”

Not sure what he meant by that, she continued to stare, her heart speeding up, and butterflies taking flight in her stomach when he lowered his head.

He’s going to kiss me. What should I do?

It wasn’t necessary to decide, because once his lips touched hers, all coherent thought flew like a flock of birds after a pistol shot.

His lips were full, moist and warm. At first, he was gentle, then with a groan, he pulled her closer and his lips grew more demanding. He angled her head and cupped her cheeks, nudging her lips with his tongue. Surprised, she opened her mouth, and he swept in. Had he not been holding her so tightly

against him, she would have slid to the ground, her knees refusing to remember their God-given duty to hold up her body.

He pulled away, both of them panting as if they'd run a race. He continued to hold her face, and kissed her nose, cheeks and forehead. "You have managed to get under my skin as no other woman ever has. What is it about you that intrigues me so? Are you magic? Have you placed a spell on me?"

She shook her head. "If I have, my lord, I must have cast the same spell over myself."

With another groan, he pulled her close and captured her lips once more.

CHAPTER 5



A dam held Eve's arm tucked into his as they entered the building near the Common where the assembly was to be held. A number of people had already gathered, standing together in groups of four or five, chatting and sipping on some type of drink.

Most heads turned in their direction as they cleared the entrance. Several young ladies, all dressed in their finest, left the groups they were conversing with and crossed over to where he and Eve stood.

Fluttering, curtsyng, waving of fans, giggles, and inane conversation commenced, reminding him that assemblies were the same, whether in a small village or a London ballroom. Eve stayed by his side, even though a few girls tried their best to usurp her position. He grinned, inwardly, cheering her determination.

Only two days had passed since he'd kissed her in the moonlight after their chess game. That kiss had led to others, and before he knew it, he had worked his hand up under her cloak to massage and caress her breasts. Her innocent response to his touch had almost driven him mindless. Before things got too far out of hand, he'd pulled back and taking her hand firmly in his, walked them both back to the house in determined strides.

Eve had looked a bit disoriented when he gave her a light kiss on her forehead, wished her good night, and trod purposefully to his bedroom, wishing there was a lock on the outside, so he could not leave the room until morning.

Too great was the temptation Eve represented.

The orchestra began tuning up their instruments, and the MC waved his hands and called for everyone's attention.

“I am glad to see such a wonderful gathering for our assembly. Before the dancing begins, I would like to welcome Lord Manchester, who, as most of you know, has been visiting us for a short time recovering from an injury.”

Everyone turned in his direction. He merely nodded and continued to stare at the man.

“Since tradition holds that the leading man, who we all agree is his lordship, and the most important lady present dance the first waltz, I would like to ask his lordship to select a partner with whom to start the dancing.”

All eyes turned to him. Eve stood on her toes to speak into his ear. “That would be Squire Halloway’s eldest unmarried daughter. She is standing against the south wall, wearing the dark blue gown.”

Adam moved his head to look where Eve had indicated. A young woman in a dark blue gown against the south wall preened and patted her hair as she gave him what he supposed she thought was a seductive look. He nodded to her, then turned to Eve. “May I request this dance?”

She stared at him open-mouthed. “What? You are supposed to dance with the most important woman in the room.”

He tugged her forward as the small orchestra started up. “You, Miss Eve Allen, are the most important woman in the room. To me.” He took her in his arms and began the dance.

Eve fumbled a bit in the beginning, but his firm grip and smooth moves honed over years in the ballrooms of London kept them both on track. He made a graceful turn, and caught her hand. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He felt as though the sun had come out.

Once the dance had ended, he bowed to her once more, and she curtsied. “Would you care for a drink? I feel I have worked up a thirst, myself.”

Eve took his arm and they made their way across the room to the table set up along the north wall with baked treats and two large bowls of liquid refreshment. “I don’t suppose either of these have a bit of something stronger than lemon in them?”

She laughed and took the glass he held out to her that he’d just filled. “No, my lord, I am afraid not.” She took a sip. “And you should not be asking such a thing of the village rector’s daughter.”

He bent toward her and lowered his voice. “There are quite a few more things I would like to ask the village rector’s daughter.”

Eve took in a sharp breath, and set her glass on the table. “Given your tone, my lord, I don’t think I would care to hear those questions.”

Adam grinned at her and placed his hand on his chest. “Surely you do not think it would be anything inappropriate?”

Before she could answer, they were joined by two young ladies that Eve introduced as Miss Carlyle and Miss Merriweather.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.” He bowed over both of their hands.

When they continued to linger while a country dance started up, Eve nudged him, and glanced in the young ladies’ direction. He sighed inwardly and decided to use his well-learned manners. Turning to Miss Carlyle, he said, “May I have this dance?”

She giggled and blushed, but took his hand as he led her to the dance floor to join the queue of dancers. Resigned to listening to inane babble when he would much rather talk to Eve, he smiled at her and took her two hands in his.

They did all the steps, the dips and twirls, her dancing impeccable. In fact, perhaps the gowns were, for the most part, a bit out of date, and the jewelry not as flashy, but he could have been in a London ballroom, with all the gossip, intrigue and glances cast over fans.

He executed a dance step and turned to see Eve dancing farther down the line with a young man. His insides clenched, and he had the urge to stride down toward them and yank her hands out of the man’s grip.

The situation was becoming perilous. Not only did he have the complication of Lady Ann, but Eve was a commoner, and he a duke. While dukes could mostly get away with whatever they wanted—sans murder—Mother would take to her bed for weeks if he were to announce he’d changed his mind, and wanted to offer for Miss Eve Allen, daughter of Pastor Joshua Allen of Worcestershire.

And how his honor would suffer were he to notify Lord Fenster that the marriage contracts they worked out were for naught, making him appear as frivolous as a silly debutante. But every time he compared pale, bland, perfect Lady Ann, to Eve’s vivaciousness, charm, and intelligence, the knots in his stomach turned to boulders.

* * *

EVE LISTENED with half an ear while Mr. Dartmouth prattled on and on about his newest horse. Why did men think women were interested in such matters?

Not that she expected him to talk about fashions or other issues dear to the hearts of women. She, unlike most women, was interested in books, chess, and helping the poor. Adam found those things interesting enough to talk to her about. In fact, they had never resorted to the typical boring conversations between men and women.

She closed her eyes in frustration and shook her head. Why was she forever comparing Adam to all the other men she'd ever met, and then having them come up short? It was such an exercise in futility, only assuring her that when he left she would have more with which to be miserable.

The dance, thankfully, ended, and she and Mr. Davidson parted. She was only a few steps away from where he'd left her when a strong hand grasped her elbow, followed by a low voice speaking into her ear. "Come with me outside for a stroll. I am feeling a bit overheated."

She shivered with excitement at the thought. Would Adam kiss her again? The last time they strolled after their chess game, she'd been left feeling restless and flushed, as if she needed something more from him to make the feelings cease. Despite her innocence, she knew the disquiet had something to do with desire between men and women. Although she'd tried to pry information from her older sister after she married, Angeline had resorted to raising her nose in the air, and telling her she would find out in good time.

She spent many an hour chastising herself for allowing the liberties Adam had taken with her person. Now she understood how easily Becky had been taken in by her gentleman. Eve had always thought Becky must have had some sort of weakness of character to allow herself to be seduced by her lord. It appeared members of the nobility, who did not have to work hard each day for their bread, had time to hone their seduction skills. And then practice them on innocent, unsophisticated village girls.

However, all of that did not stop her from taking his arm, and walking sedately to the door that led to the small balcony, with steps to the ground.

Despite the chill, the air felt good on her face, heated from the dancing. Once free of the watchful eyes of the assembly crowd, Adam dropped her arm and intertwined their fingers together. They walked across the balcony, and down the steps, almost as if they had planned it. She'd never felt so in accord with anyone to the point where it seemed as though this should last forever.

But it wouldn't, and she needed to keep reminding herself.

Once they cleared the steps, he swung her around, into his arms, and with

a growl, covered her mouth with a need that frightened her, because she felt the same need. She would accept what he offered and would worry about her shattered heart later.

Her shattered heart?

She tightened her lips and closed her eyes. Despite her vigilance, she was very close to falling in love with a totally inappropriate man who would take what he wanted from her, and then leave. While her intellect told her so, her heart refused to believe it. She hoped the tears that welled up so unexpectedly in her eyes would not fall, ruining the moment.

Adam pulled away and took in gulps of air, the same issue she was having. He gripped her head, and rested it against his chest. His pounding heart was in rhythm with her own. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his arms wrapped around her, of the safety and security of being in his arms. The scent of his soap, the strength of his muscles.

“Eve, we must do something about this. Things cannot continue this way.”

She leaned back to look at him. “What do you mean?” The words barely made it past her stiff lips.

He released her and ran his fingers through his hair, pacing in a small circle. “I mean I never should have started something with you that I can’t finish.”

What did he mean by that? She was fully aware there was no future for them. The fact that he never spoke of his life before told her much. He didn’t want to share it with her because she could never be a part of it.

She hugged her body, trying to keep herself together. “I understand.” She stepped back. “I think we should return to the assembly before we are missed.”

Tugging her back again, he said, “No, you do not understand. I can’t finish it here and now, but believe me, Eve, we are not finished.”

Now she was more confused than before. “Adam, you are a lord, I am a rector’s daughter. I would never allow myself to be anything inappropriate to you. What else is there?”

“Marriage.”

She reared back, all her breath leaving her. “No.” She shook her head furiously, trying desperately to get that word out of her mind. “You cannot possibly mean that. You are not thinking clearly. And now I’m going back to the assembly.” She turned, and despite Adam calling her back, sped up the

steps and yanked open the door.

Once inside, she leaned against the wall attempting to catch her breath.

A pox on these stays, I cannot get enough air!

If she could just take a deep breath, she would be fine, but black dots danced in front of her eyes, threatening to bring her to the floor. The voices around her seemed to recede as Adam pulled open the door and walked toward her. She would not swoon, else a major scandal would follow. After one look at her, he took her arm and led her back through the door. “You are pale as snow, Eve. I think you’re about to swoon.”

“I don’t swoon.” Was that her voice? It seemed to come from a great distance, dimmed by a loud hissing in her ears. Unable to fight any longer, her knees buckled, and Adam swept her into his arms as she succumbed to the darkness.

* * *

ADAM HURRIED BACK down the steps, Eve nestled in his arms. Her blasted stays were keeping her from taking a deep breath after hurrying back to the assembly. The only place that was remotely private was her papa’s wagon in which they’d arrived.

He climbed into the vehicle, and placed her on his lap. Her breathing seemed to have improved, so he dismissed his earlier thought of loosening the strings on her stays. That would surely have mortified her. He gently tapped her cheek. “Eve.”

She took a semi-deep breath and opened her eyes. The smile on her face nearly did him in. What he saw there both thrilled and frightened him. Then she seemed to remember where she was, who he was, and how he held her. “Let me up.”

Reluctantly, he let her go. She smoothed out her gown, and raised her chin. “What happened?”

“My dear, I know you said you never swoon, but you just did.”

“I see.” She looked at her lap and seemed to find an invisible piece of lint on her gown mesmerizing.

“Eve.”

She didn’t look up. “What is it?”

“Look at me.”

Her pain-filled eyes twisted his heart. He decided right then and there that no matter how he managed it, he would make Eve his. There were difficulties to overcome, the biggest, of course, being Lady Ann. Following close behind was his mother, and her obsession with proper *ton* debutantes, who had been raised to be a nobleman's wife. But he was a duke, and he would have the woman he wanted. Of course, with the pending betrothal hanging over his head, it would have been so much easier had he met Eve several weeks ago, but nevertheless he would make it work.

"I think I would like to return home." Her whispered words brought him from his ruminating.

"Considering how we both just left the assembly, I suggest we make an appearance as quickly as possible to show all is well. After another dance, we should be able to leave without undue speculation that could damage your reputation."

He had no idea how many in the assembly had witnessed Eve almost passing out, and him hurrying her out the door. Her reputation would probably suffer a bit from that, but they could control the damage somewhat by returning to the assembly, looking respectable.

"I agree."

Adam left the wagon and reached out his hand to assist Eve. His shoulder ached from when he carried her down the steps, and he hated being unable to lift her now.

"Oh, my dear, are you well?" Lady Du Clair hurried over to Eve as they walked through the door.

"Yes, my lady, I am fine. The heat of the room overtook me. But I am much better now."

Lady Du Clair eyed her speculatively. "It appeared his lordship had to assist you out." She sniffed, and glared at Adam.

"Miss Allen was feeling faint and I did not want her to trip going outside."

"Indeed."

Turning on all the charm that had worked since the time he was in short pants, he flashed the woman a broad smile. "Would you care to join me in this dance, my lady? It will give Miss Allen time to fully recover."

She tittered and her face flushed. *They are never too old.* He took her hand and led her into the line forming for the country reel. Eve spent the time chatting with the other girls, and by the time the dance was over, any pending

scandal had been allayed.

The ride back to Reverend Allen's house was quiet. It appeared most of the guests at the assembly lived in the village proper, so he and Eve were all alone on the road back. The moon was bright, and Adam felt the nearness of Eve as a vital thing.

Her hair glowed in the moonlight, and her skin shone alabaster. She kept taking glances at him, and once he placed his hand on her knee, she jumped. Her warm skin under his hand, the scent of lavender and vanilla, and her profile outlined against the darkness of the trees behind her seemed to turn the entire setting into an ethereal fairy tale.

A fairy tale he did not want to end. Soon, he would have to confess to her that he was not merely a lord, but a duke. He also had to return to London, and dispatch a message to Lord Fenster that he needed to meet with him. The sooner he told the man of his change of heart—he winced at that wording—the better. Maybe another day or so, and then he must leave.

That she had become important to him left him without a doubt as to their future. What troubled him now was how to overcome not only the situation with Lady Ann but the distance between him and Eve. Certainly not the miles, but their stations in life.

They turned the bend in the road, the small cottage standing in the moonlight, with a carriage bearing a very familiar crest on the door parked in front. As they drew closer, his mother's voice shattered the peace that had surrounded him and Eve.

“There you are, Manchester, honestly, whatever are you doing in this dreadful place?”

Adam groaned and considered how unacceptable it was to wish one's mother to perdition. His voice was soft. “Eve.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide. “Who is that?”

He hesitated for a moment, knowing everything they'd had together over the past two weeks would vanish like a magician's trick with his next words. “That is my mother, the Duchess of Manchester.” He reached for her hand.

She pulled it away and covered her chest with her palms. “The Duchess of Manchester? Then you are . . .”

