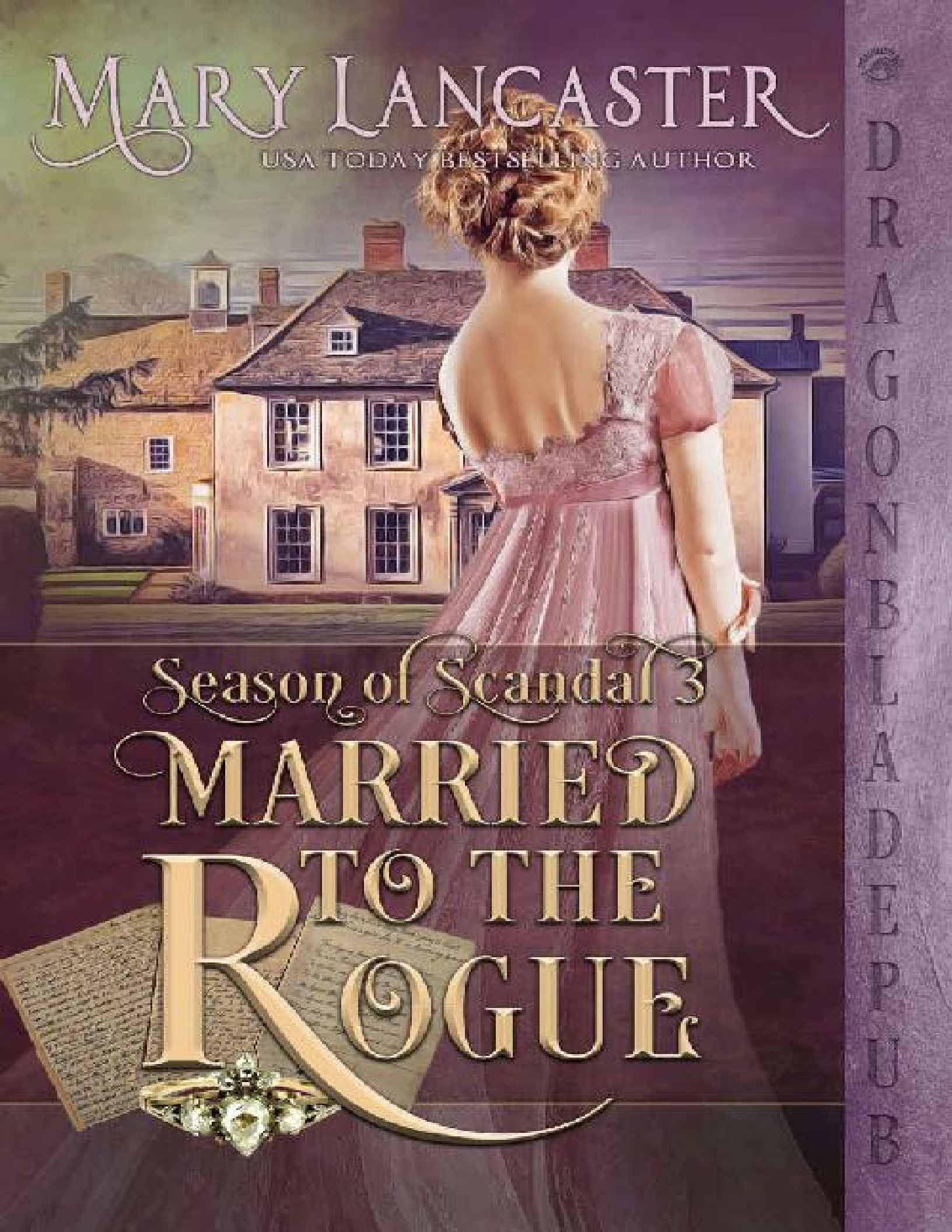


MARY LANCASTER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Season of Scandal 3
**MARRIED
TO THE
ROGUE**



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Married to the Rogue

**Season of Scandal
Book Three**

Mary Lancaster



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Chapter One

DEBORAH STEPPED DOWN from the chaise with a flood of relief. The village of Coggleton had never been so welcome a sight. She paid the post boy with almost the last of her money and walked up the path to the house her mother insisted on calling a cottage.

The front door flew open before she reached it, and her siblings spilled out, seeming to drag their mother along in their midst, like a whirlwind collecting debris.

“Oh, my goodness, Deb, what is amiss?” her mother demanded. “Why are you home so soon? Please tell me Her Highness did not dismiss you!”

“Of course not,” Deborah said hurriedly, hugging her sisters and brothers. “At least, not exactly. Shall we go inside?”

Absorbing Deborah and her bag, the whirlwind swept indoors, and Deborah soon found herself sitting in the parlor, divested of cloak and hat while her family clustered about her in expectation.

Her mother and Lucy, her younger sister nearest in age at nineteen summers, stood together by the mantelpiece, radiating an excitement that told her there was more news. She hoped it was better than hers.

“We just had a letter from your grandmother this morning,” her mother exclaimed. “Saying you had been called to the princess. We assumed you were going abroad with her as you hoped.”

“She went without me,” Deborah said, gazing at her hands and speaking in a low, deliberately calm voice. “The summons was a mistake. Three other ladies and I, all young and unmarried, arrived around the same time to find, as we thought, that the princess was entertaining guests. She wasn’t. No one had invited them, but there they were. We discovered in the morning that Her Highness had left the day before and that we had spent the night unchaperoned in the house.” She swallowed and raised her eyes to her mother’s shocked face. “While a party of...questionable taste raged below us.”

“Oh, Deborah!” Lucy wailed.

“Hush, hush.” Her mother waved this aside, staring hard at Deborah. “You were part of this? In the midst of such a...”

“No, of course not. We hid in our own sitting room next to the princess’s chambers.”

Her mother frowned. “What was the point of that when she wasn’t there? Why did you not simply leave again? Go back to your grandmother?”

“We thought she was in her bedchamber,” Deborah said flatly.

“Not at her own party?” her brother Giles exclaimed. “Sounds a bit shabby to me.”

“We thought she was saying private farewells to a friend—friends—before leaving the country,” Deborah said diplomatically, though judging by her mother’s expression of outrage, she understood perfectly. “But obviously, we were wrong, for she had already left London.”

“Oh, why did I let you take such a place with that woman?” her mother wailed.

“Because it provided a little prestige and money enough to keep the house for a little longer,” Deborah said tiredly. “But I doubt there will be any more money now.”

“Still, it is not so bad,” Lucy said encouragingly. “After all, we shouldn’t need the money now, and surely no one saw you there, Deb, if you were shut up away from everyone else?”

Deborah glanced from her to her mother. “I don’t know. We might have been seen, making occasional forays to look for the princess or someone else with authority to throw out the guests. It’s probable the guests were in no state to recognize us that night, though someone *might* have seen us leave in the morning.”

Her mother and Lucy stared at her in horror. The younger children, clearly not understanding what the fuss was about, began to lose interest and squabble over some plan for the afternoon.

“You mean you are ruined,” Lucy said in horror. “Oh, Deborah, how could you have let this happen now?”

“I don’t seem to have had much to do with it,” Deborah replied wearily. “But all is not yet lost. Lady Juliet and Lady Meg were also there, and it’s possible their families will be able to quash any rumors that might arise.”

“Well, let us hope so, Deb!” Lucy exclaimed. “For otherwise, you will

have destroyed *everything!*”

Deborah met her sister’s turbulent gaze. “Hardly everything. What in *particular* do you mean?”

“We have every reason to hope,” her mother answered, “that Lucy is about to receive an offer from Sir Edmund Letchworth.”

Deborah’s eyes widened. “But that would be wonderful! Providing you like him, Lucy?”

“There will be no point in my liking him if he hears about *you*,” Lucy muttered. “His family would never permit it then.”

“Nonsense, if he is more than one-and-twenty, he may judge for himself in such matters,” Deborah said firmly. “You need only explain the truth to him, and if he is worthy of you, he will not allow it to make any difference.”

“You don’t really live much in the real world, do you, Deb?” Lucy flounced to the door, although the drama of her exit was spoiled by the arrival of Bertha, the maid, with a tea tray. Lucy was obliged to step aside before continuing on her way.

The tea was duly poured and the scones snatched by Deborah’s starving siblings, who were all trying to tell her their news at once. It was some time before she could ask her mother, “How serious is this matter of Lucy’s imminent engagement?”

“Almost secure,” her mother replied ruefully. “The Letchworths arrived at Coggleton House last month, for the first time in several years, apparently. Certainly, they have not been in residence since we came to the area. They held a ball for all the neighboring gentlefolk. Needless to say, Sir Edmund was captivated by our Lucy and has called on us several times since. She has been riding with him and his sister, and we have been to dinner at the house. We were the only guests! Apart from Mr. Halland, who was visiting his grandfather—the Earl of Hawfield, you know—at Gosmere Hall.”

Bewildered by this aside, Deborah drew her parent back to the matter in hand. “Are his affections engaged, do you think? Are Lucy’s?”

“Well, who would not want to be Lady Letchworth? He is a most agreeable and unassuming young man, most attentive and polite, and I do believe his interest is quite fixed on Lucy. So you do see why this *trouble* of yours has come at precisely the wrong moment? We truly don’t want to scare him away.”

“If he can be so scared away, he isn’t worth having,” Deborah said

staunchly.

“Tell that to your sister,” her mother retorted. “In fact, repeat it to yourself next quarter day when the rent is due. For there will be no more money from your position, and there is precious little left in the coffers. To be frank, Deb, this is not merely a matter of love, it is a necessity.”

Stricken, Deborah gazed helplessly at her mother. She had known things would be tight, but she hadn’t appreciated just how close to the precipice they stood. One way or another, it seemed, ruin awaited them all.

*

HAVING BEEN SHUT up in stuffy coaches for almost a day and a half, Deborah resolved to go for a walk with her younger siblings that afternoon.

“But, you can’t!” Lucy exclaimed. “I was going to walk this afternoon!”

Deborah blinked. “I wasn’t excluding you.”

“She’s planning to run into *Sir Edmund*,” their sister Lizzie giggled.

“Then it’s as well I will be there to chaperone you,” Deborah said.

“But he can’t meet *you*, Deb,” Lucy stated. “You know that!”

Deborah stared at her, absorbing the inevitable guilt. “Then I shall walk in the other direction. Do you want to take the children, or shall I?”

“Oh, both of you are being silly,” their mother declared. “We shall all go together. We must never appear ashamed of Deborah, or it will merely confirm the rumor. Besides, no one will know anything about this scandal. Probably.”

“The Letchworths don’t even know her name,” Lucy said grimly. “And I would rather keep it that way.”

“Give her another name,” Giles suggested. “Miss Tumblebumpkin.”

“Miss Raspberry!” Lizzie, the youngest, cried.

“Miss Lunkhead,” Stephen contributed.

“It might fit,” Deborah said tartly, “but I refuse that one in public.”

“Miss Kneesandtoes,” Giles said.

“Miss Honeycake!”

“Miss Horseandhounds!”

They were still coming up with increasingly bizarre names, most of which made Deborah laugh and even cracked a smile in Lucy’s anxious face

as they left the house and walked through the village.

Lucy clearly had a preferred direction and set off along the path that led, eventually, to Coggleton House.

“What is he like?” Deborah asked her, hoping to heal some of the rift between them. “Is he very handsome and clever?”

“Not really,” Lucy replied. “But he is quite...serious. A most moral and upright gentleman.”

“Well, that is good,” Deborah said, trying to summon enthusiasm for this description of her sister’s favored suitor.

“Not in the present circumstances,” Lucy said grimly and walked faster.

Deborah, sighing, made no effort to catch up. Instead, she asked the children what they thought of Sir Edmund.

“Apart from mooning over Lucy, he’s not so bad,” Giles said. “He always acknowledges us, which every adult doesn’t always trouble to.”

“And he plays spillikins quite well,” Lizzie offered.

“Then, he has been to the cottage?” Deborah asked in surprise.

“Several times. Usually with his sister, but once by himself,” replied Stephen, the most observant and practical of her siblings.

“That was when he played spillikins,” Lizzie agreed. “Look, do you think that is him, now?”

Giles grinned. “Just *happening* to be on the path at this time.”

A few yards ahead, just past where the path to Coggleton House crossed with the road to Gosmere, Lucy had stopped to see to the laces of her boot—or was pretending to do so. Beyond her, a man came striding alone along the path.

Deborah, curious to meet the gentleman on whom all their fortunes now depended, walked quicker before she remembered she was *persona non grata*. Unsure what to do, she lingered at the crossroads, observing as the man hurried closer, sweeping off his hat.

He bowed, smiling, politely greeting their mother first. “Mrs. Shelby, what a pleasant surprise. It is a lovely day for a walk, is it not? How do you do, Miss Shelby? Might I be of assistance?”

From his smile, from the glow in his eyes when he gazed upon Lucy, Deborah guessed the young man was indeed smitten. Which was a relief.

And Lucy was definitely flirting as she smiled up at him. “Oh, no, thank you, sir. I just needed to retie the lace.”