He sighed. “The Duke of Manchester, at your service.”

CHAPTER 6



Eve sat on the old, rickety wooden bench, stupidly, unable to do anything but stare at him. “You are a duke?” Good heavens, he was a member of the highest-ranking nobility in the Kingdom. If she’d thought before there was no future for them, now, it was apparent that her family could be in trouble for housing him. She blanched. They could even be accused of kidnapping.

And what if mother’s ministrations hadn’t worked, and he’d died? They might have ended up in prison in leg irons! She backed up on the seat, almost as if he was a leper. Adam reached out and grabbed her. “Eve, you’re going to fall off the edge of the wagon seat.”

“Manchester, come down from there. Whatever is that thing you are riding on?” The duchess glided from the carriage to the wagon. “Is there not a decent inn anywhere near here? I am weary from my travels.”

“Mother, what are you doing here?”

“Did you think once I received word of your injury in this unknown place, I would simply ignore it? And, I would like to know why I had to hear about this from your man of business.”

Before Adam could say another word, Eve jumped from the wagon seat, and raced to the front door of the house. Mama and Papa stood in the doorway, in their nightclothes, looking as confused as she felt. She edged past them, and hurried up the stairs to her bedroom.

“Eve!” Adam’s shout reached her ears, but she placed her palms over them and shook her head.

She had to get away. Her fairytale had turned into a nightmare. A duke! Why had he lied to them? He must think them all fools. Was he laughing

right now with his mother at their backward ways? Eve was mortified. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, feeling as though she would never be warm again.

A pounding on her bedroom door had her looking for an escape. "Eve, open the door. Please."

She shook her head, as though he could see through the wood. "No, Your Grace. Leave me alone."

"Eve, I will not leave until you talk to me. I'll sit here in front of your door all night."

Sit in front of her door? He was a duke. Oh, lord, what was she to do? She hugged her middle and wandered around the room, not seeing anything, but hearing his pleading from the other side. She had thought perhaps he was a baron, or maybe, just maybe, a nobleman's second or third son. Tears formed in her eyes and slid down her cheeks.

"Just go away. Please." Her voice was low, but he apparently heard her.

"No. Open the door. Just for a minute."

Where were Mama and Papa? And the duchess? Eve laughed, almost hysterically, at the thought of her parents in their nightclothes receiving the Duchess of Manchester. *Would you care for some tea, Your Grace? Please excuse our chipped cups and plates. Oh, dear, where has our cook gone with those fancy scones she does up for us so well?*

She threw herself on the bed and sobbed.

A softer knock drew her attention. "Eve, please let me in." Mama's comforting voice had her wiping her cheeks and dragging her body to the door. She opened it to Mama, with Adam standing behind her.

"Eve, His Grace wishes to speak with you. Please don't leave him with an impression of us as being so ill-mannered."

She felt the flush of embarrassment rise from her middle to her face. Mama was right, she was being rude. To a duke. She nodded and stepped out of the room.

"May I have your permission to escort Miss Allen to the parlor and speak with her there?" Adam bowed respectfully to her mama, as if she were a great lady, and not a lowly villager dressed in her nightgown and cap.

"Yes. I will attend with you, but I will grant you privacy to speak." She turned and headed down the stairs, followed by Eve, and then Adam. She saw no evidence of the duchess and wondered what happened to her. Oh, yes, most likely she was in the kitchen stirring the pot of stew. Then she chastised

herself for being nasty. And judgmental.

Mama took a seat by the door, and Eve walked across the small room and turned to face Adam, her arms crossed over her chest. “Yes?”

“Don’t do this, Eve.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Do what, Your Grace?”

He ran his fingers through his hair, giving her the overwhelming urge to run her fingers through the silky locks herself. She might as well, she’d never get another chance.

“What I’m doing, *Your Grace*, is granting you an audience so you can say goodbye, thank me for the care, and wish me a wonderful life.” She dropped her hands by her sides. “So I will say it for you. Goodbye, Your Grace, you are welcome for the care, and I hope you have a wonderful life, as well.”

She attempted to step around him, but he stopped her. “No. I want you to come to my London townhouse with me.”

Her mouth dropped open and she stared at him wide-eyed. “Oh, this has gone far enough.” Duke or no, she was seriously considering slapping his noble face. How dare he present her with such an improper offer while Mama stood not twenty feet from them? Was there no honor whatsoever in the man? She huffed. Like all nobles.

“I am serious.”

“Why?” she shot back. “Are you in need of another maid? A cook, perhaps? Or maybe you need someone to polish the silver. But, oh, my, I’ve forgotten how to polish silver, since it’s been absolutely ages since I’ve done that.” She poked him in the chest. “Do not dare to tell me you are looking for me to fulfill an indecent position.” Somewhere in her speech, her anger had turned to anguish, and tears rolled down her cheeks, unchecked.

He reared back as if she had, indeed, slapped him. “I would never make you such a demeaning offer. For goodness sakes, your mother stands not twenty feet from us.”

Despite Mama’s presence, he pulled her into his arms, and cupped her chin, to force her to look at him. She’d never been so embarrassed in her life. Her cheeks were wet, and probably blotchy, and good heavens, her nose was running. She must have presented a perfect picture of polished English womanhood.

Adam glanced over his shoulder at Mama, who she hoped was tactfully gazing at her lap. Somewhere in the background, she heard the duchess giving orders to someone. So, she was still here. Maybe she would like to

sleep on the settee in the parlor. Hopefully, their linen closet boasted enough sheets.

“Eve, listen to me. As I told you earlier, this is not over between us. I have no idea how I will work this all out, but I will. I promise you that. I must go to the inn at the village now, and attempt to rein in my mother, who, as you can see, can be quite trying at times. Please tell me you will consider going with me tomorrow.”

“No.” She shook her head vigorously. She didn’t have to think long about that. “It has been very nice, and I enjoyed your company, and playing chess. But it’s over, Your Grace. You go back to your life, and I will continue with mine.”

The duchess’s voice rose and within seconds she was in the room with them. “Manchester, I am waiting. I would like to get to bed sometime this night. Please say your goodbyes so we can depart.” She looked pointedly at Eve. “We must find a decent inn, and I would like to discuss your upcoming wedding with Lady Ann.”

Eve sucked in a deep breath, her wide eyes snapping toward Adam. He was betrothed? Before she thought it through, she pulled back her arm and slapped his face. Then, horrified at what she had done, she ran from the room, up the stairs to her bedchamber. She slammed the door shut, and resting against it, slid to the floor.

You are so many ways a fool, Miss Eve Allen.

* * *

WHAT A MESS he’d made of things. He climbed into the carriage behind his mother after giving the driver directions to the village inn.

“I will never understand you. Why in heaven’s name would you recover from a wound as serious as a gunshot in a backwoods village with no proper care, no doctor, and a chance of catching God knows what from that house.” The duchess brushed off her gown as if she carried critters with her from the Allens’ extremely clean home.

“Enough, Mother. Reverend Allen and his family were extremely kind to me. If Miss Allen hadn’t come along the road that night, I could very well have expired right there.”

“Of course she did. She most likely has high aspirations and thought

finding you would better her position in the world.” Most likely seeing his expression had her changing her attitude. “Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful to them, actually. In fact, I think we should send them money, or maybe offer Miss Allen a position in our home, if you would like, she seems like a hard working girl.”

“Miss Allen is not seeking a position, or a reward for helping me. She and her parents took care of me because it was the right thing to do. They were not looking for anything in return, and I sincerely believe if you offered them money they would be highly insulted.”

The duchess waved her hand. “I doubt that. You saw that house, it’s small, and their furniture is old, and certainly that gown Miss Allen wore is years out of fashion. They could use the money, and I think we should offer it to them.”

“Mother, if you offer them one shilling, I will cut your allowance in half.”

She suffered in silence for about five minutes, and then to his regret, started up again. “Why did you not notify me immediately of your injury? Why did I have to have your man of business come to the house to tell me my son had been shot and probably dying, and he never thought to send word?”

“By the time I sent word to Mr. Mathers, I was well on my way to good health, hardly dying.”

The carriage rolled to a stop in the front of the inn he’d seen the week before when he and Eve brought the food and clothing items to the Common to distribute to the needy.

Eve.

The only good thing about Mother’s harping was it kept him from thinking about Eve, and what a disaster he’d left behind. He should have told her long before now that he was a duke and close to making an offer for another woman. Close, but not yet finished. The reason he’d not said anything in the beginning was because he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable with his status as a duke, which is precisely what he’d ended up doing. What in heaven’s name had come over him to pursue Eve before he broke free of Lady Ann?

“It was simple. He’d fallen in love with her.

That thought jarred him like nothing else in his entire life. He’d spent the last ten years avoiding one grasping female after another, thinking there was no one he could ever love, who would love him back, proving such a thing existed in his world.

Until now.

It mattered not that she was a rector's daughter, and was raised away from the *ton*, and did not have the schooling to accept the role of the perfect duchess. He doubted she could paint a decent watercolor or play the pianoforte with skill. However, Eve had a sense of humor, a kind heart, an intelligent mind, and best of all she would never bore him into a coma within months of marriage.

They liked the same things, the same authors, loved chess, and laughed at the same jokes. He sensed an underlying passion in her when he'd kissed her. She would not be a wife who merely suffered her husband's attentions, but would embrace them as she did all of life. Eve was strong, charming, compassionate, and beautiful.

And he loved her.

"Mother, I want you to extend an invitation to the Allen family for Christmas. In fact, I would like you to invite them for an extended stay during Christmas."

She huffed. "I will certainly not. You are betrothed to Lady Ann, and we will be spending the holidays entertaining her, along with her parents, Lord and Lady Fenster. Remember your place. Whatever happened between you and the Allen chit is behind you."

Before he could remind her that he was not truly betrothed, the footman opened the door to the carriage. His mother turned to him. "We will discuss this further inside." She climbed down, and waited for him. Taking his arm, they proceeded into the inn.

"Lord Manchester, so nice to see you." The innkeeper offered him a generous smile. Adam recognized him from the assembly.

"Young man, my son is the Duke of Manchester. You will address him as Your Grace."

A bit taken aback, the poor lad flushed red and gave a sharp bow. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace."

Adam glared at his mother. "That was not necessary." He turned to the young man. "We need two rooms for the night. Can you accommodate us?"

"Yes, yes." The man who had chatted so friendly with him earlier suddenly turned into a subservient clerk, bowing and scraping and making Adam immensely uncomfortable. "Right this way, Your Graces. I'm afraid our lodgings are nowhere near what you are used to, and I apologize."

"No need. Whatever you have will be fine." He glared at his mother when

she gave a distinctive sniff.

He entered the room the lad brought him to, which was small, but larger than the one he'd been sleeping in at Reverend Allen's house. He stripped off his clothes, and laid on the bed, staring at the canopy and wondering how he could fix the mess he'd gotten himself into.

* * *

MAMA SMOOTHED BACK Eve's hair as she laid on her bed, the tears still leaking from her eyes. "Eve, you knew from the start that nothing could come of an acquaintance with a member of the peerage."

She knotted the handkerchief in her hand. "Yes, I know." Eve looked up at the woman who had been such a force in her life. "But, Mama, it hurts so much. He lied to us. Not only is he a duke, but he is betrothed to another woman!"

"It could not have ended any other way. And a duke!" Her mother shook her head, still apparently unsettled that they'd been housing a duke for a couple of weeks. "I will get you a cool cloth for your head. That will help to settle you and tomorrow things might look a bit brighter."

Poor Mama. Always the optimist, never able to bear one of her children suffering. She rose from the bed and left the room. Eve turned onto her side and thought about Adam. How he'd kissed her, and held her face as he stared into her eyes. What had he seen there? She didn't want to think about it.

And his promises of working things out. Of wanting her to return to his home with him. He must have taken leave of his senses. She no more belonged at a fancy duke's home, than he'd belonged in her little house. She was a rector's daughter from a small village, and he was a duke. Nothing more needed to be said.

Perhaps she had been correct, and he merely wanted to set her up in a house somewhere as his mistress.

While he married *Lady Ann*; whoever she was.

Mama returned with the cloth which she placed on her forehead after helping her out of her clothes. With a kiss to her cheek, Mama left the room, and despite her distress, Eve fell into a deep slumber.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, she awoke with a stuffed-up nose and a blinding headache. Her initial confusion as to why she felt so dreadful was quickly resolved when the memories from the night before engulfed her.

Adam, the Duke of Manchester.

Her chess partner, her dance partner, and her first real kiss. She groaned and rolled onto her side, knowing she had work to do, and could not lie abed and feel sorry for herself. He would return today to his life, and plan his wedding, while hers must go on. For better or worse.

Tossing the covers aside, she rose and padded to the dresser and splashed water on her face. Yes, she looked as bad as she felt. With a deep sigh worthy of any swooning debutante, she pulled out her work dress and dropped it over her head. She fastened the front, brushed her hair back to tie with a ribbon, and stepped into her half boots.

Ready to face the day.

Mama was already in the kitchen, mixing dough for bread when she wandered in. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, dear.” Papa sat at the table, spooning porridge into his mouth. “It looks like a nice sunny day out there.”

She loved these two so much. They were wonderful parents, and had showered her and her brothers and sister with so much love. Their marriage had always been what she’d hoped to have for herself. Both of her brothers and Angeline had found love. Why not her?

Because they didn’t try to find love with an unsuitable, out-of-her-class, betrothed-to-another-woman, person. Right then she determined to accept the next man from the village who invited her on a picnic or to the assembly. She would push Adam from her mind, and concentrate on finding a nice, stable man to marry. They would have a contented life. Children would appear. Love would come.

Despite her lack of hunger, she served herself a bowl of porridge and sat alongside Papa. With the work she needed to get done, an empty stomach would be a detriment.

Papa laid his spoon down and regarded Eve. “Mama had a letter from Angeline this morning. She requests that you travel to London to help her with Christmas. It seems she is in a family way again, and is feeling quite ill.”

London. Far away from Manchester Park and Adam. She could spend time with her nephews and forget everything that happened the last two

weeks. In addition, she would have the distraction of the children to help her on Christmas Day, itself, when she always had a difficult time, remembering Becky.

Her mind made up, she swallowed a mouthful of porridge. “Yes, if you can do without me, I would love to help Angeline.”

CHAPTER 7



Adam looked up as his mother entered his study. He'd been back in London for two days, and after taking care of things that were let go when he was with Eve, he was now ready to travel back to Lord Fenster's home and advise him of his decision to withdraw his offer. He was tired to the bone with recovering from his wound and then all the travel, but he had to set things to right as quickly as possible.

Truth be known, he felt uneasy about the entire thing, but he was not about to lose Eve. Now that he'd found the woman he loved, and who he believed loved him back—before he ruined everything by not telling her the truth—the idea of marriage to anyone but her was impossible.

“Milton tells me you are leaving today.”

Adam leaned back, preparing himself for another tirade. “Yes. I will be traveling to Lord Fenster's country estate.”

“You are making a serious mistake.” She moved to sit on the edge of the chair in front of his desk, her back straight, her chin raised. Her bearing one of settling in for a battle. “You will be a laughingstock with a country bumpkin for a wife. Miss Allen will never fit in, and you will be sorry within weeks of your marriage.”

“Mother, we can sit here all day and debate Miss Allen's points both good and bad, but I have made up my mind. I will visit with Fenster and explain the situation, and then I will do everything in my power to make Miss Allen see that she would be a wonderful wife for me.”

She wagged her finger, much like she had when he was in short pants. “The fact that you must convince her elevates her in my mind. She knows, if you don't, that she does not belong in your world.”

“Enough!” He slammed his palm on the desk. Mother never even twitched, but merely raised her eyebrow, leaving him feeling like a recalcitrant child. “I apologize for that outburst, but I must impress upon you once more that my wife will be my choice, and if there are any problems, they will be mine to handle.” He pushed back his chair and stood. “Now if you will excuse me, I must ready myself to travel to the Fenster Estate.”

Before she could say anything else, Adam quit the room and hurried upstairs to nudge Milton to finish packing the satchel he would need for his trip. To make better time, he was eschewing the carriage in favor of a horse. He still mourned the loss of Dionysius, and continued to hold onto hope that one day the animal he loved so well would find its way home.

Within the hour he was on his way with several hours of daylight ahead of him. As uncomfortable as he was about the task that lay ahead, he was also anxious to get the messiness behind him so he could concentrate on the next step, which was ensuring Eve was his. He smiled as he thought back to the last chess game they played.

Eve’s competitive nature had always charmed him, and the fact that he could do his best without concerning himself with trouncing her, made for much more entertaining encounters.

“You do know these games ending in a draw must cease eventually. I am beginning to see how you play and have already worked out a method to defeat you.” Eve smirked at him as she took one of his pawns.

Adam reached over and quickly took her bishop, smirking back. “Yes, you are correct, Miss Allen, but I am also learning how you play and have come up with some counterattacks that will ensure my success.”

She’d winced at the loss of the piece.

* * *

“IT IS NOT an honorable thing you are doing, Your Grace. We had an agreement.” Lord Fenster waved the paper they’d worked on only a few weeks before.

“I apologize, my lord. I am truly sorry for this, but I feel I must do what I believe is best for your daughter as well as myself.”

Fenster raised his eyebrows. “Indeed? My daughter was about to become betrothed to a duke and you think that not happening is in her best interests?”

He narrowed his eyes. "There is another woman?"

Adam hesitated. "Yes, my lord."

"Who is she?"

"She would be unknown to you. She lives in a small village in Worcestershire."

Fenster drew himself up and glared at him. "You stand before me declaring that you are throwing over my daughter, a refined, well-bred young lady of the *ton*, for some wench you met in a village?" He waved his hand in dismissal, "If you got her with child, Your Grace, set her up somewhere and see her when you wish. A proper wife expects her husband to have his mistresses."

If Fenster was not an older man, and if Adam did not acknowledge he was in the wrong in this situation, Fenster would be sitting on his arse right now, holding a bloody nose. Instead, he took a deep breath. "I will ignore that statement because you are upset. However, when and if the young lady accepts my hand, I expect her to be treated with dignity and respect. She is no wench."

With those words, he gave the man a brief nod and left the house.

Now his next step, which was most likely going to be even harder than the meeting with Fenster. He jumped on his horse, Apollo and rode away, already freed of the tight band around his chest that had held him captive since he had acknowledged that Lady Ann was not for him. And the most inappropriate woman was.

* * *

WE NEED to start gathering the evergreens for the church for Christmas. If you have time today, I would like you to go with me," Papa said.

Eve turned to her mother. "Mama? What do we have today?"

Her mama turned to her. "I will need your help with the baking, but Mrs. Vance is coming over to help with the laundry." Mrs. Vance was their occasional domestic help who had been part of their household for as long as Eve could remember. Her favorite visits from Mrs. Vance involved the best apple tarts she had ever tasted.

"I should have time, Papa." She continued to eat her breakfast, hoping that doing all the normal things that made up her life would help remind her

of her place in the world.

Two hours later she was on her hands and knees in the garden, tears rolling down her face as she pulled the last of the weeds before laying down manure for the winter. After carefully leaving seed heads on the plants for the wildlife, especially birds, to eat throughout the winter, she brushed her hands against her old coat and stood. The sound of carriage wheels caught her attention.

Oh, no. Please, don't let him see me now.

She dropped her implements, and raced through the back door, down the corridor, and up the stairs to her bedroom. She whipped off her heavy gloves, coat, apron and hat, and hurried to the mirror. Quickly dosing her face with water, she ran a brush through her hair and pulled it back, tying it with a ribbon.

Glancing down at her dress, she realized nothing could be done about that since besides the one fancy gown she'd worn to the assembly, her only other frock was in the laundry. She'd barely taken one calming breath when there was a knock on her bedroom door.

"Yes?" Lord, was that her voice?

"His Grace would like to speak with you," Mama said.

Why hadn't he just gone back to London? Why had he stopped here? Was it just to torture her?

She stiffened her shoulders, ready to cut him down with her tongue. "I will be right there, Mama."

"Don't keep His Grace waiting."

She sighed. Up until the other day he'd merely been Lord Manchester, a somewhat down-to-earth lord who seemed to fit in well with her family, and the villagers. Today he was His Grace, and she should not keep him waiting.

Feeling as though she was headed into battle, she pulled open the door and took a deep breath. She started down the stairs and looked into the eyes of the man with whom she had fallen hopelessly and irrevocably in love.

God help me.

* * *

ADAM'S STOMACH muscles knotted as he watched Eve descend the stairs. Even though he could tell she'd been crying, since her eyes were still a bit

swollen, she looked beautiful in his eyes. All he wanted to do was sweep her up and dump her into the carriage. Maybe head to Gretna Green.

Holding his hand out, he reached for her, a smile on his face. "Care to take a walk?"

She eyed his hand as though it was a snake about to lunge at her.

"Please?"

"Eve." Her mother's voice behind her seemed to spur her to accept his invitation. She nodded but ignored his hand and walked out the front door, with him following. They strolled for a short while, away from the carriage, and toward a wooded area. Neither spoke, and Adam spent the time trying to compose the correct words to start a difficult conversation.

"Before I say anything more, I want first and foremost to apologize for my deception."

Eve snorted, and continued to study the ground as they walked, her arms wrapped protectively around her middle.

Not allowing himself to be hampered by her demeanor, he continued. "When you found me wounded on the road, my rank and title were not important. I was merely a man in dire need of assistance."

No response, but she did nod her head.

"Once I began to recover, I did not want to intimidate you or your parents, so I remained merely Lord Manchester." He reached out and took her hand. "Eve, look at me. Please?"

"And bleeding in the middle of the road made you forget you were betrothed? Had the highwaymen hit you on the head as well?"

Adam ran his fingers through his hair. "About that."

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Yes, about that."

Trying to find the correct words, he stared off into the distance before he looked at her. "I have a duty and responsibility to my title. To marry and produce heirs. My mother has been presenting potential brides to me for years. I finally met a woman who I thought I could at least tolerate, so I visited with her father and drew up marriage contracts."

Her body stiffened, so he hurried on. "However, she was not at home at the time, and is not expected home until after Christmas. I had not formally proposed to her, nor even laid eyes on her in weeks. The negotiations had been completed, but the papers not signed."

Adam studied her to see her response. There was none. "After years of rejecting one debutante after another, I thought the right one for me would

never appear. I acted too quickly.”

They stopped and she stiffened her shoulders and regarded him. What he saw there touched him in a place he hadn't known existed until this moment. A place well-hidden all his life that had been waiting for Eve.

“I love you.”

There, it was out. He felt a weight lift from his shoulders. She might laugh, cry, or slap him, but he finally admitted to himself, as well as her, what his feelings were.

“Please don't toy with me, Your Grace.” Her flushed face hardened into annoyance.

“Do you have so little faith in me that you think I would say that if I didn't mean it? I might have held back on telling you my full identity, and about the pending betrothal, but believe me, I love you, and I want to marry you.”

Eve took in a deep breath, her eyes wide. “A duke does not marry a rector's daughter!”

“A duke marries whomever he chooses to marry. And you are my choice.” He pulled her into his arms, holding her close, watching her beautiful face, flushed with agitation. “I want you to marry me. I know this is not a proper proposal, and I aim to do things properly and speak with your father. However, I will not leave here until you fully understand what my intentions are toward you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Please don't say those things. I know once you've returned to your real life you will understand why what you are suggesting can never be. You will realize I can never successfully fill the role of duchess, and the young lady you are now betrothed to will fit that position perfectly.”

“I am not betrothed. I have already visited with Lord Fenster and told him of my decision to not continue the betrothal.”

“I'm sure that didn't go well.”

Choosing to ignore that remark, he said, “Eve, listen to me. Mother will be sending you an official invitation to our Christmas Eve ball. She holds it every year at our country estate. Most members of the *ton* are in the country this time of the year, so the ball is a wonderful way for those scattered about to gather for the holiday. I want you, and your parents, to travel to Manchester Park and spend Christmas with us. Please tell me you will accept.”

Eve drew back, clearly shocked. “We cannot accept an invitation to your Christmas Eve ball. We no more belong there than you did here.”

“Ah, but I did belong here quite well, did I not?”

She poked her finger in his chest. “You pretended to belong here because it is quite easy to delve lower in society, but impossible to raise up oneself.” She looked off, and for a moment he thought he’d lost the tiny bit he’d gained thus far.

“Eve, you are an intelligent and friendly woman. You will fit in just fine.”

“Indeed? And which of my fabulous gowns shall I wear to a ball? Perhaps the one I wore to the village to distribute food to the poor? And, dear me, I will have to make sure my lady’s maid knows the latest hairstyles to compete with all the other women at this ball.” She began to pull herself away. “No, Your Grace, I cannot subject myself to that sort of scrutiny and ridicule.”

He tightened his hold. “You compete with no one. Miss Eve Allen as herself is wonderful, charming, beautiful, and smart. That is what I see, and that is what everyone else will see.” Even though he knew he lied, and she would not be accepted so easily, he had to convince her to accept Mother’s invitation.

Once his mother acknowledged Eve as her future daughter-in-law, she would make sure Eve presented herself well. Her pride would allow no less. It was, indeed, an uphill battle he fought for himself, but the reward was Eve.

That was worth anything he had to overcome.

CHAPTER 8



*E*ve was stupid enough to begin to believe that Adam was serious, and really did want her to attend his mother's Christmas Eve ball. As far as loving her, and wanting to marry her, well that was a bit too much for her to believe.

What if he is sincere?

She pushed that thought away. Perhaps he sincerely believed he meant it right now, but once he returned to his life, surely he would relegate her to a place in his memories called, 'nice little village girl who saved my life'. Instead of arguing with him, she merely said, "I will consider the invitation."

He touched her cheek, making her want to turn her face into his large, warm palm, and ask him never to leave.

"No. Not consider it. You must come."

"Perhaps."

"If you do not come, I will embarrass you by arriving here at your front door and kidnapping you." With no further words, he gripped her shoulders and pulled her close. His head dipped and he took her lips in a kiss that repeated his words. Words that she found impossible to believe.

He stepped back, and touched her cheek lightly, turned on his heel and left. She watched with a heavy heart as he walked toward the carriage, never once turning back. After climbing in, and shutting the door, he signaled the driver, and the carriage rolled forward.

She had no polish, no noteworthy skills or experience. Of course, due to Papa's insistence, she spoke three languages, was well-read, and could hold her own in a chess game. Somehow, she didn't think they were the sort of talents the *ton*, or Adam's mother, the Duchess, considered worthy of the

title.

Eve had never met a true debutante, but she'd heard tales from Mrs. Caldwell, The Baron FitzWalter's eldest daughter, who had spent some time in London during the Season two years ago. When she'd received no offers, her father arranged for her to marry Mr. Caldwell, a small landowner in the neighboring county.

Mrs. Caldwell had waxed eloquently about how the young ladies of the *ton* were well versed in playing musical instruments, could paint, sing, and were most fluid in their dance movements. They knew how to convey messages using their fans and flirted shamelessly with the young gentlemen when their chaperones were otherwise occupied.

She had held the girls of the village enthralled with stories of beautiful gowns and jewels, of rides in the park, and bouquets of flowers arriving at the young ladies' homes the morning after a ball. It had all sounded romantic to so many of the girls, but to Eve, it seemed pretentious and silly.

With a final glance at the disappearing carriage, she turned and entered the house to return to her real life, where bread needed to be baked and clothes needed to be laundered.

* * *

IT HAD BEEN two weeks to the day after Adam's departure, when the cream-colored vellum, folded in half, with a wax seal on it, arrived at the cottage. Eve accepted it from the messenger and studied it. Her hand shook as she continued to hold it, afraid to open it, and afraid not to.

She had not told Mama about Adam's request that they spend Christmas with them at Manchester Park. Since she had some doubts that it would ever come to pass, she had no reason to bring it up. But the invitation—if that was what the message was—addressed The Reverend Joshua Allen, Mrs. Elizabeth Allen, and Miss Evelyn Allen.

Mama was in the kitchen, cutting vegetables for dinner. "Mama, where is Papa?"

"I believe he's at the church meeting with a few of the congregants." She looked at her hand. "What do you have there?"

"A message, with an official-looking seal on it."

"How strange." She wiped her hands on her apron and walked to where

Eve stood. She glanced over her shoulder. “Is not that the seal of the Duke of Manchester?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Mama said nothing, but simply viewed Eve with raised brows. “I wonder what the duke wants?”

Eve shrugged, and her face heated, since she was not a good liar.

“Eve?”

“The duke might have mentioned that he would invite us all to attend a Christmas Eve ball at his home at Manchester Park. But, the reason I said nothing was because I thought once he left here, he would not remember that, or even remember us.”

Mama reached out and stroked her cheek. “Oh, my poor daughter. You have strong feelings for him. But, sweeting, he is not of our class. You would be wise to forget him and concentrate on making a wonderful life for yourself right here in the village with one of the lads who are always dancing attendance on you.”