What Deborah couldn't decide was whether her sister's blush was from genuine feeling. Either way, she was glad to see the young man speak to the children, too. Even Lizzie, who'd remained with Deborah, stepped closer.

At the same time, the thunder of galloping hooves penetrated Deborah's distracted observation. The noise rushed on her so quickly that for an instant, she couldn't even judge its direction. Then she seized Lizzie and flattened them both against the hedge. She uttered an inarticulate cry of warning to those ahead, just as a horse and rider exploded from the Gosmere road, clearly meaning to jump the hedge at exactly where Deborah and Lizzie stood.

Deborah stumbled, trying to push Lizzie further away. The rider wrenched his horse's head around and pulled up so sharply that the animal reared, whinnying wildly as it pawed the air. The hooves were still terrifying close to her, especially if the rider had lost control of the horse, which could lash out in any direction.

Somehow the rider clung on. Deborah could even hear his voice murmuring soothing words that actually seemed to work, for when the horse's front hooves finally hit the ground, it merely danced a little and snorted rather than kicking, bolting or rearing up again.

The rider's face was at complete odds with his gentle voice. Deborah had never seen anyone so utterly furious. His mouth was a thin, hard line, his wild eyes stormy beneath black, scowling brows.

Those rage-filled eyes fixed on Deborah, seeming to pin her to the hedge. She wondered wildly what she had done wrong.

"Are you hurt?" he asked curtly.

Apparently, his rage was not directed at her. Dumbly, Deborah shook her head.

"My apologies," he threw at her, "for riding like a maniac."

Only then did he turn his attention to those only a few yards further along the road. They were staring open-mouthed, as though not quite sure what had just happened.

"Good God, Halland, what has got you into such a state?" asked Sir Edmund.

The angry stranger barked out a laugh. "Oh, just the usual. I'm sorry to startle you all and grateful I don't seem to have done further damage." Holding his still skittish horse in an iron grip with one hand, he removed his

hat with the other. "Mrs. Shelby, Miss Shelby." He turned his head, looking once more toward Deborah, clearly expecting an introduction.

The storm still raging in his intense blue eyes was barely controlled. It should have been frightening, and her heart did skitter in response, but mostly, she was conscious of curiosity.

"Oh, she is just the governess," Lucy said gaily.

Deborah blinked, answering his bow with a smile so faint and hesitant it might have been worthy of the most downtrodden governess ever employed.

"Miss Tumblebumpkin," Giles said irrepressibly.

"Raspberry," Lizzie insisted.

The stranger's gaze flickered to the children, his scowl fading into something that might have been amusement. "Christopher Halland," he said, "at your service...ma'am."

"Dismount and walk with us," Sir Edmund invited. "The poor beast looks as if he could do with the rest."

"But sadly, I could not," Mr. Halland said shortly. The frown was back. "I am unfit for company and must wish you a pleasant stroll without me. Good day."

With that, he clapped his hat back on his head and maneuvered the horse past everyone on the path. Almost immediately, the horse broke into a canter, then jumped the hedge into the field beyond, and galloped off into the distance.

"What a strange, abrupt young man," Deborah's mother observed. "He seemed much more pleasant when we dined at Coggleton House last week."

"Ah, well, I suspect his hopes have been dashed," Sir Edmund excused. "Gosmere Hall is his, you know, held in trust for him, along with a small fortune, by his grandfather."

"Lord Hawfield?" Lucy asked, perhaps to show Deborah the noble circles to which the family now aspired.

"Yes. They're always at loggerheads over something, and Halland has been chafing for years to have the trust relaxed."

"Why?" Deborah's mother asked. "He does not live there, does he? No one has since we arrived in Coggleton three years ago."

"Oh, he has plans for the place," Sir Edmund said vaguely. "He arranged for his lordship to meet him at Gosmere to explain them, hoping to extract his inheritance early, but clearly the old gentleman has not bitten. May I escort

you ladies wherever you are going?”

“Oh, we were just walking,” Lucy said.

“I think we’ve come far enough,” their mother said. “But walk with us, by all means, Sir Edmund. Perhaps you could join us for tea?”

Sir Edmund glanced at his fob timepiece. “Sadly, I have an appointment.” He wrinkled his nose. “Dull estate business, you understand, but has to be done. However, I shall be glad if I may walk back to the village with you.”

Deborah had plenty of opportunities to observe Sir Edmund and Lucy during the walk home. Without neglecting their mother and with frequent remarks cast at one or other of the children, he still found plenty of opportunities to stroll with Lucy, a little distance in front of the main party. They appeared to enjoy these more private conversations, and by the time they bade him goodbye, Deborah began to feel much more hopeful.

“Only, why on earth did you tell him I’m the governess?” she demanded of Lucy as they sat down in the parlor once more.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Lucy said carelessly. “It just slipped out.”

“Well, you had better tell him the truth, or it will create a very odd impression of you,” their mother said severely, although she had hardly disputed the claim at the time.

“It will create an odder impression if I change the story now,” Lucy retorted. “Besides, Deb will be gone again soon to another position, will she not? He need not see her again for ages, and when he does, he will not remember her, for no one notices the governess.”

“It could take me weeks to find a suitable position,” Deborah pointed out when she could speak. “And I am hardly unknown in the neighborhood. The entire village knows we do not employ a governess. Apart from Miss Figgis now and again.”

“Besides,” their mother said crossly, “one of the points of your marrying Sir Edmund, Lucy, is that she need not take any more positions.”

“You will have to tell him the truth,” Deborah urged. “Otherwise, the silly lie will come back and bite you.”

“I would not *have* to lie if you were not ruined!” Lucy snapped.

Deborah fell back against the cushions as though she had been struck.

Lucy’s gaze fell. “I shouldn’t have said it, but how can I possibly take it back again now?”

Deborah swallowed. “Make a joke of it. The children clearly did. You

were only going along with their nonsense and never expected him to take you seriously.”

Lucy raised her gaze once more and gave a twisted smile. “You’re a better liar than I am, Deb. You should be able to come up with something equally good to justify your scandal.”

“If there *is* any scandal,” their mother said firmly. “I am still hopeful nothing will come of it. The papers will be too full of the princess going abroad to even mention her lades.”

Deborah hoped so, too, though somehow, she didn’t believe it would be quite that simple.



Chapter Two

CHRISTOPHER HALLAND SLOWED his horse, breathing deeply to calm the storm within. His rage now was more with himself than with his grandfather. Nearly riding down the young lady and the child had pierced his selfish temper too acutely.

He could not deny he had been careering across the country like a lunatic, furiously vowing to marry the first unwed female he came across, whether she was a milkmaid or a middle-aged spinster.

And of course, it had been the governess.

That he had so nearly injured her and the child appalled him. He could have killed them. His gut twisted with shame and fresh anger.

The governess had been trying to save the child. Then she had tried to hide her fear, facing down his no doubt maniacal stare with a calm relief that was curiously free of judgment. She seemed...different to the females he normally encountered, absorbing without offense, the ridiculous name bestowed upon her by her charge. Miss Tumblebumpkin indeed.

He smiled reluctantly. His grandfather would be well-served if he really did marry a governess. Immediately. Then Gosmere Hall would be his, along with his maternal grandfather's fortune, and he could begin his educational experiment and the more independent life he craved. Even without seeing the old man's face, the marriage would be worth it for so many reasons.

And damn it, what governess would *not* prefer to be the mistress of a fine house and estate than to be a mere drudge in someone else's family?

Reluctantly, he turned the horse's head back toward the hall. With luck, his grandfather would be gone by the time he returned. Fury surged again. What difference could two years make to the old man? He just took delight in thwarting him, refusing to believe he was serious when the merit of his plan was clear to everyone else. And even if the experiment failed, then at least it would have been tried. At least some children would have choices not previously open to them...

Damn it, I will marry the governess. If she'll have me, and I don't see any reason she wouldn't.

Except that I just behaved like a madman.

Well, she hadn't seemed upset... In fact, she had rather pleasing gray eyes, soothing to a man's ill-temper. And she was pretty enough, with a few locks of honey-blonde hair escaping her bonnet, those fine eyes and an expressive mouth that seemed to want to smile but wasn't quite sure if such a thing was allowed. An intriguing girl, uncommon...and if she was a governess, it was probable she came of good family.

He frowned suddenly. In fact, now he thought of it, she looked rather like Lucy Shelby, whom Edmund Letchworth wished to marry. *And* like the child, she had seized out of his way. The name-calling and her reaction were suddenly much understandable.

She's no more the governess than I am.

So why pretend she is?

The mystery engaged him until he found himself on the drive up to Gosmere Hall. His grandfather's carriage was rumbling toward him. He doubted it would stop, and it didn't. But Christopher swept off his hat and bowed ironically. His grandfather nodded in return, gracious in victory.

Well, the old man hadn't won. Not yet.

*

CHRISTOPHER WOKE, STILL resolved to call that day at the Shelbys' house. Despite desiring a marriage of convenience, he had no intention of saddling himself with an ill-natured, vulgar, or stupid woman. Which was why any old milkmaid wouldn't do. Or, God help him, the grasping Nell, who had a body to delight the senses and conversation to dull the soul. Only at his very angriest had he considered marrying Nell.

But no, a wife who would annoy him was hardly a convenience. So, he resolved to talk to the Shelby girl at least once more before deciding whether or not to marry her.

As he threw open the shutters of his bedchamber, it came to him that although his life was in London, he rather liked this house. He had always known it would be his, and on his rare visits, he had always been rather proud

of the fact. Of course, it needed to be lived in, to be whipped into shape by a mistress's touch.

Washed and dressed, he ran downstairs and found several letters awaiting him. One from Andrew Gates, his radical teacher friend, asked eagerly for news of his interview with Lord Hawfield. Christopher sighed and laid it aside.

Another epistle, from Lady Letchworth, asked him to come for tea and to tell her anything his people had discovered about the Shelby family, who would also be invited to tea. He tossed that aside, too, in favor of the third letter from Ludovic Dunne, an unusual friend with a knack of discovering whatever one needed to know. This had proved useful to Christopher in several political matters. So when Lady Letchworth had asked him what he knew of the girl Edmund Letchworth wished to marry, he had invoked Dunne's help again. It seemed he finally had an answer.

A short note enclosed a scrap of newspaper—some lurid scandal sheet judging by the headline *Orgy at C. Place*. The letter merely stated that Mrs. Emily Shelby was the widow of the Reverend Mr. Francis Shelby, a respected vicar who seemed to have lived an exemplary life before dying unexpectedly. His impecunious family had subsequently moved to the Cheshire village of Cogleton. And through the intervention of Shelby's bishop, a family friend, his eldest daughter, Miss Lucy's sister Deborah, had managed to get a place in the Princess of Wales's household.

Which had most recently resided at Connaught Place in London. Frowning, Christopher picked up the scrap of newspaper. *Orgy at C. Place*.

Undaunted by the absence of either propriety or their royal mistress... Lady M.W., Lady J.L., Miss D.S., and Miss H.C. lurk in the midst of the night's debauchery...

Oh, yes, the Shelbys had every reason to hide the presence of the eldest daughter from Letchworth, and Miss D. S. had every reason to be married quickly.

Letchworth was less likely to offer for Lucy if such a revelation reached him, and the Shelbys only just kept their heads above water. They were respectable by birth, but they would add nothing to the Letchworth estate or consequence. The tide would turn against Lucy.

And as for Deborah, surely the girl he had almost ridden down... The only possible way out for her was a respectable marriage.

Well, few people would have called Christopher respectable, but surely any port in a storm...

Fortunately, Christopher didn't actually care whether or not she was guilty. Her calm countenance swam before his eyes, a brief spark of laughter catching at her mouth. Not exactly the face of a wanton, though it was true appearances could be deceptive.

*

DEBORAH SLEPT A little later than normal, enjoying her long slumber in a familiar bed. The previous two nights had been more or less sleepless, one spent traveling, and the one before listening to the alarming revelry in the princess's house.

Her sisters, with whom she shared the bedchamber, were not present when she woke. She found her family in the breakfast room, delighted by an invitation to tea at Coggleton House that afternoon. However, Lucy's face fell as Deborah sat down to eat.

"You don't like meeting new people," Lucy reminded her.

"And I am quite happy to stay at home," Deborah agreed. "If you find a time to tell Sir Edmund the truth."

"I will try," Lucy promised.

In the afternoon, the Letchworth carriage arrived to take Mrs. and Miss Shelby to tea at the House.

"Every attention!" Mrs. Shelby whispered to Deborah on her way out of the front door. "You see how they favor Lucy?"

"They do," Deborah agreed.

"Actually," Giles said thoughtfully as he closed the door behind them. "*You* are Miss Shelby. She is only Miss Lucy Shelby, so it was really you they invited."

Deborah shrugged. "Well, we have never stood much by such etiquette. And we all know they *meant* Lucy."

Giles scowled. "But it's as if you are being...erased."

"Well, maybe that is a good thing for now," she said lightly. "Where are

the others? I told Cook I would bring some things from the village.”

“They’re in the village with some other children. I’ll go and keep an eye on them if you like.”