Tears gathered so quickly Eve surprised herself. “I know that Mama. That is why I never brought up the subject to you.” She tapped the vellum. “If this is, indeed, the invitation, what will we do?”

“That is Papa’s decision. I suggest you wait until he returns and give him the message. He will decide what is best.”

Eve nodded and left the kitchen, stopping at Papa’s study to place the note in the center of his desk. Right on top of the pile of sermon notes he’d been working on.

* * *

ADAM LOOKED up from the ledger that was giving him a headache as his mother opened his study door. “Do you have a moment?”

He tried not to groan since it was the height of ill manners to do so to one’s mother. “Yes, what can I help you with?” He had the feeling his headache was about to grow.

She glided into the room and settled on the chair in front of his desk. Perfect. That was how he’d always viewed his mother. Her spine perfectly straight, her hands folded perfectly in her lap, her smile a perfect slight upturn of her lips. “I wish to speak with you once more on this Miss Allen

situation.”

All right, so maybe it would not be so ill-mannered to groan at one’s mother. They had been—for lack of a better word—battling back and forth since his return from Worcestershire. Not one to easily give up something as dear to her heart as her future daughter-in-law, Mother had waged a campaign worthy of Wellington to get him to change his mind.

She had begun the moment he’d walked through the door after his visit with Eve. He listened politely until he could take it no more, then told her he needed to see to some important matters that had arisen while he was gone.

However, the tirade had continued at meals, as they passed each other on the stairs and in the corridors, and times like this, when she cornered him in his study. She’d presented him with a list this very morning at breakfast of debutantes with a check mark next to the names of the young ladies who she’d said, ‘had a brain in her head’.

The last attempt had come from his comment to her that none of the debutantes could think for themselves and would bore him to death in a matter of weeks.

“Mother, as far as I am concerned, there is no ‘Miss Allen situation’, and the matter is settled. You have invited Miss Allen and her parents at my request, and I hope they will accept. I plan to speak with her father when they arrive, and I have every intention of offering for Miss Allen as soon as that meeting has taken place.”

She leaned forward, the look on her face one of utter disbelief, even though he’d told her this repeatedly. “I refuse to believe you will take a wife who has no training whatsoever on how to run a household, how to conduct herself in society, and how to live up to the title of duchess. She will embarrass you, and any children you have. No rector’s daughter could ever step into this role, it is simply not done.”

As she continued, Adam’s thoughts wandered to how he and Eve would ensure those children Mother commented on made an appearance. If anything, his desire for Eve had grown since his departure from Worcestershire. Every time he got a whiff of vanilla or lavender, he could see her as clear as if she stood right in front of him.

Once those thoughts invaded his mind, it took a while for him to focus on the matter at hand. He shifted in his seat and pushed those reflections away, and once more concentrated on Mother’s ramblings.

“I do not wish to be rude, but I have work that needs to be done in order

for us to enjoy Christmas, and all the festivities you have planned.”

The duchess shifted in her seat, not used to being interrupted, but halted her words. “One more thing, and then I promise I will leave you be. I very much doubt if a rector’s daughter—”

“Her name is Miss Allen.”

She glowered at him. “—even has an appropriate gown to wear to the ball.”

“Whatever she wears will be fine.”

“And if it is not?” She sniffed as if Eve would arrive in a frock covered with animal leavings.

“I am sure after Diana’s wedding she left behind a gown or two.” His younger sister had married the prior year, and with an entire new wardrobe, had hied off to the country with her new husband. The lovebirds had not been heard from since, except for a brief note disseminating all the delights to be had in the married state.

“Anything your sister left behind will be hopelessly out of fashion.”

“Enough, Mother. Miss Allen will acquit herself quite well. She is lovely to look at, charming, friendly, and has all her teeth. You’ve nothing to worry about.” He stood, indicating the interview was over.

Reluctantly, since she no doubt had a lot more to say, Mother stood and shook out her skirts. “Very well, if I cannot talk you out of this, please allow me to at least counsel Miss Allen when she arrives.”

Adam walked around the desk and took her by her elbow as they moved toward the door. “You have my blessing to help her fit in. However, do not terrorize her, or demean her in any way.” He turned her to look directly at him. “I am serious about this. I want you to use all your hostess skills to make the Allens feel comfortable.”

She placed her hand on his cheek. “You know I only want what is best for you, don’t you?”

He softened at her tone. Sometimes it was hard to remember the woman who had held him on her lap and told him stories. They would sit for hours and she would sing and read to him. He would always cherish those memories and wondered where along the line she’d lost that softness and became the ‘Duchess’.

It seemed to him the change in her took place once his father died. When she had lost her own true love. He would not allow her to take his opportunity for happiness away from him.

“Yes, I know you want what is best for me. However, we need to admit we might not agree on what is best. I want no more than what you and Father had, and what Diana and her earl have.”

He turned her toward him as they reached the door. “Even a duke can aspire to love, can he not?”

CHAPTER 9



Eve took one final look in the mirror in her room, and her shoulders slumped. Despite the new ribbons on her bonnet, and the pretty embroidery Mama had added to her pelisse, she still appeared as a small village young lady, and certainly not fit to attend a ball held by the Duke of Manchester.

She had stood by silently as Papa had opened the invitation a couple of weeks ago. He had read it over carefully, more than once, with Eve holding her breath. Mama had joined them in Papa's study, as they both waited to hear Papa's response.

Papa placed the note on his desk and removed his spectacles. With his handkerchief, he cleaned off the lens, studying his fingers as they worked. Once his spectacles were back on his nose, he looked over at Eve. "Do you wish to attend, daughter?"

"I don't know." She hadn't realized up until that moment that she had been counting on Papa to make the decision for her. Had he said no, that would have been the end of it. Had he answered in the affirmative, she would have gladly prepared. But it had seemed Papa had wanted her to decide for herself.

"Before you answer, hear me out. Mama and I cannot accept this invitation, for no other reason than the church needs us during Christmastide. However, there is no reason why you cannot enjoy the festivities the duke offers you."

He waved to the two chairs in front of his desk, and they all sat. "I am not blind, and I have raised four children. There was no doubt in my mind that His Grace had developed feelings for you, and you for him. The divide

between our classes is extremely wide, of which you are undoubtedly aware.

“I cannot truthfully see you fitting into that world; however, I know how determined you are, and Mama and I are proud of the young woman you have become. I trust your decision to be the best one for you.” He leaned forward on his desk, his hands clasped, and viewed her with the loving eyes she’d seen all her life. “If this is what your heart truly wants, accept the man’s invitation, and see for yourself what you think of your differences while in his vicinage. Mama and I would always stand with what you decide.”

Eve’s heart had thumped so loudly at his words, it had almost choked her. “But Papa, if you and Mama cannot attend, I cannot go alone.”

He shook his head. “Your mama can arrange for a chaperone. I am sure there are many circumspect women in the village who would love to attend a fancy Christmas ball.”

“Can I do that? Bring someone with me who was not invited?”

Papa smiled warmly at her. “My dear, I am quite sure the duke will be more than happy to play host to a chaperone if it means you will be there, as well.”

She’d blushed at Papa’s words, and Mama’s grin.

Now the carriage Adam had sent for her was parked outside her door, and Mrs. Carter, a close friend of Mama’s, and a formidable widow with seven grown children, waited for her.

The butterflies in her stomach grew in intensity as she left the room and headed downstairs. Mrs. Carter wore a very strange-looking hat, that she must have assumed would be quite fashionable at Manchester Park. It took all of Eve’s loosely held control not to laugh. “Good morning, Mrs. Carter. Thank you so much for traveling with me.”

“I am flattered that your mama trusted me to watch out for you while you hobnob with the Quality.”

Oh, dear. Hopefully Mrs. Carter would not say anything to embarrass her. She smiled at the woman, and kissed Mama and Papa on the cheek before climbing into the well-sprung, comfortable carriage.

Her trunk had already been loaded, and soon she was waving at her parents as the vehicle rolled toward Adam’s home, and a life she’d never even dreamed about.

The trip would take about eight hours, with them stopping twice, once for luncheon and then dinner. Adam had explained in his last correspondence that they would also change horses at those stops. He’d thoughtfully sent a

complete outline of where the carriage would travel, and the roads it would take. Separately, he'd written to Papa to assure him of Eve's safety on the journey, and that he would send a footman and a well-armed outrider, along with the driver, to assure their well-being.

He had also arranged for the inns where they would stop for their meals. Papa had given her some coins, but she had a feeling Adam had already paid for whatever services they would require at the inns.

"Your young man must think quite a bit of you to go to all this trouble." Mrs. Carter gazed around the coach, running her palm over the smooth deep blue velvet seats, fingering the brocade curtains covering the windows.

Too nervous to engage in conversation, Eve merely smiled and kept her thoughts to herself. Thoughts such as 'her young man' had the carriage built just to transport her from Worcestershire to Manchester Park. She suppressed a giggle at the thought and tried her best to calm herself.

The eight-hour trip passed by too quickly in some ways, and achingly slow in others. The stops at the inns were appreciated, since she'd grown stiff sitting for hours. Although, the comfort of the carriage made the long trip not only bearable, but comfortable as possible.

After dinner, the heaviness of the meal, plus the rolling of the carriage lulled her to sleep, and it seemed she had no sooner closed her eyes than Mrs. Carter tapped her on her knee. "Eve. It appears we have arrived."

Immediately, her heart pounding resumed, and she moved the curtain aside to see Adam striding down the pathway, a huge grin on his face.

* * *

ADAM HAD SPENT the better part of the day pacing in his study and checking his timepiece against the long clock in the corner. Even though he'd received a very nice response from Pastor Allen to Mother's invitation, he still had his doubts that Eve would appear. The rector had written an apology that he and Mrs. Allen were unable to attend the festivities due to duties at Christmastide with his church, but Miss Eve Allen would be delighted to accept his invitation.

He sent his carriage off yesterday in plenty of time for it to arrive this morning to transport Eve and whoever was coming with her as chaperone. Tugging his timepiece from his waistcoat once again, he stopped and tilted

his head to listen. The sound of carriage wheels drew him to the front door.

Mother had insisted that Eve arrive several days before the ball so she could take her under her wing and prepare her for the events. Although Adam had been reluctant to turn her over to Mother's ministrations, he had no doubt that if anyone could make certain Eve had very few missteps, it was the Duchess of Manchester.

He held his breath as the footman stepped off the back of the carriage and opened the door. He extended his hand and an older woman emerged. No longer able to tolerate the wait, Adam strode to the carriage and nodded briefly to the woman. Then he poked his head into the carriage and there sat Eve. He released the deep breath he held and smiled. "Good evening."

She looked scared to death. If he didn't do something immediately to calm her, she was likely to step from the carriage and flee. Instead of reaching his hand in, he climbed in and sat across from her. "Did you have a pleasant journey?"

A quick nod was his only response. "Were the inns I arranged for you to take your meals accommodating?" He could only imagine how difficult it was for her to make such a journey without her parents.

"Yes." Ah, finally she spoke. He was making progress.

"Perhaps you can step out and introduce me to your chaperone?"

Eve shook her head. "Oh, I am so sorry. How ill-mannered of me. Your mother will be furious."

"Do not concern yourself with my mother. She is happy to have you join us and is looking forward to helping you along."

The poor girl shrank back against the seat. Just then Mother joined the group at the carriage. "Good evening, Miss Allen. Won't you join us inside? I have a light repast waiting."

Eve startled and moved to leave the carriage. Adam climbed out first, turned and took her hand. Everything in his world righted itself. The scent of vanilla and lavender embraced him with memories and warmth. Not the sort of heat the thought of taking Eve to bed brought, but a feeling of contentment that had been missing since his return from Worcestershire.

"May I make known to you my chaperone, Mrs. Carter?" Eve gave his mother a soft smile. "Mrs. Carter, may I present the Duke of Manchester and the Duchess of Manchester."

Mrs. Carter grinned and regarded him with pleasure. "I remember you, young man. You were Lord Manchester back when you were helping our Eve

here distribute food and clothing.” She looked at his mother and winked. “His Grace is a fine dancer, as well.”

Mother looked as though she’d swallowed her tongue, and her brows rose so far up her forehead they nearly disappeared into her hairline. Adam recovered faster and said, “Let us all move into the house where there is a warm fire waiting.”

He took Eve’s arm and led her into the house, following behind Mrs. Carter and his mother. They all assembled in the drawing room on the first floor. A table along the wall held small sandwiches, tarts, cookies, cheese and fruit, along with tea and hot chocolate.

They all filled their plates and took comfortable chairs scattered around the room. He and Eve sat side-by-side on a settee. Although he attempted to eat, he found he could not get enough of watching Eve.

“I have a room readied for you, Miss Allen, in our family wing. I would like to discuss your wardrobe with you in the morning, since I know you must be fatigued from the journey. I know I always am.” His mother placed her teacup in the saucer and looked toward Mrs. Carter, who viewed her with wonder. Mother did seem to have that effect on people.

“Mrs. Carter, I am sure you will find your room comfortable. I will have one of the maids bring you up when we are through.”

The older woman nodded and cast a glance at Eve. He needed to have at least some minutes with her alone before she retired for the night. “Mrs. Carter, I would like your permission to escort Miss Allen on a short walk around our gallery. I believe she might enjoy some of the paintings before she retires.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Mrs. Carter seemed overwhelmed that he would ask her permission, but he wanted to be sure that there would be no hint of impropriety in Eve’s visit. He would have a hard time keeping his hands off her, to be sure, but he could at least begin the visit with everything above board.

“I believe I will retire,” Mrs. Carter said after wiping her mouth with her serviette.

“I will ring for a maid to escort you.” Mother glided across the room and pulled the brocade cord. Before the maid answered her summons, Adam stood. “Miss Allen?”

Eve looked up at him and a slight smile graced her face. He felt as though the sun had come out.

* * *

NOW THAT SHE and Adam were leaving the room, Eve felt less anxious, although she had to admit the duchess was much more pleasant than she'd expected. However, her nerves had begun to settle when they all sat down for tea, but the duchess mentioning going over her wardrobe brought the butterflies back to her stomach again.

Eve had no wardrobe to speak of. She wore her best travel dress and pelisse, and carried with her the gown for the ball, the same one she'd worn to the assembly, along with her good church dress. A cotton nightgown, slippers for dancing, and her mother's pearl necklace. That was it. There was no need for an extensive wardrobe in the small village, especially when one lived on a rector's stipend.

She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed Adam's company. Just having him walk beside her brought her joy. It was time for her to admit she had very strong feelings for him. She dare not name it love, but there was no other word that seemed to fit.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, until they reached the gallery. Rows of portraits hung on all four walls. There seemed to be equal amounts of men and women. Several portraits were of families, staid husbands, bland wives, and staunch children stared out at the viewer, leaving her to wonder what was on their minds while the artist worked. No doubt they had been required to sit for long periods of time. Being somewhat familiar with young children through her work at the church, she wondered what inducement had been offered for them to sit still.

They halted in front of another portrait of a woman from several generations past. She looked unhappy, and quite young. Before she could dwell on that, Adam's deep voice broke through her meanderings. "As fond as I am of my ancestors, that is not why I brought you to the gallery. Now that I have you alone, I feel I must kiss you." He took her hand and kissed the back of it, staring at her over their joined hands. "May I steal a kiss?"

Eve laughed. "If you ask permission, it is not stealing."

"Good." He pulled her into his arms and took her lips in a soft kiss, soon turning into something wonderful and strong. His hands cupped her face as he tilted her head in such a way that the kiss became deeper. The longing she'd felt for weeks burst forth, and she moved even farther into his embrace.

Encouraged by her response, Adam nudged her lips with his tongue, and

then entered, sweeping over the roof of her mouth, tangling with her tongue, bringing her delightful feelings in areas where she'd never given much thought. He pulled back and kissed her forehead, eyelids, nose, cheeks, everywhere it seemed where his lips could touch on her face.

Then he moved to her neck and nuzzled the sensitive skin under her ear. "I've missed you so much. You have no idea how many nights I laid in bed wishing you were alongside me." He pulled back and looked into her eyes, studying her, looking for whatever he seemed to need. "I want you in my bed. Tonight, tomorrow, for the rest of my life."

Eve straightened but did not leave his embrace. "That is scandalous."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "No. It is not. I want to marry you, Eve. I told you that before I left Worcestershire, and I still intend to speak with your father. Since your parents were unable to attend, I will make the trip out to Worcestershire with you when you leave."

He was serious. Eve battled with the common-sense voice telling her a duke did not marry a commoner, especially a rector's daughter. She was no lady, had not been raised to be one. She had no elegance, no training worthy of a duchess. She'd never been educated on how to run a household and wasn't even sure she knew the correct utensils to use at the dinner table.

Suddenly, an overwhelming wave of panic swept through her. Whatever was she doing here? She was a terrible liar, and there were no fraudulent bones in her body. She could never pretend to be one of these people at an event as momentous as a Christmas Eve ball.

Eve drew back and licked her lips. "I think it is not a good idea to dwell on that, Adam. We are from very different worlds. In fact, I don't think I can even attend this ball, I—"

He tugged her to him and cupped her face. "Stop. You are an intelligent woman. You can do whatever it is you set your mind to. Mother has agreed to take you under her wing and help you prepare for the ball. She will make sure there are few missteps."

The panic grew, and she moved back, wringing her hands. "But the ball is in only a few days. She will grow weary of my ignorance. I cannot possibly learn in such a short period of time what takes ladies of the *ton* all their lives to learn. She took a deep breath. "I must leave, I must—"

This time he silenced her with a kiss. All her worries melted with his arms around her, and his lips on hers. If she could have this for the rest of her life, perhaps it would be worth going through whatever trials await her.

Adam pulled back and smiled. “Have I told you how happy I am that you came? I appreciate how difficult this is for you. But please do not worry. Let me do the worrying. You will impress everyone who meets you, given enough time to get to know you. Mother may seem a hard taskmaster, but she has assured me if you are who I want, she will see that you are presented in a suitable way.”

She wasn't at all sure the duchess would ever be willing to forego her desire to have Adam marry a woman of his class. For Adam's sake, and the love she felt for him, she had to make a concerted effort to try.

Hopefully, she wouldn't fall flat on her face at her first meeting with his mother.

CHAPTER 10



“No, dear, you must sit on the edge of the seat, with your back straight.”
The duchess gracefully rested her bottom on the settee. “Like this.”

Eve chewed her lip and tried to imitate the woman, but years of doing everything the absolute correct way had molded Adam’s mother into *ton* perfection. Eve, on the other hand could not get her posture that rigid without straining all the muscles in her back. She tried and felt like a soldier awaiting inspection from his commanding officer.

“And do not chew your lip.”

Eve fought the tears that threatened to turn her into a watering pot and disgrace herself in front of the duchess. They had been practicing how to walk, how to curtsy—who knew there were depths to which a person dipped depending on the station of the person they were curtsying to—and the correct way to pour tea. Since Eve doubted very much if she would be a position to pour tea given she was here for only Christmas, and would not likely be entertaining anyone on her own, it seemed a waste of time.

The duchess did not think so when Eve brought that to her attention.

“If you plan to go about in Society, you must know all the nuances that make up a successful young lady. Had you been raised by *ton* standards you would have learned all of this once you left the nursery.”

Eve tried very hard not to sigh. She was a bumbling, inept, non-Quality person who had way too many things that needed to be done on a daily basis to worry about how straight she sat in a chair. She would never learn all of this and told Adam as much earlier in the day.

He patted her hand as they ate breakfast, assuring her that she would do just fine, and he was not at all concerned that she wouldn’t acquit herself well

when the time came. He listened intently when she told him how the day before had been spent with his mother.

Hours had passed with the duchess and her *modiste*, attempting to pull together an acceptable wardrobe for Eve's visit. By the time they'd finished, Eve had been pricked, pinned, positioned into awkward poses, and examined from every angle possible. She'd been quite tired when she joined Adam in the drawing room before dinner.

"She is trying to help. Just do not let her browbeat you. She can be somewhat forceful, but she means well."

Remembering that conversation, Eve tried once more to walk across the room and sit as gracefully as the duchess had done. To her immense surprise, the duchess clapped her hands and smiled. "That was perfect, Eve."

She couldn't help beaming at her success. Then she wondered at the emptiness of these people's lives that she had received accolades for correctly placing her arse on a chair.

"Now, I want you to remember that tonight we will be having guests for dinner." The duchess waved her hand when Eve's eyes grew wide. "Do not concern yourself. I will seat you directly across from me so you can follow my lead."

She continued, ignoring the sweat that broke out on Eve's forehead. "You will wear the peach silk gown that Mlle. LaRue altered for you today. I will make sure Robbins fixes your hair in a becoming style." She reached across and patted her knee. "I suggest you take a short lie-down to calm yourself before Robbins readies your bath."

Happy to be dismissed, Eve rose and hurried from the duchess's morning room where they had been practicing walking and sitting. She rubbed her temples attempting to avoid the headache that hovered nearby.

* * *

EVE COULD NOT STOP STARING at herself in the mirror. Never a vain person, however, she acknowledged that the young lady staring back at her was beautiful. Her hair had been swept away from her face into a chignon of sorts at her nape. One curl had been left to dangle near her ear and rest on her bare shoulder.

The duchess had lent her a simple gold necklace with earrings to match.

But the *piece de resistance* was the lovely peach gown the modiste had altered for her. She had never owned anything so exquisite in her entire life. She felt like a queen, and certainly not like Miss Evelyn Allen, youngest daughter of the Reverend Joshua Allen.

Truth be known, she was concerned about the neckline showing a bit too much. The tops of her breasts were clearly on display, and she hoped they would not tumble out of the gown when she curtsied. Then she reminded herself that a proper curtsy did not involve bending forward but keeping her back straight. With the low cut gowns these women wore, it was no wonder they leaned to curtsy without bending.

So many things to remember, all of them jumbled in her mind, always with the sound of the duchess's voice chiding her. Hopefully, she would not embarrass herself or the duchess this evening at dinner.

Just watch the duchess, and all will be well.

Robbins entered the room holding a fan in her hand, with a shawl draped over her arm. "My goodness, Miss Allen, you certainly look beautiful. I'm sure the duke will not be able to keep his eyes off you."

Eve felt the heat start in her middle and spread to her face. Not used to compliments, she fumbled to take the items from the maid. She breathed a sigh of relief when the shawl covered her chest. Taking a deep breath, she turned from the mirror and left the room.

Finally familiar enough with the house to avoid walking in the wrong direction or opening doors to strange rooms, she made her way down the stairs to the drawing room where the duchess said they would all meet for dinner.

The sliding doors had been left open, and a crowd of about thirty people stood in small clusters, conversing and holding delicate glasses of liquid. Eve's mouth dried up, and she could not make her feet move forward. This was it. She would appear before members of the *ton* as if she belonged there. As if she did not pull the weeds from her garden, help with the laundry, and drive an old rickety wagon to bring food and clothes to the poor.

Just as she turned to flee back to the safety of the bedchamber she'd been assigned, a warm hand grasped her arm. "Eve?" She closed her eyes. Why didn't he just let her go? Let her return to her life, and not pretend she could ever be a part of his.

"Yes." She didn't turn but tried to blink away the tears threatening to fall on the lovely shawl.

Adam linked his arm into hers. "Come, there are several people I would like you to meet."

She looked up at him, her eyes pleading. "I don't think I can do this."

He stared into her eyes, his demeanor telling her she had no choice. "You are the bravest woman I know. You can do this." He tugged her. "Come."

Stiffening her back, she allowed him to move her forward. The duchess nodded to her as they passed. Adam stopped before a group of five people. "May I make know to you Miss Evelyn Allen? She is our guest for the Christmas season."

An older woman with a very large feather in her hair raised a lorgnette and peered at her. "Miss Allen? Do I know your family?"

Since I don't know who you are, how would I know if you know my family?

Instead of uttering those words, Eve smiled and did what she thought was an excellent curtsy. "I am not sure, my lady."

The woman harrumphed and dropped the lorgnette, leaving it to dangle from the jeweled pin fastened to her very large bosom. "Well, I only know one Allen family, and they are a disgrace."

Eve felt the sweat break out on her back. This was the first person she met and already she was making a muck of it.

Adam cast the woman his most charming smile. "Ah, Lady Penzer, I doubt if you are familiar with Miss Allen's family. They reside in a lovely village in Worcestershire."

"Indeed?" Her brows rose as if no one should stand before her whose family she did not know.

"Miss Allen, may I introduce Lord and Lady Duncan, Lord Melrose, and his daughters, Miss Clark, and Miss Amy Clark."

Eve gave more curtsies, assuming the lords and lady received a deeper one than the two young girls. They all smiled at her, except for Miss Clark who gave her a distinct glower. Oh, dear. It appeared she'd already annoyed Lady Penzer by not coming from a family she knew, and Miss Clark who for a reason completely unknown to her.

* * *

ADAM GROANED INWARDLY at the look Miss Clark cast in Eve's direction. It

had been bad enough that Lady Penzer had given her a hard time about her family, but he knew Miss Clark had aspirations where he was concerned, unfortunately initiated by his mother. He had never seriously considered the girl for his wife, but now that Eve had come into his life, no one else would ever satisfy him.

He chatted for a few minutes with the group, then moved Eve along to join another gathering. Lords Stewart and Davis were much more congenial toward Eve, which pleased him in one way because she visibly relaxed but annoyed him in another way. The men were both single, handsome, and charming. And were obviously captivated by Eve. He didn't spend too much time with them before he moved her to another group.

They had made their way around the room by the time the butler announced dinner. Bending to protocol, he escorted Lady Penzer into dinner. Once they were seated, however, he breathed a sigh of relief to see Mother had placed Eve not too far from him, and across from her, giving the girl a view of everything his mother did.

"Your Grace, I am so looking forward to the Christmas Eve Ball." Miss Clark beamed at him as she picked up her wine glass.

"As I am as well. Christmas is my favorite time of the year." He turned to Eve. "How about you, Miss Allen? What is your favorite holiday?"

"I believe it is Christmas myself. I love the scent of greenery when we decorate the house with it, and all the special foods Mama prepares."

"Your mother cooks?" Miss Clark regarded Eve as if she had just returned from the fish market carrying a dripping gutted trout.

"Yes, indeed. Miss Allen's mother is an excellent cook." Adam had no intention of hiding Eve's background, and certainly didn't want her feeling embarrassed by it. Eve was a wonderful, kind-hearted woman who would make an excellent duchess for him, and a mother for their children. If she made a few missteps in the beginning, then so be it.

Miss Clark tittered. "I doubt my mother could find the kitchen."

"Tell me, Miss Clark, how does your mother fare? I understand she was unable to attend due to an ague keeping her bedridden." The duchess stepped right in and moved the conversation along.

The rest of the dinner passed amicably. He noticed Miss Clark studying Eve occasionally as if she were trying to figure out her place. His mother had presented Miss Clark to him as a potential bride at one time. He escorted her to the theater and on a ride in Hyde Park. Each time he breathed a sigh of

relief when he brought her to her front door.

The girl had never stopped talking, even during the play. Most of her conversation centered on her and what she wanted in a marriage, and how fortunate any man would be to take her to wife. He would be only too happy to see her in wedded bliss.

If it was with anyone but him.

After the men had consumed their port and joined the ladies for tea, Adam approached Eve where she stood with his mother and three other ladies. “May I interest you in a game of chess, Miss Allen?”

Eve turned to him with a bright smile. “Yes, Your Grace, I would love a match.”

“Perhaps it would be better, my dear,” the duchess spoke to Adam, “if we organized a game that several of our guests could enjoy.”

“Oh, let us do charades. I simply love charades and am quite good at it.” Miss Clark clapped her hands at his mother’s announcement.

He wanted time to speak with Eve alone, and not willing to give up a chance to do so, he said, “Miss Clark, what an excellent idea. Why don’t you form two groups to compete against each other while Miss Allen and I play chess? Or perhaps others would enjoy a game of cards.”

He hoped that last comment would smooth his mother’s feathers at him slipping away from group games, which he abhorred—a fact of which she was quite aware.

A pointedly annoyed Miss Clark began organizing the game while mother had footmen set up card tables for the guests who preferred something not quite so enthusiastic as charades. He was happy to settle into a quiet corner with Eve.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” He arranged the pieces, a feeling of contentment sweeping over him. Her familiar scent wafted across to him, and her slender fingers placed her pieces on the board. “Yes, I am.”

As she shifted the pieces around, she said, “Mr. Dunsten, on the other side of me at dinner was quite entertaining.”

Adam looked up at her, his brows raised. “He is almost three score.”

“Oh?”

He continued to shuffle his pieces into their correct positions. He shrugged. “Well, I just thought I would mention that because the old goat is looking for another wife, after burying three of them. He’s still trying to secure an heir.”

“Three wives?”

“Yes. Three. Two in childbirth, and one from a fever.”

“Oh, the poor man.”

Remembering how the last Mrs. Dunsten looked while she was married to the man, Adam doubted he needed their sympathy.