Recognizing this as *I want to go, too, but I need a more adult reason*, Deborah smiled. “I would be grateful,” she said gravely.

Giles grinned and slouched off.

“Giles?” she called after him as a sudden thought struck her. He turned back expectantly. “Do none of you have any schooling anymore?” Miss Figgis, a retired governess who lived in the village, had used to give them lessons.

Giles shrugged. “No money,” he said.

This was not good, she reflected as she donned her pelisse and bonnet. They needed education to be equipped for the world, particularly Giles and Stephen, but Lizzie, too, would suffer.

She must begin at once to find a new position, though she doubted it would be enough to send the boys to school or even hire a governess. Her salary would be needed for the house.

Unless Lucy marries Sir Edmund. She felt guilty even thinking anything so venal. It was more important for Lucy to be happy, and she should *not* marry for money. Only, of course, she seemed to want this, and surely only part of it was a desire to be Lady Letchworth and live in a big house with lots of servants and go to London for the Season.

The thought occupied her mind as she walked into the village. She waved to the children in the square, noting her siblings among them, and walked on to the shop to buy the supplies Cook had asked for. There, she bought everything required, except the sherry her mother had requested. The shopkeeper did not sell wines but kindly directed her to the inn.

With her basket almost full, Deborah walked on to the inn at the end of the street. Here, she was welcomed by the friendly innkeeper’s wife, Mrs. Briggs, who went off immediately to fetch her a bottle of the “good” sherry.

As she stood in the entrance hall waiting, a gentleman strode out of the coffee room on her left. She glanced at him and saw with embarrassed alarm that it was the angry horseman from yesterday.

He didn’t seem inclined to stop, fortunately, merely inclining his head in a curt but civil manner as he walked on. But he took only one more pace before he glanced back at her and halted, a smile of recognition banishing the

severity in his face.

“Why, Miss Tumblebumpkin.”

Deborah flushed. “Sir. You must know I now answer only to Miss Raspberry.”

His eyes had a rather attractive way of crinkling at the corners when he smiled. “Forgive me, Miss Raspberry. You are a very good-natured governess. Or very put-upon.”

“Oh, it is only fun,” she said uncomfortably.

He considered her. His clear blue eyes still looked stormy today, but the rage of yesterday had fortunately faded. “Actually, I was just on my way to call upon Mrs. Shelby, to apologize again for riding so recklessly among you yesterday. Especially to you and the little girl. It was unforgivable.”

“No harm was done.”

“Which I think was your doing rather than mine.”

“We all do foolish things without intent sometimes,” she murmured.

His head tilted to one side. “What is your story, Miss...?”

“Here it is, Miss Shelby!” the innkeeper’s wife said, rounding the corner with a beaming smile. “Will it go in your basket?”

“Yes, of course,” Deborah said, wishing the ground would open and swallow her. “Thank you.”

“Miss Shelby,” Mr. Halland repeated, only faint mockery in his voice. “Now, I *have* to hear that story. Mrs. Briggs, a pot of fresh coffee, if you please. Will you join me, Miss Shelby?”

“Thank you, no,” she said hastily. “I can satisfy your curiosity immediately. It was a joke my siblings were playing before we even left the house. Of course, I am not the governess, and we never expected anyone to believe I was. Good afternoon, sir.”

“I’ve offended you,” he said.

“Indeed, no, sir. I have every intention of becoming a governess in the near future, so it would be a foolish offense for me to take.”

He regarded her with a gleam of speculation she could not understand. Then he glanced at the avidly watching Mrs. Briggs, who, almost as though silently instructed, smiled at Deborah.

“You’ll be perfectly safe in here, Miss. No one will disturb you but myself and the maid, and we’ll leave the door open to keep everything right. You look as if you could do with a rest and a drink.”

Deborah hesitated. Her instinct was to flee. But it struck her that this man was a friend of Sir Edmund's, and she should make sure he did not think badly of the governess nonsense. Besides, in spite of her natural reserve, which made her uncomfortable with new people, he intrigued her, dangerous temper and all.

Seeing her indecision, he reached out and closed his fingers around the handle of the basket. Startled, she let it go.

"You look like a hunted gazelle," he observed. "Poised for flight but not quite sure if it's necessary."

"I suppose I am unlikely to be ridden over in a public inn," she managed and walked past him into the coffee room.

"*Touché*," he murmured behind her.

Choosing the corner table, he placed the basket on one of the wooden chairs and held the one next to it for Deborah. She sat, and to her relief, he took the bench against the wall, opposite her, leaving plenty distance between them.

"So, Miss Shelby, explain to me why you seek to become a governess."

"It is a simple matter of necessity, sir. My previous position ended."
Idiot! Why did you bring that up?

"Ended?"

"My employer moved abroad," she said hastily.

"Ah. I understand your family came to Cogleton only recently?"

"After my father died. Obviously, we could not continue at the vicarage when it was needed by his replacement. Mrs. Copsley, the squire's wife here, is an old friend of my mother's, so she was glad to find a suitable house here. But I suppose you do not wish to know all that."

He blinked. "I did ask." He sat back while Mrs. Briggs set down the coffee pot and cups, cream, and sugar.

"Thank you," Deborah murmured.

Mr. Halland's steady gaze disconcerted her. Determined to get the encounter over with as quickly as possible, she reached for the pot and poured out two cups. He took one.

"And what reckless act have you committed recently?" he asked her.

She blinked. "None. Unless you count traveling on the mail coach from London to Chester."

"We were discussing doing foolish things without intent," he reminded

her. "Like mine of yesterday."

She thought about it. "I don't usually act out of temper."

His smile was twisted. "Then what?"

She shrugged. "Thoughtlessness. Or too much thought and reaching the wrong conclusion."

"You admit to thought? Be careful, or you will confess next to reading a book – other than a fashionable novel – and then you will be ruined."

"I don't believe such activities can ruin a governess," she said, although she reflected with some despair that her actual ruin, if ruin it proved to be, would indeed stand in the way of her obtaining *any* respectable position. Perhaps everything really did have to come down to Lucy's marriage, and if that did not happen...

She became aware of the silence, and then, alarmingly, of his unblinking observation. Had she spoken aloud? Had he somehow read the ruin in her face?

He raised his cup to his lips and drank. "Let me tell you my story," he said unexpectedly, replacing the cup on its saucer. "I am a Member of Parliament, elected to the House of Commons nearly two years ago. I am independent, fortunate enough to have an income on which to live modestly. But I also have an estate and a much larger fortune through my mother, which I will inherit on my thirtieth birthday, or when I marry. My grandfather, who controls this property in trust for me, refuses to break the trust and give it to me even two years early."

This, she already knew from Sir Edmund, so she merely nodded politely.

His lips quirked. "Don't you wish to know why I want the property now?"

"I imagine it is more comfortable in London with a large fortune."

"I already have enough to live comfortably in London," he reminded her. He almost seemed disappointed in her.

"Then why do you need more?" she asked obligingly.

He said, "I want Gosmere Hall to entertain and persuade important people of my points of view."

She blinked. "Are there not less expensive ways? At least for two years?"

"Yes, but that is wasted time. I want to prove the benefit to the economy of land improvements and decent wages for labor. But most of all, I want to endow a school on the grounds. There is a suitable building there already,

although it is in need of repair and refurbishment. And teachers and staff.”

Her eyes widened at the unexpectedness. She sipped her coffee, “I imagine that would be expensive,” she allowed. “But would you not be able to recoup from the pupils’ fees?”

“The pupils I have in mind won’t be able to pay fees.”

She set down her cup. “It is to be a charity school?”

“With a greater purpose.” He leaned forward. “In all our growing cities—and in the country, too,—are poor children, children forced into work to earn for their families. They grow up with no education, no possibility of any other life. They have no choice. What if they were given a choice? To learn, to go on to university, become doctors, lawyers, bankers, anything they wished to be? Imagine a whole country full of educated children.”

“You cannot educate the whole country,” she said practically.

“No. But I can educate a few in a model school.”

She smiled. “That you can then show to your important and influential guests?”

He grinned, almost like a schoolboy himself, then added hastily. “I would not like you to think I came up with this notion by myself, that I am advocating it through mere idealism and little knowledge. In fact, it is the brainchild of my friend who has taught at several schools from Eton to a charity school in Manchester. Many people don’t even believe that the poorer classes *can* be educated or that it is wise to educate them beyond their station. But it is clear that—”

He broke off apologetically. “Well, I won’t bore you with all that right now. Suffice it to say, my ambition stretches beyond just throwing a little charity at a church school.”

“You have a point to make.”

His eyes gleamed. He had extremely profound, intense eyes. A man of fervor and principle. “Oh, I have many points to make, so many that I cannot wait two years to begin.”

“Then what is your solution?” she asked and took a mouthful of coffee.

“Marriage,” he said regretfully. “Since my grandfather is intransigent, marriage is the only way to get my hands on the property now.”

“Then I wish you good fortune.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” A smile flickered across his face. “Because I have a proposal to make.”

She stared at him, unlikely suspicions swirling in her mind. “What kind of proposal?”

“Marriage. A marriage of convenience.”

Something twinged inside her, like an echo of disappointment, of a lost possibility. It came to her that she rather liked this intense, passionate man, who had already shown himself to be dangerously ill-tempered, yet thoughtful and friendly. And funny. That was probably what she liked.

“Do you have a lady in mind?” she asked. *Please don’t let it be Lucy. Or should it be Lucy? Would she not rather be Lady Letchworth?*

But surely it could not be anyone else when he had taken the trouble to tell her all of this?

“Of course, I do,” he said. “I am trying to be perfectly honest with you, Miss Shelby. Would you please be so good as to consider becoming my wife?”

There seemed to be no sound, no air in the room. As if the world had stopped.

Deborah’s mouth had fallen open in what had to be an entirely unbecoming manner. She closed it again and swallowed, staring at him.

“Me?” she squeaked.

He gave a rather self-deprecating grin. “Why not? I am a gentleman’s son. You are a gentleman’s daughter.”

She frowned. “So is Lucy.”

“Lucy? Your sister? I don’t think Letchworth would forgive me if I married her. Besides, I don’t believe she and I would suit so well.”

She searched his face. “You are not even joking, are you?”

He scowled. “Why would I be joking? Look, I admit I am a bad bargain as a husband. I am obsessive and forgetful, opinionated, and inclined to temper. I don’t always behave well, and I’m not proud of everything in my past. But I can promise to treat you with every respect and never to interfere with your private life, provided you behave with discretion. As shall I.”

Her head was spinning as she grasped the meaning of his words, which seemed to cast blows rather than the reassurance he seemed to intend.

She pushed her cup and saucer away. “I have just been interviewed for the position of wife,” she said flatly.

“I am prepared to be interviewed for the position of husband, although I hope I have given you all the salient facts.” He sat back, his fingers playing

with the handle of his empty cup. He might have been nervous. She could not tell. "Except that I would naturally make sure your family is financially secure. The boys may go to whatever school your mother wishes, and she can even employ a real governess."

Financial security. Even before her father died, that had been a worry in the family. In the last year...well, to have that burden lifted was no small thing. Lucy could marry Sir Edmund or not. Only...

She raised her eyes from his hand to his face. "I am not the wife you seek," she said bluntly. "I do not care for the company of strangers, and I cannot make small talk. I would be a shockingly bad hostess for your important friends."

"And yet, you are used to moving among the highest in the land," he interrupted, snatching her breath away.

"If you refer to my place with the Princess of Wales," she managed when she could speak, "I rarely had to say anything and merely did as I was asked by Her Highness or her more senior lady. In truth, the princess is of such a lively nature that one need never feel uncomfortable—" Realizing she was babbling, she broke off and swallowed. "Besides, you should know that there was an...incident. By some mistake, four of us were summoned to Her Highness's residence after she had already left London and spent the night unchaperoned in the house while a somewhat vulgar party went on under the same roof."

"Orgy," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Orgy is the word being used. Forgive me, because of your sister, the Letchworths asked me to look into your family. I received word yesterday about this...incident. The newspaper called it an orgy."

She closed her eyes. Dear God, this was worse than any of them had imagined as they'd crept out of the house in the cold light of dawn...

She snapped her eyes open again. "Then you believe I have no other choice than to accept your offer?"

"I think it might be difficult for you to receive others. In fact, if the word spreads, it will be difficult for your entire family."

"Does Sir Edmund know?" she asked hoarsely.

He shook his head. "Not from me." He smiled deprecatingly. "I am the grandson of an earl. If I marry you, the Letchworths will be more inclined to

favor your sister. Or at least not to forbid it. For what it's worth, Letchworth is a very upright young man. Unless there was fault on Lucy's part—and I can't see that there is—he is unlikely to blame her.”

She let out a relieved breath, then frowned and caught his gaze once more. “And you? You have not even asked me what happened.”

He shrugged. “That is your business. My hope is you were not harmed. For the rest, I am happy to listen, but you hardly seem the type of girl to fall happily into an orgy.”

She shuddered. “I'm not perfectly sure what an orgy is, but if it is the vulgar racket that went on below us in the princess's house, then I can assure you, I was not happy at all, and I spent most of the evening locked away from it all.”