CHAPTER 11



Eve found that Christmas was not much different among the titled and wealthy than it was in her tiny village. Excitement filled the air, special cookies, pies and drinks were prepared, gifts were purchased or made, and lovely evergreens decorated the house, giving it a smell that always brought Christmas memories.

Except everything here at Manchester Park was done on a larger scale. Instead of the Duchess making pies and cakes, a cook, supervising other ladies brought in for the holiday prepared the coming feast.

Evergreens were collected by the footmen instead of the family, although Eve insisted she and Adam go with them on the drive farther on the estate to find the perfect pieces.

“You do know I am scandalizing my guests by going with the footmen to forage for evergreens?” Adam said with a warm smile.

Feeling more relaxed since the dinner the night before had ended on a perfect note with her and Adam facing each other across the chess board, Eve merely smiled at him. “Just think of all the fun your guests are missing.”

“Yes, indeed. They are forced to remain in a warm house, sipping on holiday drinks in front of a roaring fire instead of traipsing around the countryside cutting branches? I agree, they are missing fun.” He tapped her on the nose as she wrapped a warm scarf around her neck.

She waved his hand away. “Wait. You will see.” They walked down the steps to the carriage that would take them on their hunt, Mrs. Carter right behind them. “You know, Adam, there are many parts of my life that you would enjoy. Even though the smells coming from your kitchen are wonderful, there is a great deal to be said about turning out the perfect apple

pie or gingerbread cookies yourself.”

Once they were settled and Adam had wrapped a warm blanket around them, he said, “I believe you are correct. So many of my peers are used to having everything done for them, it is refreshing to think about those who don’t have that privilege.”

“Ah, but is it a privilege?” The carriage started up. “I actually enjoy knitting wool socks for my Christmas presents and helping select the evergreens to decorate the house. And Mama and I turning out the very best food for my family as well as whichever neighbors we invited for Christmas dinner is quite satisfying.”

Adam patted her hand. “I agree, Miss Allen. If we can prevent the Duchess from swooning, I will introduce you to Cook and tell her you wish to make gingerbread cookies.”

“Are you laughing at me, Your Grace?” She frowned at him.

“Perhaps a bit. I can guarantee the Duchess would swoon if she caught you in the kitchen. Since this is your first visit, let us settle for helping select the evergreens as the initial rebellion towards life with the Upper Crust.”

“Personally, I would very much enjoy having things done for me,” Mrs. Carter said.

“I am not opposed to having things done for me, either, but I also like doing things for myself.”

“Like knitting wool socks for Christmas gifts?” Adam said, his eyes filled with mirth.

Eve raised her chin. “Indeed. Perhaps I have already knitted a pair of gloves for you.”

“No socks?”

“It is not proper,” both Eve and Mrs. Carter said at once.

They enjoyed the rest of the ride in silence, Eve watching Adam as he looked out the window as they arrived at a promising area for collecting evergreens.

Could she marry this man? So far, he had seemed serious in his desire to make her his wife. Perhaps they had more in common than they did differences. She shook her head. No. That was much too absurd to imagine. But for now she would enjoy his company and have fun helping to select the perfect evergreens to decorate his house.

* * *

UNBEKNOWNST TO HER, Adam had been studying Eve the entire ride. She was such an honest woman, every thought showed on her face. She was struggling, he was sure. He tried to imagine being in her place in the world, so far from what he'd taken for granted his entire life, and then being asked to step into it.

He loved her.

That seemed to say it all for him. While she had never uttered the words, he was almost certain she felt the same. He didn't think Mother had yet to embrace the idea of Eve as her daughter-in-law, but she had at least been kind to her and was helping her along. He was certain after a few days of Eve's company that would change.

They climbed from the carriage, and Eve led the way, having done this many times before. She studied each tree and pointed to various branches that the footmen cut down and loaded onto the carriage. Adam had to admit it was fun being out in the cold and spending time dragging boughs to bring home the wonderful Christmas smell.

Or perhaps being with Eve made everything fun. She certainly seemed to bring smiles to the footmen's faces as well as Mrs. Carter with her enthusiasm for the task.

Adam took Eve by the elbow. "Come, I believe we have enough branches now to decorate several manors. it is time for some warm liquids and luncheon."

Shivering a bit, Eve nodded. "I agree."

Mrs. Carter had retired to the carriage about twenty minutes before. She sat wrapped up in the wool blanket, her nose red. "Are we finished?" she asked.

"Yes. I think we have enough." Eve settled alongside her chaperone and wrapped another blanket around her.

Mother and her guests were in the drawing room, awaiting luncheon when they returned. "My goodness, look at the two of you. You must be frozen."

Adam placed his hand at Eve's back and moved them both toward the fireplace. "Not frozen, but we can certainly use the warmth from the fire."

"Your Grace, there is hot apple cider which will certainly warm you up," Miss Clark said as she strolled up to them. "Personally, I don't understand why you felt the need to accompany the footmen. it is not as if they don't know how to cut down branches."

Adam took a cup of hot apple cider from a footman and nodded. "Ah, but there is a certain satisfaction in doing it yourself." He looked at Eve who was also sipping cider. "Something I never knew until today."

Miss Clark huffed. "You would never catch me roaming the woods looking for branches." She shook her head.

Adam looked over at Eve and they both smiled over the rim of their cups.

* * *

EVE SAT in her assigned room, curled up on the settee in front of the window, reading a book, feeling quite derelict since she never had time to just sit and read during the day, with all the chores that needed to be done. Perhaps there were one or two things about this life that she would find quite satisfying.

Adam had to address certain matters this afternoon and instead of joining the other women in the Duchess's sitting room, Eve had elected to enjoy some time to herself.

She gazed out the window, watching the snow fall from the sky. It had only started about twenty minutes before, and already the ground was covered with a fine coating of sparkling white.

A soft knock on her door drew her attention. "Yes?"

"May I come in, Miss Allen?" The Duchess's melodious voice started the pounding in Eve's chest. Was she here to chastise her? Tell her a carriage awaited to return her home since she would never fit in? Maybe she shouldn't have encouraged Adam to go with her to find greenery.

"Yes, of course, Your Grace." Eve stood and walked to the middle of the room as the duchess entered. She offered a slight curtsy.

The Duchess waved at her. "No need for that, my dear. If you curtsy every time you see me you will spend all your time dipping." She walked toward the settee where Eve's book sat. "Can we have a chat?"

Oh, goodness. That didn't sound promising. "Of course, Your Grace."

The two of them sat and Eve smoothed out her skirt with damp palms, remembering to sit in that uncomfortable stiff-backed position. The Duchess did it so easily and didn't seem to be in pain at all. Years of doing so, she guessed.

"I wish to ask you a simple question, Miss Allen."

Eve nodded, the pounding in her chest growing to where she felt as

though her heart would jump from her chest.

“Do you love my son?”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate even though she hadn’t admitted it completely to herself yet. “Yes, I love him, Your Grace.” She spoke more firmly. “I know the difference between us, and that you are not happy with his attachment to me, but if I were to be honest with you as well as myself, then I admit that I love him.”

The Duchess nodded. “You are certain you can fit into this life?” She waved her hand around. “Members of the *ton* can be brutal to outsiders. As a duke, my son can mostly do what he wants, but you will have to face people on your own, without him by your side. There will be snickers, and comments, and other ways women will let you know you don’t belong, you don’t fit. Can you handle that?”

Eve raised her chin. “I believe I can.”

“I notice you preferred to spend the afternoon in your room as opposed to joining the ladies in my sitting room. You do realize as a duchess you cannot do that. You must be gracious, thoughtful and caring of your guests. Hiding is not allowed.”

Eve felt as though she was caught in a whirlwind. Was she prepared to do all the social niceties that would be required of her?

The Duchess studied her for a minute. “There is much more to you than I had expected. You certainly do not possess the refinement and grace one would envisage in a duchess, but I believe if you truly love my son, you can overcome that.” She stood and shook out her skirts. “The modiste will be here in the morning to do the final fitting for tomorrow night’s ball gown.”

She started toward the door and turned back. “We will assemble in the drawing room in a half hour for dinner.”

Eve collapsed onto the settee. The duchess brought out all the fears she’d been battling since the invitation to the Christmas Eve ball had arrived at her home. Would she never fit in? Would Adam end up disgusted with her, and wish he’d never turned from the women of his kind to marry her?

She wished her mama were here for guidance. She had a feeling Adam intended to propose to her during the festivities, and she had no confident answer for him. She was terrified of saying yes and equally terrified of saying no.

Yes would mean plunging herself into a completely unknown—and unfriendly—world that she never in her entire life had expected to be a part

of. Yes would also mean marriage to the man she loved and who loved her. Wasn't that what she had wanted her whole life?

Saying no would send her back to the life she'd known forever. The life she was comfortable in, she fit well in, and had no expectations of ever leaving. Stating no would mean saying goodbye to the only man that had ever captured her heart.

She had to relegate all these questions and doubts to the back of her mind. She was expected in the drawing room in a half hour and worrying was only giving her a headache.

* * *

EVE HELD a glass of sherry in her hand, trying hard to not roll her eyes at Miss Clark as she went on and on about her latest modiste and how she didn't live up to Miss Clark's requirements.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the familiar voice say, "Good evening ladies." Adam touched her lightly on her elbow, a movement which was not lost on Miss Clark who frowned in Eve's direction.

"Good evening, Your Grace. We missed you this afternoon. We thought you might be out in the woods again, perhaps searching for tomorrow's dinner."

The other ladies in the group tittered, but Eve wished that the floor would open up underneath her.

"How amusing, Miss Clark. I do enjoy the hunt on occasion. But I believe I will leave the food foraging to the real hunters." He turned to Eve, "May I have the pleasure of a stroll around the room before we are called into dinner?"

Before she could even answer, he took her arm and drew it into his. "Keep smiling, my dear."

She fought the tears threatening and smiled.

"That's good. Now we will engage in lively conversation with each other."

"Adam—" She stopped, fighting the lump in her throat. "You know she said that because of me."

"Miss Clark is a selfish, bitter, unhappy young woman. She finds fault with everyone and everything. Do not pay her any mind."

“But don’t you see? That is only the beginning. The people in your world will not accept me. You will grow tired of me and begin to resent me.”

He drew her into a corner where they would have a bit of privacy. “I want to marry you. I love you. I don’t care who accepts or does not accept you. I am a duke; you will be a duchess. They would not dare disparage you once we are wed.”

He continued their walk. “I will come to your room tonight when everyone is asleep. We must talk this out. I will not have you doubting yourself.”

CHAPTER 12



Eve paced the floor in her room awaiting Adam's arrival. She should not allow him through the door. It was improper and went against everything she was raised to believe. It was bad enough they'd shared more than a few enthusiastic kisses, but this would ruin her completely if they were caught.

She jumped at the sound of the soft knock. She wiped her sweaty palms on her dress and opened the door. Adam entered and took her into his arms. "We must talk, sweetheart. I cannot have you worrying about what people will say about the two of us. I am a duke, I can marry whomever I please."

Eve pulled away. "You are a duke, yes. You were raised to be a duke. Your mother was raised to be a duchess and does it remarkably well. I was raised to marry a man from the village and live that life."

"Stop." He reached out and pulled her against him again. "My mother is more than willing to help you. She will take you under her wing and guide you. Even if she did not approve at the start, she has come to admire you, and will not let you fail."

She thought back to the duchess's visit earlier in the day when she questioned her about her feelings for Adam. The duchess did give her a lot to think about and there were times she believed she could do this, and then times, like when Miss Clark made the rude remark about Adam hunting for their food that she felt miles away from this life he offered.

"Stop thinking, darling." Placing his knuckle under her chin, he bent his head and placed his soft, warm lips over hers. If anything would stop her thinking, it was certainly Adam's kisses.

"I want to announce our betrothal at tomorrow night's ball. I know the

proper way would be to visit with your father first, but since you came here with his permission, I believe he would give his blessing once I see him.”

Was she ready to make that commitment?

“More than anything I want to stay with you here tonight, but I also want to prove to you that I respect you and would never do anything to dishonor you.” He smoothed back the hair on her forehead. “So with great reluctance I will say good night. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and I look forward to sharing that day with you as well as the day after. And letting everyone know you are my choice, and I will always stand by you.”

With those words he kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

* * *

EVE JOINED the rest of the lively crowd the next morning for breakfast. The plans for the day were the group to gather after breakfast for singing and exchange of small gifts. An afternoon trip to the village to admire all the decorations would keep the guests busy before the Christmas Eve dinner, and then ball.

As much as Eve was enjoying being with Adam and sharing in all the events for the day, she was missing her parents. They had their special routine for the holiday. After a church service, she, Mama and Papa would enjoy the feast she and Mama had prepared. Traditionally, they shared their meal with a few neighbors who had no family.

Some years her sister or brothers would come with their families but this year it was to be just her Mama and Papa. After an exchange of gifts, they would join some of the church members in Christmas caroling around the village in anticipation of Christmas the next day.

“Why the sad face, my love?” Adam asked as he sat alongside her on the settee as they waited for the gift giving and music to start.

“Just missing my parents.” She sighed. “I know our celebration would seem very pastoral to you, after all this.” She waved her hand around. “But it is something we've always done together.”

“Ah, sweetheart, I promise from now on we will celebrate Christmas with your family.”

She laughed. “That is a nice gesture, Your Grace, but I don't think a quiet rustic holiday can live up to what you're used to.”

He closed his eyes. “Eve, stop it. I lived in your house for two weeks, did I not? What you and your family have to offer is something wonderful. The love and joy I found in your home was definitely something special.”

“Your Grace.” Adam’s butler entered the drawing room and approached him.

“Yes, Peter.”

He handed a folded piece of parchment to him. “This note just arrived for Miss Allen.”

Eve sat forward, a sense of looming disaster surrounding her. Adam passed the note to her and with shaking hands she opened it. Her eyes skimmed the paper and she gasped. “Oh, no. I must return home immediately.” She hopped up.

“What is it?” Adam stood and grasped her elbow.

“My parents. They are both sick. There is no one there to take care of them. I must leave.”

“Wait a minute. Does the note say what their illness is?”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Influenza.”

“No. I’m sorry Eve, but I cannot allow you to go back home with influenza there. it is too dangerous.”

Eve drew in a breath, her eyes wide. “You cannot stop me, Your Grace. My parents need me, and I will go to them. Please ask to have a carriage brought around while I pack.”

He grabbed her hand as she turned to leave. “No, Eve. There must be another way to handle this.”