“You are an innocent,” he observed, “caught in a scandal, not of your making. You need a husband. I need a wife. I believe we could deal well together.”

“On the basis of one interview? Sir, there must be any number of better born, wealthier, and more sociable women who would jump at the chance to —”

“Are you trying to talk yourself out of the position, Miss Shelby?” he interrupted.

She stared at him. He was joking about this as a position, of course, but perhaps that was the way to regard it. An extremely well-paid position, with benefits for her whole family.

And a way out of the scandal.

Pressure built behind her eyes so quickly that she rubbed distractedly at her forehead. “You are truly serious about this?”

“I am, but I will not press you. Go home and think, if you like. But if you could give me your answer one way or another by tomorrow, I would be grateful.”

“I would be relieving one set of problems,” she said slowly, “and taking on others.”

“That is life.” His lips curved into a smile of pure mischief. “And it can be fun.”

Her breath caught. A position with adventure was what she imagined she would have when she accompanied the princess abroad. This was an entirely different adventure and just as unknown.

“Shall I call on you tomorrow?” he asked. “Or would you prefer to send a note to me at Gosmere Hall?”

“There’s no need,” she said abruptly. “I accept your offer. I will marry you.”

Dear God, what have I done?



Chapter Three

HIS EYES WIDENED with excitement she knew had nothing to do with her personally.

None of this was personal.

However, he solemnly held out his hand, and she shook it because she didn't really know what else to do.

"Thank you," he said. "I shall do my best to ensure you never regret this decision."

"Likewise," she agreed.

He released her hand, and she let it fall back into her lap. Shock and even fear at what she had just done surged within her, forcing her abruptly to her feet.

"I should go home," she mumbled. "If you will excuse me."

"I'll accompany you, carry your basket."

"There is no need. I—"

"I believe there is every need," he said lightly.

She had just agreed to marry this man. Instead of trying to shake him off, she should at least be getting used to his company. She could not explain to herself, let alone to him, why she suddenly found his person just too overwhelming.

Inevitably, it seemed, they saw her mother's friend, Mrs. Copsley, being driven along the village street in her gig. The lady's eyes were agog, but Mr. Halland merely raised his hat and kept walking. Deborah dropped a quick curtsy and hurried on with him.

She didn't know if she was glad or sorry when the children merely waved from the square and didn't run up to join them. Her mind was too busy for conversation, but she did feel his gaze upon her frequently. Perhaps he was appalled at what he had just done. Should she give him a chance to back out?

"Did I say, Miss Shelby, that you have no reason to fear me?" he said abruptly. "I have a temper, but I could not hurt a friend, and I hope that is

what we shall be.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said at once, even as she wondered if it was true.

“I forgot to ask you if there was someone else.”

“Someone else?” she repeated blankly.

“Some other gentleman whom you might have hoped to marry.”

“Oh, no.”

“I don’t want to deprive you of happiness. Our agreement is that we may follow our own hearts, within the bounds of discretion. I shan’t force my attentions on you.”

Her face flamed. “Thank you,” she replied in a strangled voice. *I think...* “What do we do now?”

“Am I correct in thinking you don’t want to make a fuss over the wedding?”

“Quite correct,” she said in relief.

“Then, with your agreement, I shall see about having the bans waived. With luck, we may be married in the village church the day after tomorrow.”

“You have a way of depriving me of breath.”

“Too soon?” He almost sounded disappointed.

“No, no, by all means, let us have it over with.”

His lips twitched. “You really don’t like fuss, do you?”

She bit her lip. “I’m sorry. That must have sounded terribly rude.”

“No, I like that you say what you think. I hope you always will. If you are agreeable, we can move into Gosmere Hall immediately after the wedding.”

“Will your grandfather not object?” she asked nervously.

“Lord, no, He left yesterday, shortly after I galloped into you. I shall write to him today and tell everyone who needs to know. As should you.” He frowned suddenly. “You *are* more than one-and-twenty?”

“Three-and-twenty. There is no one whose permission I need.”

“Then I will make arrangements and let you know. Is this your house?”

“Yes.”

He opened the gate for her and followed her to the front door, where he held out his hand.

Slowly, as though she were giving herself, she put her hand in his and watched his long fingers curl around it. *To have and to hold*. Was she truly about to give this stranger complete power over her? Terrifying. And

curiously exciting. There was latent strength in the hand that held hers with gentle firmness. She did not mind his touch. She did not mind it at all.

“You have not told me your name,” he observed.

“Deborah.”

“Deborah,” he repeated. “I’m Christopher, though you may call me Chris or Kit if you like. Until tomorrow.”

She slid her hand free. “Goodbye.”

He smiled, tipped his hat, and returned her basket before striding back down the path.

Am I dreaming this?

*

DEBORAH DECIDED ON the blunt approach. When her mother and sister returned from Letchworth House, she waited until they were seated in the parlor and left a gap in their speculations as to when precisely Sir Edmund might make his offer. The children were playing and squabbling over aspects of their extended game but had also quieted for a moment.

Deborah took a deep breath. “Mr. Halland made me an offer of marriage this afternoon, and I have accepted him.”

All eyes in the room turned on her in astonishment.

Her mother frowned. “I don’t think that’s a terribly tasteful jest, Deborah. You know how much we are depending on this match of L—”

“Of course I do, and I’m trying to tell you not to be so anxious over it anymore. Mr. Halland has assured me that he will arrange for your financial security as well as school for the boys, and a governess.”

“But what are you talking about, Deb?” Lucy demanded. “Do you mean Mr. Christopher Halland at Gosmere? You only met him once!”

“Twice,” Deborah corrected. “I ran into him in the village this afternoon.”

“And on the strength of that, he made you an offer of marriage?” her mother said in disbelief. “Deb, have you considered that he was jesting? Gentlemen can be cruel, particularly if he had heard of your...trouble. He did not mean it, my dear, and I’m surprised you do not see that.”

“I did consider the possibility,” she allowed. “For I was at least as astonished as you. But he was honest with me. He did not pretend any tender

feelings that I would not have believed. He knew of my *trouble*, as you call it, and pointed out I was truly in need of a husband, and if he marries me in full knowledge of the trouble, Sir Edmund could have less reason not to offer for Lucy.”

“But why?” Lucy demanded. Deborah could see she was torn between relief and hope and suspicion of resentment that her older sister might have eclipsed her by this sudden marriage coup. “Why would he suddenly do this for us when he does not even pretend to love you?”

“Be fair, Lucy,” her mother said. “How could he love her when he only met her yesterday for the first time, and most of that was spent trying to ride over her. Or not.”

“Love has nothing to do with it,” Deborah said calmly. “It is to be a marriage of convenience. He needs to be married to obtain his inheritance early, and I need to be married for reasons we are only too aware of. Especially now, when I understand the *trouble* has been reported in at least one newspaper. Mr. Halland knew I was at the princess’s house.”

Her mother sprang up, wringing her hands with conflicting emotions as she began to pace the room. “But this is wonderful! At least it would be, but none of us *know* Mr. Halland, and I am not sure I like him. He is quite wild and unconventional, you know, full of radical ideas that would turn everyone against him were he not an earl’s grandson. And then, *women...*”

“Since I do not love him, his past, or indeed present, does not concern me,” Deborah said. “We have agreed upon respect and discretion.”

“It sounds a very...*cold* marriage,” her mother said anxiously.

“It is,” Deborah agreed. “But frankly, it seems the best way out for all of us.”

“You mean you’re going to live at Gosmere Hall?” Stephen said, his eyes wide. “But you can’t, Deb! It’s haunted!”

“No, it isn’t,” Giles scoffed. “We only said that because it was so big and quiet when it was shut up, and that old servant loomed out of nowhere. But I went up there the other day when the earl was in residence, and it looked quite different—bustling. I don’t think Deb needs to be frightened of ghosts.”

“Well, that is comforting,” Deborah murmured.

“And Gosmere Hall is close, so we can visit all the time,” Lizzie said eagerly. “It will be wonderful! If Lucy is at Coggleton House and Deb at Gosmere, it will almost be the same as now.” She smiled brilliantly at her

older sisters, then shivered with delight. “And only think of the hide-and-seek possibilities at Gosmere.”

This seemed to catch even Stephen’s imagination, and they all began to talk at once.

Deborah’s mother sat down beside her, searching her face. “Deb, are you sacrificing yourself for us? Do you even like this man? This stranger?”

Deborah thought about it with some reluctance. Intense blue eyes, a determined mouth, quick laughter, stormy temper, and unexpected care for others, not even of his class. Thoughtful and curious. Intriguing. And handsome, that, too. Her stomach gave a funny little flutter.

“Actually, I do,” she said, “in so far as it is possible to like anyone on such short acquaintance. It is hardly a love match, but I believe we can deal together reasonably well.”

“I imagine it will be agreeable for you to have your own home,” her mother said, “even such a *dark* one as Gosmere. But I suppose you will be in London while Parliament sits.”

“We have not discussed such matters.”

“You can’t have discussed very much at all,” Lucy said, staring at her. “When do you mean to be married? If it happens at all!”

“The day after tomorrow,” Deborah replied.

Lucy’s eyes widened. “The day—”

“Pass the smelling salts,” their mother said faintly.

*

DEBORAH ROSE THE following day restless and on edge, suspicious she might just have imagined the whole unlikely tale. What she really wished to do was walk by herself up to Gosmere Hall, either to get a glimpse of her new home or to find out from Mr. Halland if their agreement was indeed serious.

However, a day of summer drizzle and her mother’s unusually close observation combined to keep her indoors. She spent some time reading and playing with her siblings, and listening to Stephen coaxing rather beautiful music from an old guitar that had been a gift from the bishop.

And then, around midday, a knock at the front door paralyzed her. Her heart beat so fast she was afraid it might jump out of her body, and she stared

at the parlor door.

Beside her, Giles said intensely, "If you're frightened of him, Deb, don't marry him. Nothing is worth that."

"I'm not," she said in surprise. "I'm just not quite sure how to behave."

It turned out not to matter at that moment, for their visitor was Mrs. Copsley, the squire's wife, who sailed into the room. She was a stout, well-meaning woman, who took a kind of innocent pride in her rank within local society, a rank only trumped by the rare visits of titled people to Coggleton House or Gosmere Hall. Slightly less appealing was her assumption that this gave her the right to know everything about everyone and to deliver her opinion unchallenged. She had been unquestionably kind to the Shelbys since their arrival in the village, and she had, apparently, promoted the match between Sir Edmund and Lucy.

"Mabel!" Deborah's mother greeted her in clear surprise. "How good to see you. Do sit! Bertha, tea, if you please. Will you join us for luncheon, Mabel?"

"Oh, no, I can't stop," Mrs. Copsley said. "But thank you for asking. No, I just came to make sure all was well with dear Deborah."

Deborah's mother bridled, no doubt, with the *trouble* in mind. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Merely, I saw her yesterday with Mr. Halland—Mr. *Christopher* Halland—who was clearly making himself agreeable." She turned to Deborah with a kind smile. "And I know you have been in London and are used to dealing with all sorts of rogues who must have visited Her Highness, but in the country, with a man of Mr. Halland's reputation, one really needs to be more careful."

"Mr. Halland was extremely kind and behaved with the utmost propriety."

"That time, my dear, but perhaps not in the future. He has been wild to a fault since his youth and shows no signs of calming down." She put her hand to the side of her mouth as though to shield Deborah and her siblings from hearing. "Lady Belham, you know. And *actresses*."

"Before you go any further, Mabel," Mrs. Shelby said firmly, "you should know that we have received an offer of marriage for Deborah from Mr. Halland."

Mrs. Copsley's mouth fell open. "Oh, my dear," she said in appalled

tones. "I do hope you have not accepted him."

Deborah tilted her chin. "In fact, I have."

"You know how things are with us, Mabel," her mother said nervously. "And he is, you know, Hawfield's grandson."

"Yes, but the Hallands are just not *safe*, Emily," Mrs. Copsley declared. "I beg you will not repeat it, but I have always found something *sinister* about Hawfield. His wife died quite suddenly, you know, as did his heir. Then there is young Rupert who had to flee the country to avoid standing trial for murder."

"If there is a taint there, I am sure our Mr. Halland has avoided it. No one ever said a word against *his* father."

"No, but the daughter—Christopher's sister—also died in mysterious circumstances. And as for Christopher's politics! Well, he might as well declare himself a Jacobin and cut off all our heads!"

"Really?" Giles demanded, showing his first interest in the conversation.

"No, *not* really," his mother said crossly. "Mrs. Copsley is making a point that Mr. Halland has some radical ideas, but he is no revolutionary."

"He believes in education," Deborah put in.

Mrs. Copsley sniffed. "And the house, Deborah! I would hate to be mistress of such a great, gloomy place, and while I don't believe in ghosts, Gosmere Hall is the one place that might just change my mind. Ghostly lights swirl about the place on some nights, and such strange, unworldly sounds..."

"Ooh," Stephen marveled. "I told you, Deb!"

"Keep your mind on the hide-and-seek," Giles advised.