“There is no other way. They are my parents. They are sick. I must attend them. Nothing else needs to be said.” She tugged her hand from his and hurried from the room.

* * *

“WHAT IS IT DEAR?” his mother said as she walked up to him watching Eve leave.

Adam ran his fingers through his hair. “Mr. and Mrs. Allen. The note said they have influenza and Eve feels she must return to take care of them. Influenza is much too dangerous. I can’t allow her to go.”

His mother pursed her lips. “I understand your concern, Adam, but if the

girl wants to return home, you cannot stop her.”

“We’re about to be betrothed. I should have some say in this.”

The duchess shook her head. “But she hasn’t accepted you yet. It is best to try to talk to her instead of attempting to order her about.”

Adam left the room and bounded up the stairs. He knocked on Eve’s door. “Eve, I need to talk to you.”

She opened the door, holding a dress she was folding. “You’re not going to talk me out of this.” She turned back and continued placing clothes in her satchel. “Have you asked for a carriage?”

He walked up to her and placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her around. “I just want you to stop and think. Isn’t there anyone closer that can help them? Is there a doctor nearby?”

Eve stepped back. “You don’t understand, do you? That is the difference between us I’ve been trying to tell you. In your world you get a doctor to help. You hire someone to care for them. You keep your hands clean so as not to contract the illness.” She shook her head, tears in her eyes. “These are my parents!”

His hands dropped and he stood watching her, not knowing what to say. Yes, in his world they would fetch a doctor, a caretaker, anyone trained to assist in medical matters. Did that make them supercilious? To him that made sense.

Eve closed her satchel and turned. “Will you call for a carriage, or shall I hire a hackney?”

He stiffened. “Of course.” He turned and left the room and asked Peter to arrange for a carriage to take Miss Allen to her home in Worcestershire. Not wishing to rejoin the festivities, he retired to his library and poured himself a brandy.

Perhaps Eve had been right all along, and their worlds were too far apart for them to have a successful marriage.

Hours passed as the sun moved from one window in the library to the other side and finally set. His mother attempted to get him to join in the Christmas Ball, but after harsh words from him, she left him to sip, staring at the fireplace, dwelling on the mess the holiday had turned out to be.

* * *

THREE DAYS later Adam once again sat in his office staring at the fireplace. All the guests for Christmas had left and not playing the proper host, he ignored them all. Which left the Duchess doing everything and based on her demeanor as she faced him this morning, she was unhappy.

“Are you going to wallow in here like a spoiled child? You have duties to perform and here you sit doing nothing. When was the last time you bathed and changed your clothes?”

“Leave me alone, Mother.”

She opened her mouth to speak when the butler entered the library. “Your Grace, this has arrived for you by special delivery.”

Hoping it was word from Eve, he grabbed the document out of the butler’s hand. He opened it, his hand shaking. *Please God, don’t have her caught Influenza.*

His eyes skimmed the page. He tossed it on his desk and leaned his head against the back of the chair. “Perfect. Just perfect.”

“What is it?” the duchess said. When he didn’t answer her, she picked up the legal document and read it. “Lord Fenster is suing you for breach of contract? I thought you said you hadn’t signed contracts?”

His eyes closed, he said, “We didn’t sign contracts. This is his attempt to disgrace me and possibly force my hand by labeling me dishonorable for all the world to see.”

“This is preposterous. He can’t sue you for breach of contract if there was no contract.”

He opened one eye and regarded his mother. “Apparently he doesn’t believe so.”

“What will you do?”

Adam pushed his chair back and stood. “Right now I am returning to my bedchamber. I haven’t slept in days and as you rightly pointed out, haven’t bathed or changed my clothes. I will see you this evening.”

* * *

EVE SMOOTHED the cool cloth over her mother’s head, hoping to lower her fever. The local doctor had been by and gave her a list of remedies for her parents as well as a tisane for her to take to help ward off catching the illness as she took care of them.

The most frightening thing the doctor had told her was her papa's case was much worse than Mama's and there was a good chance he might not even recover.

When she wasn't on her knees praying for their recovery, or doing laundry, cooking and other things that needed to be done along with their care, she thought about Adam. Had she been too harsh on him? She was truly in a panicked state when the missive arrived, and now that she was back and taking care of them, she gave herself time to consider their last conversation.

Had it been so very foolish for him to suggest hiring someone to care for them? She accused him of 'keeping his hands clean' instead of delving right in to help, when the first thing she'd done when she arrived home was to summon the doctor. How different was that from what Adam had suggested?

Fatigue from trying to keep up with all the worries and work had begun to befuddle her mind. No matter the differences in their lives, or the fact that Adam tried to persuade her to protect herself in a way she considered selfish, did not change the fact that she loved him.

And he claimed to love her. When her brain was clear, usually the first thing in the morning after some rest, she admitted he did, in fact, love her. It showed in all the things he'd done and said. How he'd treated her, how he stuck up for her.

Did that make it any easier to accept a marriage between them?

She sighed and continued to wipe her mother's body down. It mattered not what she thought now since Adam let her go and after more than a week, hadn't come after her. Perhaps her words had finally convinced him they were not meant to be together.

Why did it hurt so much to be right?

CHAPTER 13



Christmas was two weeks past. Adam spent his time keeping busy, pushing all thoughts of Eve from his mind. He hired an attorney to squelch the legal matter with Lord Fenster. There was even one day when he considered just marrying Lady Ann and get it all over with.

Then he would think of Eve, her caring, loving manner, her intelligence and charm. Why wouldn't she believe she could be a successful duchess? He'd tried his best to convince her, but in the end she chose to turn her back on him.

She didn't turn her back on you, dimwit, she went to take care of her parents. Isn't her caring nature one of the reasons you love her?

Was he truly that stupid? Did he really think her returning to Worcestershire to take care of those she loved was a rejection of him?

He looked at the glass of brandy in his hand and tossed it into the fireplace, glass and all. The alcohol in the drink sparked a burst of flames. "I am an idiot. I love Eve's caring nature, but how caring of her and her parents had I been when she was distraught?"

Because you are a duke and think everyone should bow to your wishes, you never considered going with her. To make sure she didn't place herself in danger. What does that tell her?

That you don't love her enough to stand by her side. How can she think you would support her when she is criticized by members of the ton if you didn't stand with her in this important matter?

Damnation, he hoped he wasn't too late. He pushed himself away from his desk and hurried up to his bedchamber and found his valet in the dressing room attached to his room. "Malcolm, pack my bags for a trip. You may

figure on about a week.”

Once he'd made the decision, he was anxious to be on his way. What if he arrived and Eve had caught the illness and was sick? Or dead? A cold sweat broke out all over his body. It would be his fault. He should have gone with her and insisted on hiring people to care for her parents. Eve could have supervised it but didn't need to do it all herself.

“Malcolm, are we packed yet?”

His long-time valet gave a sigh. “Your Grace it will take more than five minutes to prepare. I assume you are taking the carriage? Perhaps you can have it brought around while you wait for me.”

“That's an excellent idea! I will take my horse and you can follow in the carriage. I will get there much sooner.”

“Your Grace,” Malcolm started, but Adam was already headed down the corridor to his mother's sitting room.

He burst into the room with enough energy that he scared his poor mother. “Adam! For heaven's sake what is the matter? Have you received word from Miss Allen?”

He shook his head. “No. But I am leaving momentarily to travel to her home.”

The Duchess rested her hands in her lap where she held a piece of embroidery. “It's about time, son.”

He smirked. “I thought you didn't approve of Miss Allen?”

“It matters not if I approve of her. Apparently, you love the woman and from what she's told me, she loves you as well. If she is your choice, I will do whatever it takes to see that she doesn't fail in her role as Duchess.

“But before we consider that, I suggest you leave as quickly as possible. Some other gentleman may grab her up while you wallowed in self-pity.”

He grinned. “That will never happen.” He bent over and kissed her on the cheek. “I'm off. I'm riding Apollo and Malcolm will follow in my carriage.”

“Safe travels, son.”

With a slight salute, he left his mother, made his way to the mews to instruct his man to prepare the carriage. Too anxious to await him tacking Apollo, he did the job himself.

* * *

EVE PLACED her bonnet on the hook near the front door and made her way to the kitchen. She sat at the old wooden table, resting her elbows, and stared at the blank wall.

She just buried her father.

Even though she held his hand when he passed, and took care of all the funeral arrangements, it didn't seem real to her. Mama was still sick but had insisted on attending the funeral. Halfway through the service she had to be brought back home.

Eve had no idea what they would do next. Once the bishop was notified of Papa's death, a new pastor would be assigned to the church and she and Mama would be homeless.

She had no choice. Although her heart still belonged to Adam, she had to be practical and accept one of the young men who had been stopping by since her return from Manchester to ask after her welfare and request a chance to walk out with her.

It was only a matter of time when one of them proposed and with her mother to care for, she would accept. In a minute she would have to get up and see to Mother. For now she would just sit and ponder.

On her life.

On her future.

The sound of horse's hooves drew her attention to the window in the front parlor. She stood, her mouth agape, certain she was seeing things.

His Grace, the Duke of Manchester came to an abrupt halt, jumped from his horse, strode the few steps to the front door and pounded. "Eve!"

Snapping out of her trance, she hopped up and opened the door. "Adam. What are you doing here?"

He stepped over the portal and took her into his arms. "I've come to beg your forgiveness for being such an arse and to ask you once again. Will you marry me?"

Too shocked to even think of an answer she stepped back. "Come in."

He removed his hat. "How are your parents?"

She walked to the parlor and took a seat on the worn settee. "Papa passed away two days ago. His funeral was this morning."

Adam sat alongside her and took her hands in his. "I'm so sorry. Did the doctor see him?"

She nodded. "Yes. He told me from the start that his case was bad and he didn't have a great deal of faith in him recovering."

He squeezed her hand. "What about your mother?"

"She has recovered but remains weak."

"Marry me, Eve."

She pulled her hands free and sighed. "Nothing has changed. I still don't belong in your world."

"Then we will make a new world. One that encompasses yours and mine." He raised his hand as she opened her mouth. "No. Listen to me. I agree, being a duchess is a challenge. However, my mother has sworn to take you under her wing and make sure you do not fail."

"Adam. . ."

"And—we will spend the rest of the winter at Manchester Park where Mother can tutor you. By spring when the next Season begins, you will be ready to take your place in society."

"Why?"

"Because I love you. I know you love me, and I cannot imagine the rest of my life if you are not in it." He slid to one knee. "Miss Evelyn Allen, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife? My duchess? The mother of my children?"

"Say yes, Eve." Mother's weak voice came from the doorway where she leaned against the frame.

"Mother! What are you doing out of bed?" Eve hurried to her side, taking her arm to move her to the closest chair.

"I am trying to keep my stubborn daughter from making the biggest mistake of her life." She reached up and cupped her cheek. "Eve, love in a marriage can overcome many trials. It's obvious despite your differences, the two of you belong together. I never thought I would say that since I also felt that there were simply too many obstacles to overcome. But losing your father made me realize the depth of love we shared will sustain me for the rest of my life on this earth." She looked over at Adam. "Don't let her get away."

"I won't. Believe me I intend to stay camped out on your front doorstep until she says yes."

Eve looked between her mother and the man she loved. "When did I lose control of making my own choices?"

"You haven't, my dear," her mother said. "You made your choice when you dragged home a wounded man who desperately needed help. A man you had no idea was a duke. He was just a man in need. And from the looks of

him now, I would say he is still just a man in need. He needs you, daughter.”

Eve raised her chin and turned to Adam. “I accept your proposal, Your Grace.” With those words she made her way across the room where he pulled her into his arms and kissed her with all the longing she also felt.

Mother quietly made her way back to bed, a smile on her face.

EPILOGUE



Christmas
Three years later

Eve picked twenty-month old Marjorie up from the carpet and took the piece of candy out of her little fist. “No, dear, you cannot eat candy before Nurse comes to give you dinner.”

The wails of the child had Adam, the dowager duchess, and Mother all scurrying into the room. “What’s wrong with Marjorie?” Adam reached for his daughter and patted her back, making ‘papa’ sounds.

Eve huffed. “The child is being spoiled. I merely took a piece of candy she must have found on the floor that had fallen from the bowl on the table and was eating it. Nurse will be here any minute to bring her upstairs for dinner and her bath.”

The dowager duchess held out her hands. “Oh, little one. Come to Grandmama.”

Eve shook her head and lumbered over to the settee where she plopped her seven-month pregnant body down. She rubbed her stomach. “This one must be a boy because I’m much bigger than I was with Marjorie at this stage.”

Mother sat alongside her. “You are probably doing too much for Christmas.”

Adam sat on her other side. “I tell her that every day. That’s why we employ servants.”

The dowager duchess took the seat across from them, holding a now

quieted Marjorie on her lap. “Eve dear, why don’t you do the things that make you very happy and leave the rest to others.”

Sometimes she found it trying to have both her mother and mother-in-law living with them. Other times she couldn’t imagine life without them. Her mother loved more than anything to take over the enormous kitchen occasionally and prepare a meal for them all since cooking was always a favorite chore of hers.

The dowager duchess still gave helpful advice to Eve to keep her from stumbling when faced with the required social duties of a duchess. But nothing pleased her more than to watch both older women fuss over her daughter.

Since Diana and her Earl were travelling abroad, the dowager had been pleased beyond compare when she learned she had a granddaughter to dote on.

Mother joined the dowager in playing with Marjorie, and Adam took her place alongside Eve. He began to twirl the strand of hair that had fallen from her chignon. “Christmas is always my favorite holiday.”

Eve studied the grandmamas with Marjorie. “Mine, too.”

“I’m thinking since the grandmamas are busy with the baby, perhaps I should help you upstairs so you can take a short nap.”

She turned to look at him. “I’m not tired.”

“Neither am I, but I feel the need for a nap myself.” He stood and took her hand. “Come. Let’s see what else we can think of doing in our bedchamber if we don’t feel the need for a nap.”

The End

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Details on my website at <https://calliehutton.com/christmas-romances/>

Miss Merry's Christmas
A Dogtown Christmas
A Wife by Christmas
Nellie

Enjoy this excerpt from
Miss Merry's Christmas!

Hamptonshire, England
October, 1813

MISS MEREDITH CHAMBERS took a deep breath and smiled at the two little girls staring up at her with wide eyes. "Well, it appears we're here."

Her smile faltered when they both grabbed her legs and hid their faces in her skirts. "What's this?"

"I don't want to live here," Charlotte, the older of the sisters at eight years, wailed.

"Me neither," Clare, the younger one at six years echoed.

Merry dropped to her knees and pulled them both close. "You are the duke's wards. He is a very important man, your father's best friend. You will love living here."

Two curly, blond-haired heads shook furiously.

"Madam?" The front door of the massive house opened, and a tall, thin butler, his nose as long as the rest of him, glared down at them. "His Grace awaits you in the library."

Merry stood and patted her hair, which had come loose from her knot. Well, no time to fuss with it now. She took each girl's hand in hers and made her way up the steps. The sound of the well-sprung coach that delivered them, its wheels clattering on the cobblestones, rang in her ears, the last link to their old life.

"Girls, release my hands, you're squeezing too hard."

They ignored her request as they made it to the top of the steps.

The butler viewed the group without expression. "This way if you please."

Merry followed the man, still dragging her charges.

Goodness, the house was huge. The marble entrance hall was filled with delicate tables, over-stuffed Queen Anne chairs, and an immense clock, its sound almost as loud as her pounding heart.

“Madam? Do you wish assistance?”

Realizing she gaped like a ruffian from the street, she attempted to step forward, still impeded by the girls who had dug their heels in. “Ladies, you must move forward.” They clung tighter. She flashed a smile at the butler, whose countenance remained impassive, leaving her to wonder if a smile ever graced his stoic face.

Despite her best intentions, Merry twisted back and forth, amazed as she took in her surroundings. Plush carpets, silk wall coverings, priceless lamps, all reminding her of the wealth and status of the girls’ guardian. Her nose smacked into something solid as the butler came to an abrupt stop, but her body, with her two charges still dragging behind her, did not.

Lips twitching, but maintaining his austere demeanor, the butler opened a large wooden door with elaborate carvings, and sniffed before announcing, “Lady Charlotte Spencer, Lady Clare Spencer, and Miss Meredith Chambers.”

The girls moved with her, but with their heads down, staring at the floor. Breathless from her effort, she looked up into the most arresting brown eyes, with specks of gold, she’d ever seen. Above the eyes, sharp black eyebrows rose almost to the hairline of wavy black hair. Below the eyes an aristocratic nose led to sensual lips drawn into a tight line.

“Your Grace.” She puffed and attempted a clumsy curtsy.

The only sound in the room was the soft click of the door as the butler exited. Merry waited patiently to be invited to sit. Instead, the brown eyes kept staring at her, then leisurely slid their way down her person, and obviously from the additional tightening of his full sensual lips, finding her wanting.

Eventually, a long-fingered hand flicked in the direction of one of the two leather chairs in front of his desk. “You may sit.”

Merry sat abruptly, feeling like a dog panting in front of its master. The two girls ended up on her lap, still examining their shoes.

“Is there something wrong with the young ladies?” The deep voice rolled over her, setting her heart to pounding.

Merry grasped the girls’ chins and attempted to have them face their

ward. Without success. She had no idea their neck muscles were so strong. “No, Your Grace. They’re merely a bit anxious.”

“Indeed.”

How was it possible to put so much disapproval into one word?

After a moment, he settled back in his chair, his fingers clutching a quill pen he tapped on the desk. “I trust you had a pleasant journey?”

With all the liquid in her mouth dried up, she merely nodded.

“I understand from my solicitors you’ve had sole charge of the girls since their parents passed away a month ago?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Good. She was finally able to pry her mouth open.

“And you find it so difficult to control your charges that they do not sit as proper ladies?”

Heat rose to Merry’s face and anger washed through her. The arrogant arse! “They’re confused and a bit distressed. And, might I point out that there are only two chairs and we are three people.” She bent and whispered furiously to the girls. “Please move to the other chair. You can sit together. His Grace is not happy with you on my lap.”

“No.” Two voices piped up, murmuring to their knees.

She smiled slightly at the duke and shrugged. If possible his eyebrows rose further, disappearing underneath the wave that rested against his forehead.

“It appears to me, Miss Chambers, that Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare have arrived into my keeping just in time.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “I arranged for a governess to train them in proper behavior. She will instruct the girls in the skills necessary for a lady of their station.” He waved his hand. “Sewing, French, watercolors, manners, rules of Society, and so forth.”

Merry stared at him, her jaw slack. Well over six feet, David, Duke of Penrose, was a sight to behold. Every inch the lord of the manor, his coat fit him as if it had been painted on. His white-on-white waistcoat hugged his impressive body above well-fitting tan breeches tucked into shiny black Hessian boots. A snow white, intricately tied cravat stood in stark contrast to his lightly tanned skin.

His Grace slowly rounded the desk like a lion stalking its prey and rested one hip on the edge, peering down at her, his foot swinging back and forth. “I shall allow a bit of transition time for the young ladies. You may stay on for a week or two. Then I will see you receive a generous stipend to tide you over

until you can secure another position.”

Two young faces looked up and shook their heads in disagreement. “No!”

PENROSE STUDIED the two tiny anxious girls in front of him. So these were the children that might have been his, had Eleanor chosen him instead of Bedford years ago. He stopped his thoughts from wandering in that direction. He’d gotten over the defection of the lovely Lady Eleanor, but found it ironic that it was he who would raise her daughters, see them presented to Society, and married. *Life takes interesting twists and turns.*

Miss Chambers presented a whole other issue. Although pretty in a common sort of way, with her huge blue eyes and less than tidy golden blonde hair, her inability to handle the most minor directives to his wards did not bode well. In fact, it appeared he was about to face a mutiny before he’d even had the chance to speak to the young minxes.

“So you do possess faces. And voices.”

“Girls, curtsy to His Grace.”

Studying him with suspicion, they did a quick bob, then took the chair next to Miss Chambers. The older girl studied her lap, and the younger one began to chew on her fingernail.

Penrose’s gaze shifted to Miss Chambers, who had the grace to blush.

“They’re not usually this shy, Your Grace, but it has been a difficult month for them.”

“Take your finger from your mouth.” The order, coming out a bit stronger than he’d intended, had two sets of young eyes peering at him in terror.

“Young ladies do not chew on their fingers or speak to their shoes.” He shifted his gaze to Lady Charlotte. “And girls who will one day be presented to the queen do not mumble or refuse to look in the face of the person addressing them.”

Both girls returned to staring at the floor.

Penrose sighed. “Miss Chambers.”

The woman raised her chin, eyes flashing, and regarded him. “Yes, *Your Grace.*”

He chose to ignore the sarcasm in her voice. “I would be remiss in my duties as guardian to allow you to continue to supervise their activities. It is clear to me you have no control over them. They do not possess even a hint of good manners, and certainly not the demeanor required of their station.”

He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to speak.

“As I mentioned before, you will be permitted to remain here at Penrose Hall for a week or two until the girls are settled in. I will be more than generous, so you will be able to take time in securing a new position.” He slid off the desk, and moved to return to his chair.

“Wait just a minute, *Your Grace*.”

Penrose came to an abrupt stop. No one in his life had ever addressed him with such derision. And to think it came from a governess. Horror gripped him as he swung around. “You are an American!”

Miss Chambers stood. “Yes. I am an American. And you, *Your Grace*, are an arrogant Englishman.”

Blood rushed to his face, his heart thumping at the insolence. Then, without thought, he threw his head back and roared with laughter. This sprite of a woman—this *American*—had just insulted him as no other in his entire life. Used to bowing and scraping from his peers, and flirting and admiration from women, he felt as though someone had opened a window and let in fresh air. However, as amused as he was at her behavior, she would still have to go. His charges needed a good, English governess to bring them to right.

“Miss Chambers, I will overlook your outburst and attribute it to your lack of proper upbringing. Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare are in dire need of direction that you apparently have not provided. As grateful as I am that you took them under your wing when their parents died suddenly, I must insist on you leaving them into the care of the governess I have secured for them who will arrive on the morrow. Once your presence is no longer needed to secure the cooperation of my wards, you will be released.”

He walked to the far right corner of the room and pulled the bell. Miss Chambers studied him as they waited for the servant he’d summoned. Within minutes, a young nursery maid entered the room and bobbed. “*Your Grace*?”

“See that Lady Charlotte and Lady Clare are settled. I believe Miss Chambers has been assigned the room adjoining theirs for the time being.” His arms crossed, he looked at the woefully inadequate governess. “The young ladies will have dinner in the nursery. I will expect you to present yourself in the drawing room at precisely eight o’clock to join myself, my brother, Lord Brandon, and my mother, the Duchess of Penrose, for dinner.”

With that command, he strode from the room.

MERRY TOOK a deep breath to keep from racing after the prig and giving him a piece of her mind. *Lack of proper upbringing*, indeed. Duke or no duke, Penrose was arrogant, condescending, and contemptuous. He'd frightened the girls and affected a most unpleasant welcome. She glanced at them still huddled together in the large chair.

"Come, let's get settled in the nursery, and see what fine books and toys are there."

Charlotte and Clare stood and took her hands. The trio followed the maid out the door and up the stairs. Wherever the contemptuous man had gotten off to, she didn't see him the entire trip. And a trip it was. Even though her former employers, Lord and Lady Bedford, had an impressive home, this dwelling put it to shame. It would take her weeks to learn all the hallways, wings and sections of the place. Except, she reminded herself, the *lord of the manor* would be tossing her out on her arse in a week or two.

She sighed. Charlotte and Clare had been her charges for five years, and leaving them in someone else's care troubled her. They'd been a mere one and three when Lord and Lady Belford hired her during their trip to America. Their nanny had succumbed to a fever, and Merry was only too happy to leave her home behind, where all the young men who had paid her addresses had married elsewhere.

As the daughter of a professor, she'd been educated beyond the expectations of most young ladies, and in fact, most men as well. Although the young bucks who attempted to court her were charming, they lacked the spark she desired in a lifetime mate.

She'd spent hours discussing books, plays and music with her father. Proud of her sharp mind, he'd taught her philosophy, economics, history, and languages. She'd picked up French and German quickly. A duck out of water in her circle of female friends, who only conversed about the latest gossip, gowns, and young men, the chance to travel to England shortly after her father passed away seemed her salvation. At one and twenty, it had been time for a new direction.

"Miss, this is the nursery. If you will follow me, I'll show you to your chamber next door." The young maid swung open the door to a brightly colored schoolroom. Small wooden tables and chairs took up the center of the room. A bookcase lined the walls, with puzzles, games and slates stacked on the shelves. On the far side of the room, a door led to what appeared to be a sleeping chamber.

The girls left her side for the first time since they'd alighted from the carriage earlier, hurrying to discover the wonders of the bookshelves.

"I'm going to get settled in my bedchamber, which is right alongside this one." Merry addressed the girls, amused to see they barely acknowledged her as they flipped through books and pulled out puzzles.

The governess's room was as large as the nursery. Blue and white striped silk covered the walls, broken up by windows on two of the four walls, bathing the area in bright sunlight. A large canopied bed with a flowered quilt and numerous pillows caught her eye as she viewed the room. Her shoes sank into plush carpet. The huge fireplace stood cold, causing her to run her hands up and down her arms against the chill.

"I'll light a fire for you right away, miss," the young maid assured her.

"Thank you. That will be nice."

Merry wandered about the room, examining the dressing table and chair, the empty wardrobe, and more bookcases filled with books. Penrose might be an overbearing brute, but the family certainly took very good care of their governesses. Well, no matter, she wouldn't be here long. Since the new governess was due to arrive tomorrow, this would probably be Merry's only night in this splendid room.

Her stomach clenched as she recalled the conversation with the duke. He obviously held little regard for Americans. Well, this American was not going to bow and scrape. Let her English counterparts do that. She sniffed. The aristocracy meant nothing to her. Her previous employers had allowed leniency in their daughters' upbringing, and having them now subjected to all the mores and strictures of Polite Society almost brought her to tears.

MERRY SAT on the floor of the nursery, legs crossed, Charlotte and Clare on either side of her, the three heads bent over the storybook Merry read. This was her favorite time of the day, when dinner was over, the girls washed and dressed for bed, and an engrossing story holding them hostage until time to sleep.

A maid had come to assist her to dress for dinner earlier, but she told the girl she would eat with her charges, and would not be joining the duke's family in the dining room.

"And the prince charming swept her into his strong arms, and twirled her around the dance floor. 'Will you marry me, my princess?' he asked. 'Yes,'

she responded, much to his delight.”

She paused for effect, then sighed. “After the royal wedding, they lived happily ever after.” She gently closed the book. “The end.”

“I like that story,” Clare said as she rubbed her eyes.

“Me, too,” Charlotte added, dreamy-eyed. “One day I will meet a prince charming, who will twirl me around the ballroom.”

Her younger sister nodded, enthralled with Charlotte’s dream.

“I will wear the most beautiful gown, with matching—”

Merry jerked her head up as the door to the nursery flew open and slammed against the wall. Like the wrath of God, the Duke of Penrose stood in the doorway, fire in his eyes, his hands fisted at his sides.

“Miss Chambers, I *ordered* you to join my family for dinner.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Praise for books by Callie Hutton

A Study in Murder

"This book is a delight!...*A Study in Murder* has clear echoes of Jane Austen, Agatha Christie, and of course, Sherlock Holmes. You will love this book." —William Bernhardt, author of *The Last Chance*

Lawyer

"A one-of-a-kind new series that's packed with surprises." —Mary Ellen Hughes, National bestselling author of *A Curio Killing*.

"[A] lively and entertaining mystery...I predict a long run for this smart series." —Victoria Abbott, award-winning author of *The Book Collector Mysteries*

"With a breezy style and alluring, low-keyed humor, Hutton crafts a charming mystery with a delightful, irrepressible sleuth." —Madeline Hunter, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Never Deny a Duke*

The Elusive Wife

"I loved this book and you will too. Jason is a hottie & Oliva is the kind of woman we'd all want as a friend. Read it!" —Cocktails and Books

"In my experience I've had a few hits but more misses with historical romance so I was really pleasantly surprised to be hooked from the start by obviously good writing." —Book Chick City

"The historic elements and sensory details of each scene make the story come to life, and certainly helps immerse the reader in the world that Olivia and Jason share." —The Romance Reviews

"You will not want to miss *The Elusive Wife*." —My Book Addiction

"...it was a well written plot and the characters were likeable." —Night Owl Reviews

A Run for Love

"An exciting, heart-warming Western love story!" —*New York Times* bestselling author Georgina Gentry

"I loved this book!!! I read the BEST historical romance last night...It's called *A Run For Love*." —*New York Times* bestselling author Sharon Sala

"This is my first Callie Hutton story, but it certainly won't be my last." —The Romance Reviews

An Angel in the Mail

"...a warm fuzzy sensuous read. I didn't put it down until I was done." —Sizzling Hot Reviews

Visit www.calliehutton.com for more information.