"At any rate, take your time and think about it, Deborah," Mrs. Copsley pleaded. "And you know there will be no need if Lucy marries Sir Edmund,"

"Goodness," Deborah's mother said in awe. "I would then have *two* very creditably married daughters."

"You will not rush into this marriage, will you?" Mrs. Copsley asked anxiously.

"Oh, no," Deborah assured her. "Tomorrow is time enough."

*

WITH NO SIGN of Mr. Halland during the day, Deborah began to doubt the

agreement she thought they had reached. Perhaps her mother was correct, and it had all been a jest. And she was going to look rather silly when Mrs. Copsley reminded her she had thought to be married the following day.

Then, just as they were about to sit down to dinner, Bertha brought in a hand-delivered note, directed to "Miss Shelby". Lucy reached for it eagerly before her mother slapped her hand away.

"Miss Shelby is Deborah. At least until she is married."

Deborah took it with a murmur of thanks. Aware of Lucy's resentful gaze, she broke the seal and glanced hastily at the signature at the bottom scrawl. *Christopher Halland*.

Her stomach tightened. She could not tell if she felt excitement or dread, or if she was glad or sorry not to be let off the hook. Forcing herself to read, she took it in, then folded the note and set it aside.

"Mr. Halland has arranged a license and spoken to the vicar. We are to be married at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

"How am I supposed to organize a wedding breakfast by then?" her mother wailed.

"We could just send a note to the inn," Deborah suggested. "And I doubt it will be a large party, just us and Mr. Halland. And his groomsman, I suppose."

Although she maintained her calm during dinner, inside, she was too agitated to face the evening in the company of her family. Pleading the desirability of an early night before her wedding, she escaped to her own chamber.

By the light of the solitary candle, she gazed out of the rain-spattered window. Her marriage to a total stranger was arranged for tomorrow morning. By midday, she would be completely in his power. The feeling that she had made a terrible, irreparable mistake rose quickly, overwhelming her until she could stand it no longer.

With a gasp, she swung away from the window, seized her pillows, and pushed them under the covers so that they might resemble her sleeping person should her sisters give it a cursory glance. It was the best she could do. In any case, surely she would be home by midnight.

She grabbed her coat and candle, then crept downstairs.

*

THE WEATHER WAS not kind, and she arrived at Gosmere Hall two hours later, soaked to the skin. But at least she had finally made her goal. She raised the knocker on the front door and rapped. Only then did she glance upward at the big, forbidding house. No wonder Stephen thought it was haunted. A drop of rain splashed into her eye just as the front door opened.

Blinking rapidly, she saw an elderly footman gazing at her in consternation. She must look like a drowned rat and very little like the lady who would—probably—be his mistress by tomorrow.

“Mr. Halland, if you please,” she said with as much confidence as she could muster. Then, as the man looked as if he was about to send her about her business, or at least to the back door, she added, “He will want to see me.”

Apparently, this meant something to the servant who grudgingly opened the door wider to let her enter. He pointed at the mat inside the door, and she obediently wiped her soaked, muddy boots and extinguished the lantern before setting it down.

“Follow me,” he said sternly.

Deborah looked neither left nor right. She did not care about the house that was to be her home. She only wanted to see the man who was to be her husband. Wet, cold, and exhausted, she stumbled up a wide staircase and squelched after the servant to a closed door, which he knocked perfunctorily before opening.

Deborah saw Christopher at once. He sprawled in his shirt sleeves at one end of a large dining table, his long fingers curled around a brandy glass while he stared broodingly into it, as if it held the answers to all life’s questions.

“This young person, sir,” the servant announced. “She believes you are expecting her.”

Mr. Halland’s head snapped up. He frowned in irritation, presumably at the disturbance. And then, seeing her, his lips parted in shock, and he jumped to his feet.

“Good God! Ma’am, you are soaked, come here by the fire. Eric, go away, and not a word, do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” said the footman and departed, closing the door behind him.

By then, Christopher had reached her and taken her hand, drawing her toward the fire. She offered no resistance, though she ignored the chair he set for her and instead sank to her knees before the hearth.

His boots moved away. She heard the slosh of liquid, and his boots reappeared. He crouched down, thrusting a glass into her hand. But she was far too agitated to drink anything. She set it down on the hearth.

“What is it?” he asked urgently. “What has happened?”

“Nothing,” she managed. “I just had to see you. I had to be sure.”

A frown pulled at his brow. “About marrying me?”

She nodded.

A rueful smile flickered on his lips. “I’m afraid you find me at a disadvantage. I am hardly dressed to receive visitors.”

Laughter caught in her throat. “*You* are at a disadvantage?” she countered, indicating her soaked state.

“Well, at least I had the fire lit, though the servants think I’m either mad or extravagant at the height of summer. Actually, the room’s dashed gloomy without a fire. Do you want to see the house?”

She shook her head, searching his face instead.

He bore it in silence for a little. “You are having second thoughts.”

She shivered. “I was glad to receive your note. Truly. Only then...it was *real*. And the reality is, we are strangers.”

“And you place yourself in my power tomorrow.”

“Exactly,” she said, relieved by his quick understanding. “We have an agreement, and I trusted you yesterday, only now I can’t remember why.”

“You have no reason to trust me,” he acknowledged.

“Nor, you, me,” she said, “And coming here like this... can’t have endeared me to you.”

His smile was unexpectedly warm. “On the contrary.”

Her eyes fell, not in fear or even embarrassment but because she was suddenly overwhelmed by the intimacy of the moment, kneeling before a fire with him crouched close beside her, supremely casual in only his shirt and pantaloons. A little thrill of awareness passed through her, urging her into a slightly desperate speech.

“You must think I am insane. Already ruined through no fault of my own, now I walk voluntarily into another impropriety. I can only imagine what

your servant thinks...”

“He can think what he likes, but if he speaks it, he will be out on his ear, and he knows it. All will be well tomorrow after we are married. If you still wish to be married.”

She gazed into the fire, trying to slow her breathing, and again he took her hand. Her gaze flew up to his.

“I hold you to nothing, Deborah,” he said quietly. “I understand your doubts. And God knows we are both taking a risk. Yours is undoubtedly greater.”

Her lips twisted. “Is it? You see me now as I am. I don’t always do as... as society expects. I don’t always realize it’s wrong until I’ve done it. I’m not sure you want that in a wife.”

His eyes flickered from her face and down her sodden person and then came to rest on their joined hands. A strange heat sparked somewhere in her stomach, warming her from the inside. She made the faintest jerk to be free of his light clasp of her hand, and then let it lie still. His touch did not frighten her. *He* did not frighten her.

He looked up, catching her searching gaze. “I want you to trust me. As for the rest, I like eccentric people. And I’m afraid you will need to, too, if you marry me.”

His eyes were humorous, inviting her to share the deprecating joke. A sense of ease, almost of wonder, crept over her.

He rose to his feet. “I’m going to order the carriage and take you home. Sleep. If you come to church tomorrow, I shall be glad. If you don’t, I’d like us still to be friends.”

Ten minutes later, she sat beside him in friendly darkness as his carriage bowled down the drive from Gosmere Hall.

“I’m sorry,” she offered. “I didn’t mean to drag you out.”

“I’m glad you came to me. And don’t worry. Neither Eric nor Danny on the coach will blab about this. You can still cry off with impunity.”

“I won’t,” she said.

In truth, she thought it far more likely after tonight that he would.



Chapter Four

THE ABSENCE OF a groomsman only struck Christopher when he rose on the morning of his wedding day. He supposed he could drag Hunter, the Gosmere Hall butler, into it, but he suspected Deborah's family might find that odd or even insulting. However, there had been no time to summon any of his particular friends from London, and the only family member he'd cared much for—Cousin Rupert—had fled the country after killing someone in a duel.

It would have to be Edmund Letchworth. Since the morning was still early, he donned riding clothes and rode over to Cogleton House.

Sir Edmund was discovered at breakfast with his mother and sister.

Christopher bowed politely to the ladies.

"Join us," Lady Letchworth invited regally. "And tell us what we can do for you so early in the morning?"

"I can't stop, thank you, ma'am. I've come for Sir Edmund."

"What?" Edmund asked, startled.

"I need you. But you have to hurry. Take the carriage to the village, and I'll meet you at the church at about a quarter before eleven."

"The church? Not like you, old fellow," Letchworth remarked. "And why do I have to take the carriage?"

"So, you don't smell of horse at my wedding. Bustle about!"

A teaspoon clattered as they all stared at him.

"But...but who the deuce are you marrying?" Letchworth demanded.

"Miss Shelby," he replied impatiently.

Letchworth leapt to his feet, his face whitening.

Christopher laughed. "Not *your* Miss Shelby! Deborah, the eldest sister."

"She is not even in Cheshire," Letchworth said.

"She has only recently arrived," Christopher replied diplomatically.

"Then, you knew her before?"

"No."

Letchworth gave a crooked smile. “You must have some *devastating* charm.”

“I haven’t charmed her in the slightest,” Christopher said with a twinge of regret. “Obviously, it is a marriage of convenience, but we believe it will answer very well.”

“For you,” Lady Letchworth said, frowning. “Infamous of you to marry the girl for such a reason. Does she *know* you only want access to your fortune?”

“Of course she does,” Christopher said impatiently.

“Perhaps she wants access to it, too,” drawled Letchworth’s sister Frederica, Mrs. Ireton. She was a pretty young matron who had adopted a fashionable ennui since her marriage a year ago.

“Who could blame her if she does?” Christopher retorted. “However, that is not her reason for marrying me, and I hope you will treat her with every kindness and respect. Hurry up, Letchworth, I need to go back to Gosmere and change.”

“Oh, stand still, man!” Lady Letchworth exclaimed as Christopher strode back toward the door. “Why all this urgency?”

“It’s the vicar. He’s a busy man and a stickler for punctuality.” He grinned, pausing only to be sure Letchworth followed him out of the room.

“Are you sure about this?” Letchworth demanded as they approached the staircase.

“Of course, I am.”

“Doesn’t she—Miss Shelby—find it...insulting?”

Actually, after last night’s bizarre but curiously touching visit, he wasn’t quite sure what she thought of it. “She’d find it more insulting if I pretended an affection I couldn’t possibly feel after a total of about half an hour spent in her company.”

“Halland, you can’t do this!” Letchworth said, even more appalled.

Christopher paused, scowling. “Look, if you want no part of it, say so now, and I’ll ask someone else instead. I thought of you because you at least have some connection to the family, but I daresay Copsley or Dr. Nairn would oblige me. With or without you, the marriage goes ahead as planned.”

“Don’t you think people might find it a bit rum? Such a speedy, hole-in-the-corner affair?”

“I don’t care if they do. It’s not them I’m marrying.”

“No, but it’s Deborah Shelby, they will all be looking at and gossiping about, speculating as to why she married you so quickly on so little acquaintance.”

He shrugged. “We all know *little acquaintance* is the only way she could be induced to marry me. Yes or no, Letchworth?”

Letchworth sighed. “Yes, I suppose.”

“Then, hurry,” Christopher said, shoving him toward the upward stairs. “A quarter before eleven!” With that, he rushed down the stairs, two and three at a time.

As he rode back to Gosmere, his head was full of plans for the school, and how quickly he could begin it. But more than once, Deborah intruded into his thoughts.

Perhaps he should not be doing this. Ruling out other possibilities for her. Providing comfort but not the happiness of love she might expect. She wasn’t the kind of girl, surely, to enjoy intrigues and furtive affairs. She was refreshingly different. Funny. Sweet. And honest, telling him about the scandal immediately, when she could easily have secured the ring first. And last night’s impulsive visit, looking like a half-drowned urchin, lost yet determined to discover if he was worth the risk.

No, neither of them were romantic fools. They were each taking practical steps toward their own goals, and Christopher had no last-minute regrets.

He wondered how soon Gates could get here. He had already summoned builders and spoken to his solicitor about setting up a separate trust for the school and inviting charitable donations, for his own fortune could not last forever on such a project.

*

DEBORAH, AMAZINGLY, HAD crept back into the house last night without her sortie being discovered. By morning, she cringed at her ill-judged visit to Gosmere and would not have been surprised to enter the church and discover it empty.

But in fact, as she stepped inside with her mother, her siblings trotting behind, the pews were remarkably full. She wondered if she had stumbled into some other service, for beside the Copsleys were other gentlefolk, and

several villagers sat behind.

But no, there, at the front of the church, talking to Mr. May, the vicar, and Sir Edmund Letchworth, was Christopher Halland.

She hadn't scared him off after all.

His head turned toward the newcomers, and a sudden beam of light through the high window seemed to blind her. She walked on, blinking rapidly, and then Christopher stood in front of her, tall, solid, and handsome in smart morning dress. Her heart thundered as he took her hand and led her to Mr. May.

In sudden panic, she looked over her shoulder to see her mother and the children taking their seats in the front pew. Lucy stood still beside Deborah. The vicar's voice drew her attention back, but his words seemed to float over her head. Christopher was removing her glove, holding her hand in his. Life and sense seemed to zing suddenly back. Her fingers curled convulsively around his and then loosened. But she could not look at him.

Mr. May was speaking to her. She responded, making her vows before God and man.

And then, they were man and wife.

*

CHRISTOPHER SEEMED QUITE content to breakfast at the inn. Sir Edmund joined them, though his family did not.

Neither did the Copsleys, although Mrs. Copsley embraced Deborah, murmuring, "If you need anything, anything at all, come to me."

"Thank you," Deborah said politely, appreciating the kindness while having little clue about the meaning.

Mrs. Briggs greeted them at the inn's front door with huge smiles, having played her part in bringing the happy couple together. They were shown into the private parlor and presented with an array of her best dishes.

"If you have your things packed and ready, we can take them up to the hall with us this afternoon," Christopher suggested as they neared the end.

"Very well."

"Anything else can be sent up later."

"Can we come this afternoon?" Stephen asked eagerly.

“Not this afternoon,” their mother said firmly.

“Tomorrow, if you wish?” Christopher offered. “Arrange it with Deborah, but you are welcome at any time.”

“Are you not going on a wedding trip?” Lucy asked in astonishment.

Christopher’s eyebrows flew up. “Do you know, I never thought of it? Do you care for such a thing, Deborah?”

Deborah, who had been longing to travel abroad for as long as she could remember, and who had walked into the princess’s house that fateful evening convinced it was about to happen at last, smiled and shook her head.

“Perhaps we can take a few weeks once everything is under way,” Christopher said carelessly.

“We shall see,” Deborah murmured.

*

UNTIL LAST NIGHT, Deborah had only ever seen Gosmere Hall from a distance, for without a horse or carriage, it was a long walk from the village. In her mind’s eye was a large, gloomy house shuttered and faceless. Blundering up there in the dark and the rain had done little to dispel the memory. And in daylight, her first glimpse of it through the trees seemed to confirm everything. However, as they grew closer, she saw that the shutters had been thrown open, that apart from a tangle of ivy, it was not really overgrown. And yet the impression of darkness, of eeriness remained, no doubt the product of her imagination.

“The building is old,” Christopher said apologetically. “But it is in decent repair. However, we’ll probably want to make changes to the inside. Ask Mrs. Dawson to help find tradesmen to do whatever you want to the place.”

“Who is Mrs. Dawson?”

“The housekeeper. She and Hunter, the butler, have been there since before my maternal grandfather died. They’ve kept the place going for years, maintaining a handful of rooms for unexpected visits by my grandfather—Hawfield, I mean—or me. But we’ll need more servants to open the place up completely. Gardeners, too, probably.” He glanced at her with a quick smile. “Am I overwhelming you?”

“I’m not used to running a large establishment.”

“But you’ll find your way,” he said comfortably. “And it’s not so very large. I like the house. I think we’ll be comfortable here.”

We. He was her husband, her family, now. But as the carriage rumbled up the sweeping drive to the front of the house, she couldn’t imagine ever being comfortable in the big, rambling hall.

Christopher jumped down unaided and let down the carriage steps for her. As he handed her down, she saw the meager staff had assembled like a guard of honor down each side of the steps to the portico. At the front stood a tall, thin, balding man who held his head tilted slightly, perhaps to look down at the rest of the world more easily. And a rigid, plump woman with thin lips and a disapproving expression. Her heart sank.

“This is Hunter and Mrs. Dawson,” Christopher said casually, and the pair bowed and curtsied, respectively. “Mrs. Halland is now your mistress. Have them take up the bags, Hunter.”

Hunter bowed submissively, but his darting glance was not friendly. As they walked up the steps to the front door, Deborah saw a cook, two maids, and last night’s footman, Eric, in faded, ill-fitting livery. There were also a couple of rougher looking men who might have been gardeners or grooms or the coachman from last night whom she had only seen in darkness. She would no doubt discover in time. For now, Christopher did not trouble to introduce them, so she merely nodded to them on the way past.

The entrance hall was huge, dark, and gloomy, despite large, tall windows on all sides, even stretching up the marble staircase.

“It needs work,” Christopher allowed. “Only one room on this floor is cleaned as a reception room for unexpected callers. Up on the next floor,” he added, ushering her toward the staircase, “it is *slightly* more comfortable.”

Deborah hoped so. However, comfort was not the word she would have used for the massive formal dining room or the ornate yet faded drawing room on the other side of the gallery. They were clean, but still gloomy and smelled musty.

Increasingly oppressed, she followed him upstairs to the bedchambers.

“You can explore everything at your leisure and decide what to do with each room,” he said as though sensing her feelings. “These apartments are traditionally the mistress’s, so they’ve been hastily cleaned and aired for you. But again, you must feel free to choose any rooms you like.”

The rooms were large and well-proportioned. Although inevitably

gloomy, someone had blessedly left the windows open, and the musty smell was minimal. A generous sitting room, a small antechamber, and a large bedchamber made up the suite, which must have covered as much area as the Shelbys' entire house.

"My room is right at the other end of the house. I'll show you just so you know where to find me!"

Obediently, she accompanied him along the passage, which, again, should surely have been lighter and brighter than it was on such a sunny day.

"These were my grandfather's rooms," he said, throwing open the first door they came to, some distance after her own. She had a glimpse of dark opulence and several doors within before she hurried after Christopher.

His bedchamber was considerably less grand, a large, single room with clothes, books, and papers strewn all over it.

"Sorry," he said, closing the door again. "Not a tidy person!"

"Don't you have a valet?"

"No, though perhaps I should acquire one." He frowned suddenly. "You don't have a maid either, do you? We had better change that, though I suppose you could use the chambermaid for now. There is plenty of room in the servants' quarters." He pointed to the attic above. "So, we can take on as many servants as we see fit."

"Do you really want to open up the whole house?" she asked, daunted. "It will be a huge undertaking. Especially if you are involved with the school at the same time. To say nothing of your parliamentary duties."

"We could begin a little at a time. We can take proper stock tomorrow and set a few things in motion. For today, I think we should just get used to the place. I'll leave you to unpack and settle into your rooms. And then... Would you like tea in the garden?"

"Oh, yes, please," she said fervently, desperate to get out into fresher air.

It didn't take her long to hang her few gowns and outer garments in the wardrobe and her underclothes in the drawers. Her hairbrush, pins, and ribbons found a place, as did her toothbrush and powder. In a clean but streaky mirror, her new ring glinted on her finger—gold and diamonds, finer than anything she had ever possessed, binding her to the man who owned all this.

Or at least, she hoped he did. Otherwise, Lord Hawfield, the trustee, would come back and turn them both out. A breath of slightly hysterical

laughter caught at her throat. Hastily, she crossed to the door and went downstairs in search of Christopher, the terrace, and tea.

The terrace was reached through a large, grubby room on the first floor, suddenly made bright by throwing open the French windows. Christopher grinned at her delight and showed the chairs and table set up outside. The servants brought tea and an array of scones and pastries.

Deborah poured tea for them both and finally relaxed enough to look about her. The terrace overlooked a formal garden sloping down to woods and fields. A natural lake glinted on the right.

“It *is* pretty,” she said in surprise. “Did you come here as a child?”

“Occasionally. But my grandfather lived mostly in London. I came more after he died, knowing it was mine or would be one day. And yet, I had no say in the running of the estate or the use of the house. And as you see, it is not exactly welcoming.”

She glanced back through the dingy French windows. Sunlight beamed in on cobwebs and dust. Setting down her cup, she rose and touched the outside glass of the door. “No wonder the place is dark. The windows are filthy. Christopher, we will need an *army* of servants.”

“I know. Talk to Hunter and Mrs. Dawson.”

She nodded, gazing curiously into the room. The furniture was masked in Halland covers, and the floor was dirty, but beyond the cobwebs, the ceiling moldings and the cornices were pretty. “This could be a beautiful room, a kind of summer drawing room.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea. Will that be your first project?”

“If you like the idea.” She sat down again and thoughtfully drank her tea. “If your aim is entertainment, I think we need to brighten up the formal rooms, too. And the entrance hall, while magnificent, is not welcoming either. It will,” she reflected, “be a massive upheaval.”

“Will you mind?”

“No, I like to be busy. But it will not immediately be a restful home for you.”

He blinked as though he barely understood the words. Then his face softened. “You are very sweet, you know.”

She flushed. “I’ve no idea why you would think so.”

“You are truly concerned for my comfort when I have just married you and plunged you immediately into a large project of work.”

“Is that not the normal concern of a wife?”

“You are not exactly a normal wife.”

“I shall endeavor to be convenient.”

“As shall I, but you may need to kick me from time to time. I am obsessive by nature and too used to pleasing only myself.”

“And yet you will spend thousands creating and maintaining a school for the poor.”

“I’m a politician,” he said cynically. “Nothing is done without an element of personal ambition.”

After tea, they wandered through the garden and, without actually meaning to, ended by walking to the lake.

“There used to be swans here when my grandfather was young,” Christopher said. “Long gone by the time I remember it. I do remember swimming, though, and fishing with Rupert and Dudley.”

“Your brothers?”

“Cousins. We all came with my grandfather one summer. I think it must have been shortly after their father died. Their father and mine were brothers, and Dudley had just become Hawfield’s heir, with the title of Lord Bilston.”

“And Rupert?”

“Ah, well, Rupert is the skeleton in our cupboard. He killed a man in a duel and had to flee the country. Which is a pity—except, of course, that it keeps me from being held up as the black sheep of the family.”

“You have a...*colorful* family,” she observed.

He shrugged. “Rupert was the best of them, in my opinion. Which probably tells you all you need to know. I think I prefer your family.”

“You won’t once they have run wild here a few times.”

He laughed. “I like that they’re lively.” He shrugged. “I was alone a good deal after my sister died.”

She glanced at him in quick surprise, the oddest idea striking her, that he might ever have been lonely. “What happened to her?”

“The doctors were not sure. One of those sudden, childhood ailments that could not be cured. They would not let me see her in case I caught it, too.”

“You must have missed her.”

“Yes.” But he didn’t linger to discuss it, merely offered her his arm for the walk back to the house.

It felt very strange, this casual intimacy, but then everything about her life

was strange now—even summoning a chambermaid to help her change for dinner. The girl’s name was Anne, she was only eighteen years old and came from the village, but she seemed delighted to help her new mistress dress, even offered to brush and pin her hair, which she did surprisingly well.

She smiled quite gleefully at Deborah’s reflection in the glass and then scowled. “The glass is steaky. Sorry, ma’am. I’ll clean it again while you’re at dinner.”

“Don’t worry. I realize you have all been very busy with not enough staff to do everything.”

“Thank you, ma’am!” She curtsied and stood back to let Deborah rise.

Although it was still light, the sun had moved across the sky, and the drawing room was even gloomier than before. Christopher had not yet come down, so she walked over to the window and lifted the casement. While the inside was clean, the outside was too dirty for much light to penetrate. She breathed in the fresher air with enjoyment, which is how Christopher found her.

“The whole house needs aired,” she observed.

“I suppose it doesn’t need to smell like a mausoleum. In fact, I’d rather it didn’t. A glass of sherry?”

It was a pleasant evening, for Christopher turned out to be very agreeable company. To her surprise, he actually seemed interested in her opinion on more than the superficialities of art and music, and she soon found herself discussing politics, history, the peace in Europe, and the conditions of the poor, all with a rather beguiling mix of humor and passion on his part.

When dinner was announced, they took their conversation to the dining room, where places had been set at opposite ends of the large table. Christopher immediately moved his place beside her, obliging the footman to place the dishes in a more sensible place.

And afterward, he did not bother with the tradition of sitting over his wine, but picked it up and accompanied her to the drawing room.

The candles had been lit, and the darkness of the place no longer seemed so oppressive. He told her about a few amusing incidents at the House of Commons and asked about her duties with the princess.

“You miss her,” he observed at last.

She considered. “Perhaps. Life was never dull around her. She is excessively kind and good-natured. But mostly, I pitied her.” She stopped,

biting her lip before she said too much.

“Because her husband was relentlessly nasty?”

She nodded, gazing out of the window to avoid looking at him.

She felt his movement within the room, and then he took her hand, and she jumped, her gaze flying to his face.

He crouched in front of her chair, a rueful half-smile lurking on his lips. “Theirs was a marriage of *inconvenience*. There is no reason why ours should be so.”

“Of course not,” she said nervously. Close up, his intense eyes were overwhelmingly attractive. As was the lean, even bone structure of his face, the shape of his generous, sensual mouth. Without realizing it, she thought, his fingertips idly rubbed the skin at the base of her thumb, causing an odd commotion in her body.

“I am content with my marriage,” he said gently. “I hope you will grow to be so.”

She swallowed. “I have no complaints, sir. You have been most kind.”

A frown tugged at his brows and vanished. “Have I?”

She smiled uncertainly, and his fingertips stilled on her hand. His lips quirked, then he raised her hand and dropped a light kiss, not on her fingers, but by chance on the precise spot sensitized by his careless caress. Her breath caught, but he had already released her and straightened.

“Do you know, I believe I shall retire early,” he said. “Do you wish to sit on, or shall I blow out the candles?”

She all but leapt to her feet, having no desire whatever to linger in the room alone.

He presented her with a lit candle, and they walked along the gallery to the staircase together. Somewhere, the ease and companionship of a growing friendship remained. But it was overlaid now with this strange, new awareness, not just of his handsome face, but of his tall, masculine body and the loose yet graceful way he moved. It kept her silent until they reached the door of her apartment when it came to her with a jolt that this was her wedding night.

He had said he would not force his attentions on her, that this was a marriage of mere convenience. But nothing that had happened between them that day could have led him to believe a husband’s attentions would be *unwelcome*. They were his right and her duty, as her mother had sought to

explain in a muddled, only half-understood conversation the previous evening—a discussion that both she and Mrs. Shelby had been delighted to end.

Now, facing him before her bedchamber door, she felt curiously agonized. Panicked and yet excited, her stomach in turmoil, her skin tingling.

He held out his hand compellingly, and she placed hers on it, praying it did not tremble. Would it be so very bad to give herself to this man? He was kind and gentle, and at this moment, oddly thrilling. Time stretched out between them. She was afraid to breathe.

His lips quirked into a faint, rueful smile. He bent and kissed her fingers. “Good night, Mrs. Halland. I hope you sleep well.”

She swallowed. “I hope you do, too. Goodnight.”

Releasing her hand, he reached across and pushed open her door. She could smell his hair, his skin, clean and masculine, like fresh tree bark and cut grass. And then he straightened, smiled, and sauntered away down the passage toward his own, distant chamber.

She stumbled inside, closed the door, and leaned her back against it. *What on earth just happened?*

Nothing, she realized. Nothing at all.



Chapter Five

DEBORAH WOKE EARLY after a long, yet vaguely disturbed sleep. Perhaps it was dreams inspired by the strangeness of the house, but she had a vague recollection of strange sounds, creaks and whispers, and ominous shadows against the partially open window.

In the light of morning, unease faded into a sense of welcome to the new day, her new life, her new husband. For yesterday, she had learned that they could more than tolerate each other. They could be friends. And this great, gloomy house could be home.

She washed in the cold water left from last night and dressed in her oldest morning gown, fastening it as best she could before hastily brushing and pinning up her hair. Then, she sallied forth to explore.

She decided to begin on the first floor, where she walked into the drawing room and threw open all the windows, tops and bottoms. A fresh breeze greeted her, and she breathed in with relief. Immediately, she went to repeat the process in the dining room. Here, she found Mrs. Dawson directing the maid to clean the floor.

They both stared at her, disconcerted.

“Good morning,” Deborah said quietly and walked past them.

“Breakfast will be served in the parlor,” Mrs. Dawson said, “but I’m afraid it is not yet ready.”

“No matter. I am in no hurry to eat.” Deborah undid the catch and opened the first window before walking on to the next.

“Ma’am, the dust will come in and dirty the floor she is trying to clean,” Mrs. Dawson said patiently, as though speaking to a child.

“Then she may do it later. I cannot dine another night in such a stale room.”

Mrs. Dawson bridled. “Forgive me, ma’am, if all is not yet exactly as you like.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You have been running this house with no

staff. I would like to see you and Hunter after breakfast, let us say at nine of the clock. Here will be fine.”

Mrs. Dawson waved the maid away imperiously, and the girl vanished with her bucket and brush. “Nine of the clock is our busiest time.”

“The house cannot run now on its old routines,” Deborah said patiently. “You and I have much to discuss. Please tell Hunter, and I will see you at nine.”

She half-expected to be contradicted again, or at least to receive a killing look, but the housekeeper looked so despairing that Deborah almost turned back. However, Mrs. Dawson strode out of the room and downstairs as though in high dudgeon.

Deborah sighed, for she did not like confrontations and did not wish to begin one with a woman she needed as an ally. However, thrusting the worry aside until later, she walked along the gallery, throwing open doors to various connecting rooms. Most of the furniture was in Halland covers. She took off a few to investigate and found most of it in decent condition, if somewhat old-fashioned.

Turning the corner to a less opulent passage, she found another sitting room, a study and then, at the next corner, she threw open a door and smiled.

It was a large, irregular-shaped room, lined with books from floor to ceiling. A glass cabinet held what looked like Egyptian curios. An armchair, two sofas, and two desks were scattered about the room. Despite the inevitable mustiness, it felt at last, like home. She walked around the windows, opening them to the fresh air, and looked about with glee.

“There you are,” Christopher said, sometime later, strolling into the room to find her halfway up a step ladder, examining the books.

“I love this room,” she said enthusiastically. “Can we clean it and decorate it and make it ours?”

He blinked. “It *is* ours, but of course we can. I’m going to breakfast if you’d like to join me.”

She slid down two steps of the ladder in her hurry, and he strode forward to catch her, lifting her to the ground by her waist.

She flushed at the contact, although he seemed not to notice.

“Take care,” he said, releasing her and ushering her to the door.

Over breakfast, she said, “All the rooms along the gallery I think can be made beautiful again with a thorough airing and beating and a coat of paint.

And once the windows are clean. They will be perfect for entertaining—salons for music and poetry, cards and politicking. If we work on those, and the room that leads to the terrace...”

“And the library,” he interpolated.

She smiled. “And the library. Then, I think we shall have the space to entertain within a week or two. If we can raise the staff, of course.”

“We might need some guest bedrooms,” he said. “Oh, and Andrew Gates, my partner in the school scheme, is coming over later today, so he will need one of those bedchambers, at least until the dower house is habitable.”

“Then I hope Mrs. Dawson has access to servants right away. We’re discussing it after breakfast. With Hunter, too.”

He smiled faintly. “I did not realize you were quite so efficient.”

“I might not be. At the moment, all I have is ideas.”

Accordingly, at nine o’clock, she walked into the dining room, armed with a pen and ink, and her old notebook in which she had written the few tasks of her days with the princess.

To her surprise, Mrs. Dawson and Hunter were already there, standing rigidly upright just inside the door.

“Oh,” Deborah said, “thank you for being so prompt. Please, sit down.”

“Sit down, ma’am?” Hunter repeated, scandalized at the very idea.

“Yes, we have much to discuss, and it’s uncomfortable for me to strain my neck upward all the time.”

Exchanging worried glances, the two sat opposite her at the very edges of their seats.

“Later, I’d like you to show me where everything is—linen stores, china, and glass, things like that—and I had better speak to the cook. But first, we need to discuss staff. How many do you need to run the house efficiently?”

Again, they exchanged puzzled looks. Then Mrs. Dawson said carefully, “You are not dismissing us?”

Deborah blinked. “Dismissing you? That would be insanity when I know nothing about the house.” She frowned suddenly. “Unless you refuse to help me, in which case I shall count that as resignation.”

“No, no,” Hunter said earnestly. “We would love to help you.”

“It was just you looked so unhappy with everything,” Mrs. Dawson said in a rush, “we were sure you would want to bring in your own people.”

Deborah frowned. “My own people?”

“You lived in London with the Princess of Wales.”

Deborah almost laughed. “Well, that is a quite different matter,” she said hastily. “Mr. Halland wishes to live here and entertain here, so we need an army of servants to clean. How quickly can you interview and bring in more staff?”

“For cleaning? There will be several from the village and the farms that can begin such work straight away. If you want experienced domestic servants, then that will take a little longer.”

“Well, let us do both. And let it be known that the locals will be considered for permanent positions if we like their work. Does that seem a good idea?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good. Now, about cleaning the outside of the windows...”

She parted from them half an hour later to continue her explorations and decide on the first guest bedchambers to be made ready. There were several substantial suites of rooms, including the one next to hers, but they also seemed to need the most work. In any case, since the first few visitors were likely to be Mr. Gates, an unmarried teacher, and various men of business, it made more sense to use less opulent chambers like the one Christopher was inhabiting.

By luncheon, two men were up tall ladders with buckets, cleaning the outsides of the hall windows. Six local women—and two of their small children—were being directed to inside cleaning duties.

Christopher strode through the open front door as she ran down the staircase to fetch a clean bucket.

She stopped to throw a smile at him. “How is the school?”

“Still looking like the neglected dower house it was. Do you want to come and see it after luncheon? Or are you too busy here?”

“No, I’d love to see it. I wonder if Cook has thought about luncheon?”

It appeared she had not only thought of it but prepared it already, for the expanded staff as well as for Deborah and Christopher.

They were just sitting down at the terrace table when the sounds of approaching children’s voices distracted them. Two small village children appeared along the garden path, leading Stephen and Lizzie, and behind them came Deborah’s mother and the rest of her siblings.

Deborah sprang to her feet, darting toward them. “Goodness, did you

walk over?”

“We did,” her mother said breathlessly. “And I am exhausted!”

“Oh dear, sit here in the shade, Mama...”

Christopher, having murmured a word in the ear of the servant who had just brought lemonade and a plate of sandwiches, strolled forward to welcome everyone with casual geniality.

“Deb, have you been cleaning?” Lucy demanded, no doubt seeing the dirt on her gown and smuts on her face.

“I’m afraid so,” Deborah replied with a quick smile. “There is a beautiful library here, and there is more than enough for everyone else to do.”

“It is a positive hive of activity,” her mother observed, sinking into the chair while Deborah fanned her with her bonnet.

“The day after your wedding?” Lucy said with clear disapproval.

“It’s better than living in a great, dirty mausoleum for much longer,” Christopher said easily, “though to be sure, it’s a lot of upheaval. Deborah has taken the bull by the horns! We have large plans.”

One of the “new” women appeared with more sandwiches, some cherries, and apples, then shooed the tiny children back toward the house. At the last moment, Christopher swiped the sandwich plate off the table and held it in front of them. The children grinned and took one each.

“Thank you, sir,” the woman murmured with a smile.

Christopher merely returned the plate to the table without fuss. But his casual kindness warmed Deborah’s heart.

Another two chairs were brought out, while the children sat on the low wall around the terrace or wandered around, asking questions.

“Is it haunted?” Stephen asked Deborah, staring up the house.

“Only by cobwebs,” Deborah said lightly, although she couldn’t help remembering her troubled dreams.

“It is huge,” Lucy observed. “Won’t you feel odd, just the two of you rattling about here?”

“Oh, it will soon fill up with children,” their mother said comfortably, causing Deborah to flush to the roots of her hair.

“We mean to entertain friends a good deal,” Christopher said smoothly.

Lucy laughed. “*Deborah?* She doesn’t like crowds of people, avoids them like the plague.”

“Well, they don’t all need to come at once,” Christopher murmured. “A

honey-cake, Miss Lucy?”

The family stayed for a couple of hours, exploring the garden and the house, and asking Deborah about their plans.

In the end, Lucy said, “It will be very grand, Deb.” There was just a hint of envy in her voice.

“Not really. I just want it to be comfortable.”

Christopher sent them home in the carriage, with Giles sitting proudly up beside the coachman. After waving them off, Deborah accompanied her husband on a walk to the dower house on the other side of the woods.

Although built on a smaller scale than Gosmere Hall, it was still a good-sized house.

“There should be room for at least ten boys, a couple of classrooms, library, and dining room, private rooms for Gates and another teacher,” Christopher said enthusiastically. “What do you think?”

“I think that would work. And you could build onto it later if you wished.”

They walked back, enthusiastically discussing what staff might be necessary to care for ten lively youths, and reached the house just in time to welcome Mr. Gates, Christopher’s partner in the venture.

“Mrs. Halland,” he greeted her with a bow and a frown. He was a gentlemanly looking man, perhaps in his forties, of medium height and serious expression. “I do hope my visit is acceptable. I confess I was surprised by Halland’s invitation so soon after your wedding, and I assure you I shall be more than happy at the village inn.”

“Nonsense,” Deborah said. “You are most welcome! I know you have much to discuss.”

Half an hour later, when she returned to cleaning the library, it struck her that she coped much better with strangers as a hostess rather than a visitor, or even as the daughter of the house. It was an interesting discovery that gave her fresh hope.

*

AFTER A DAY and a half spent with the front door and the windows wide open, the entrance hall smelled fresh and clean. The large, cathedral-like windows

now gleamed outside and in. The downstairs reception room, the drawing room, and the dining room had all been thoroughly aired, and the soft furnishings taken outside and beaten until the mustiness of disuse had vanished. With the windows cleaned, they were also brighter and much less daunting.

The cleaning staff had embarked on the terrace room and the salons, and a painter was expected that afternoon to talk to her about the library.

Christopher and Mr. Gates were at the dower house with builders and carpenters. And Deborah had just approved Mrs. Dawson's choice of two maids, and Hunter's of a second footman and a groom.

She was climbing the staircase to return to the library when two men walked through the open front door. Since the servants were all busy elsewhere, she hurried back down.

"Can I help you, sir?" she inquired, for her visitors were clearly gentlemen. She addressed the elder, a tall, thin man with a shock of white hair and an expression of baffled fury.

"I very much doubt it," the old gentleman snapped. "Since I've no idea who you are."

"I'm Mrs. Halland, sir. Mrs. Christopher Halland." It still sounded odd on her lips.

The old gentleman's eyes seemed to spit. He looked her up and down from her hair escaping its pins to the hem of her dusty gown. The blatant rudeness chilled her.

"Is that what you think?" he uttered. His companion was staring at her, too,—quite hard.

"It is, sir, what I know," she replied, although her mind was wondering exactly what he meant.

His lips curled, and she braced herself for whatever insult was coming next, but fortunately, Hunter's footsteps were heard hurrying across the hall from the servants' quarters, and her discourteous caller was distracted.

However, her hopes that she could leave Hunter to deal with him were quickly dashed, for he turned at once to the butler, saying familiarly, "Ah, Hunter. See to packing this...*female's* bags and show her out if you will. Make sure she takes nothing that belongs to the estate. And then send for my grandson."

The knowledge hit her with a huge flush of anger. *Lord Hawfield.*

“Steady on, Grandpapa,” the younger man said uneasily.

Both his grandfather and Deborah ignored him, gazing instead at Hunter, whose face remained expressionless, though there was a hint of panic behind his eyes.

“You may ignore his lordship’s jest, Hunter,” Deborah said, willing her voice not to shake. “But certainly, please send for Mr. Halland.”



Chapter Six

SHE HAD NO idea if Hunter would obey her, and she could not afford the indignity of waiting around to see. As if using someone else's voice, she added, "His lordship may wait in the drawing room if he chooses. Or if he does not care to accept my hospitality, he may wait in the reception room."

The old man's eyes showed a tendency to pop with fury, especially when Hunter bowed to her and said, "Yes, madam." By then, she had turned her back on her visitors and was forcing herself to walk sedately to the staircase. She hoped the trembling of her legs would not betray her.

"You are more generous than I," Christopher's voice drawled, and she spun around to see him leaning against the still-open front door. In his shirt-sleeves, he looked rather delightfully ruffled and flushed, as though he had run all the way from the dower house when he'd seen his grandfather's carriage approach. "I'd tell him to wait at the inn. What the devil do you mean turning up in my house and insulting my wife? If you weren't my grandfather, I'd throw you out on your ear."

He walked across the hall, as though he were about to do just that.

"You may go, Hunter," Christopher said. "Grandfather, if you can keep a civil tongue in your head, we can go up to the drawing room. Otherwise, you might as well go."

"You have no idea what you have done!" Lord Hawfield burst out. "But by all means, let us go upstairs. There is no reason the servants should hear your folly."

Christopher did not reply, merely strode past them with quick, angry steps, his scowl black. Deborah carried on upstairs, meaning to go to the library and continue with the tasks she had set herself, leaving Christopher to deal privately with his family. Her presence, clearly, would only exacerbate matters.

But a moment later, Christopher caught up with her and placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry about this. I won't have you bullied in your own

home.”

They had reached the landing, and he drew her toward the gallery and the drawing room. She made a quick, instinctive move to be free, but he held on.

“No, we do it now,” he said, “or it will just rumble on. You are my wife, the mistress of Gosmere Hall.”

“Are you sure?”

He blinked down at her, his frown deepening impossibly. “Of course, I am.”

Deborah had the deepest dislike of confrontations and angry voices. Together with her feeling that this was Christopher’s family business and nothing to do with her, this situation was enough to make her bolt to the other side of the house.

However, his hand covered hers on his arm, giving it a gentle little squeeze, and this gentleness, despite the fury in his face, distracted her so much that she found herself in the drawing room.

“Shall I ring for tea?” she asked nervously, as Lord Hawfield strode in, the younger man on his heels.

“Not yet,” Christopher said, retaining her hand. “We don’t know yet that my grandfather is staying. Allow me to make formal introductions. My grandfather, Lord Hawfield, and his heir, my cousin Dudley, Lord Bilston. Gentlemen, I am happy to present my wife, Deborah.”

“Ma’am,” Dudley said with a short bow.

“Let’s stop the pretense,” Hawfield snapped. “We all know why you married her. I suppose you think I should be grateful it wasn’t the kitchen maid. Or is it?”

“That was said in anger, and I believe it was the milkmaid I threatened you with. My wife is a different case altogether—a gentlewoman as all but a fool could see at once.”

“It makes no difference who she is,” Hawfield roared, causing Deborah’s whole body to jump. “I’ll have the damned marriage annulled, and don’t think I won’t!”

Christopher, who probably felt the trembling of her body, was distracted enough to walk with her to a chair where she sank down, wishing it would fold over her. Since it wouldn’t, she held herself rigid, forcing her hands to stillness when they tried to reach up to her ears to shut out the anger.

“No, you won’t,” Christopher said with unexpected calmness. “The

marriage was legal in every sense. To be honest, sir, I find it rather distasteful that you are so eager to hold on to control of my property. But I have already spoken to the solicitors concerned, and the truth is, you can't. Gosmere Hall and the estate is mine. You can make yourself a laughing stock raging against it if you like, but it will do you no good and change nothing. Would you like tea?"

"Tea? *Tea*?" Lord Hawfield was turning puce.

"Now, now, Grandpapa, calm yourself," Lord Bilston said uneasily. "Chris, don't."

"Why, what's wrong with tea?" Christopher asked provokingly. "You can have brandy if you prefer. It's rather good."

"Oh, the devil!" Hawfield exploded. "What is the matter with you? What do you imagine you're doing? Do you think the girl married you for love? For belief in your ridiculous charity and the hope you'll be Prime Minister one day? Have you no idea who or what she is?"

"Be careful, Grandfather," Christopher warned.

"Look at her!" Hawfield stabbed a finger in her direction. "Is that ill-groomed creature in the grubby dress really to be the lady of Gosmere Hall? Your political hostess to support your career? You've married a ruined trollop, you imbecile, and the world knows it! Don't you know she was in the household of the Princess of Wales? Ramshackle woman, if ever there was one, but even for *her* household, it was a new low to remain in her house when she had gone, gobbling up everything she left behind and turning the place into an open brothel..."

"Enough," Christopher said. He spoke quietly and yet with a peculiar intensity that cut through his grandfather's loudness like a knife. At the same time, his hand gripped Deborah's stricken shoulder, comforting, supporting. "If you choose to get your information from salacious scandal rags, there is no point in even talking to you. You will, simply, apologize to my wife or leave. Now."

Hawfield's gaze crashed into Christopher's. "Don't you care? She has twisted you—"

"My wife has been completely honest with me from the moment we met," Christopher said calmly. "For one thing, exactly how much *twisting* do you imagine can be done on the basis of half an hour's public conversation? We married for mutual convenience and from mutual respect."

“Respect that neither of you has earned!” Hawfield interrupted.

“Goodbye, sir,” Christopher said.

The old man looked baffled. Deborah guessed this was not the way their quarrels usually went.

“Well, well,” he said at last. His gaze lowered to the floor, then lifted to Deborah’s face. “I am a bluntly-spoken man. You must forgive any rudeness.”

“And insult,” Christopher added.

Hawfield smiled thinly. “As you say. My care is only for my grandson’s wellbeing and maintaining his property as I was entrusted to do.”

Christopher moved away from her, and she was conscious of a surge of panic, but he only pulled the bell, and Deborah swallowed, trying to gather herself back together.

“Please sit down,” she managed.

Her visitors sat, both gazing around the room as though trying to work out what was different about it.

Ellen, the new maid, stuck her head around the door.

“Tea, if you please,” Deborah said. “And ask Mrs. Dawson to have bedchambers made ready for their lordships.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The maid curtseyed and vanished.

“Who the devil is she?” Hawfield demanded.

“We’re taking on new staff,” Deborah murmured.

Hawfield smiled, but only with his lips. “You’re not letting the grass grow under your feet, are you?”

“Indeed, no, there is much to do.”

Tea arrived speedily, much to Deborah’s relief. Dudley, Lord Bilston, began to make polite conversation about the weather to Deborah, and to Christopher about family news and mutual friends. It might have eased the tension had she not felt Hawfield’s gaze constantly upon her, as though waiting for her to betray some hint of depravity, or at least clumsiness.

Somehow, she got through the next half hour, but it was with considerable relief that she heard Christopher offering to show their guests to their rooms. The old man barely remembered to nod to her, but at least the younger bowed civilly as they left the room.

Deborah counted to ten, then fled to the library and picked up her duster.

Ten minutes later, she was still gazing at it as the door opened, and

Christopher came in. He was frowning, but she realized, with surprise, it was a frown of concern, not anger.

He searched her face. "What are you thinking?"

She swallowed. "That without you, I would have fled weeping like a scolded child."

His lips twisted. "Well, without me, you wouldn't have been in this situation in the first place. For what it's worth, without you, I would have had a flaming row with him and said things that would never have been forgiven. But I knew you would hate it, and in biting my tongue, I discovered a better way to deal with him. It seems we make a good partnership."

He took the duster from her numb fingers and dropped it on the nearby table. "I think you have done enough here for today. Come, let's walk down to the lake."

"Don't you want to return to Mr. Gates at the dower house?"

"No, I've left him arguing with the builders. I think we both need an escape."

He did not even trouble to fetch a coat, and she was only able to snatch her old bonnet from the stand on their way out.

The fresh air filled her lungs, the birds' songs soothed her mind back into proper thought.

"The word is spreading," she observed. "About the scandal. Is Lord Hawfield not right that it will do you harm?"

"Only if he insists on shouting his mouth off about it. If he accepts you, it could well help scotch the whole nonsense."

"I doubt he's going to do that," she said wryly.

"He's still in the house. His one hope was to scare or shame us into seeking an annulment. Otherwise, it's not in his power to part us."

"I can't understand why he is so upset. What is it to him whether you have Gosmere now or in two years?"

Christopher shrugged. "He doesn't like being thwarted, and to give him his due, he still thinks I am playing at politics and am a dilettante at heart."

"Are you?"

He flashed her a rather charming smile, half-deprecating, half-mischievous. "I'm serious about some things. Just not everything."

"And he thinks it should be all or nothing?"

"Perhaps. And I suppose he is concerned about family honor. But I won't

allow him to go on thinking you threaten that.”

“You can’t stop him thinking, Christopher.”

“No, but stopping him talking is a start. And from there, we’ll just have to change his mind.”

She gave him an unhappy smile. “Just? I can’t charm him, you know.”

“You underestimate yourself. No one expects you to flutter your eyelashes and flatter him. In fact, on the whole, I would rather you didn’t! Just be yourself. He is only an old bluster-bag.”

She couldn’t help laughing at the description, and he smiled back, taking her hand and swinging it upward, almost as though they were children playing together.

“I should have brought my coat for you to sit on,” he observed as they paused by the gently rippling lake.

She sank down onto the grass. “My dress is already filthy, as your grandfather noted.”

“You have other gowns,” he said comfortably, then glanced at her. “Though perhaps you need more?”

She shook her head. “Not unless you wish me to wear something different every day and every evening.”

“You must wear what you wish. All I mean is, if you would like anything, we can easily go to Chester or Liverpool. I like you, whatever you wear.”

It was said so casually, she glanced at him to see if she had misheard. He was gazing across the lake, his finger idly twisting a blade of grass. He looked perfectly content, his short dark hair, slightly ruffled, his open-necked shirt falling to one side, revealing the strong column of his throat and a broad collarbone. No one would have known he was an earl’s grandson. But it came to her that whatever he wore, she liked him, too.

He glanced round, catching her observation. “What? Do I look horribly disreputable?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No.”

“I’m sorry about my grandfather. I didn’t expect him to trouble us so soon. I thought he’d go back to London and fume in silence until his temper cooled.”

“It doesn’t matter. I shan’t go into a decline. It was just...unexpected, and I’m afraid I rather cower before anger and loud voices.”

“You seemed to be giving as good as you got by the time I arrived,” he

remarked. "In fact, on the whole, I'd have put you ahead and all with total civility. You most certainly did not cower."

"I did inside," she confessed.

"That's different," he said gently. "Everyone does that."

"You are trying to make me feel better."

"Trust me, you hide it so well, no one would guess."

"You did."

"I'm good at observing people, and you were right beside me with your hand on my arm. I could feel you trembling."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He took her hand, looking into her averted face. "For what?"

She could only shake her head again.

He didn't release her hand, but after a moment, he asked, "Did someone bully you or shout at you excessively when you were a child?"

"Oh, no," she said, shocked. Then she said carefully, "My father was a good man, though strict. I was always getting into mischief, and then so were Lucy and Giles, and as the eldest, I always got the blame for all of us, even when Lucy had learned to twist him around her little finger. I wasn't afraid of him, for he was kind beneath it, but my biggest dread became his anger and having to explain myself to his displeasure. I suppose the feeling has stayed with me, even when I thought I had outgrown it."

He squeezed her hand. "Well, we must stick to our pact. You will keep me from shouting at my grandfather, and I will stop him from shouting at you. Or at least protect you when he does. When I was a child, I used to imagine him in his nightcap, and he wasn't nearly so frightening. And when he roars, he's really just like a small child having a tantrum."

"You are irreverent," she observed.

"I admit it."

She smiled, and he smiled back, raising her hand to his lips and dropping a quick kiss on her fingers. He seemed about to release her hand, and for some reason, she was sorry. Then something unfathomable changed in his eyes, and he leaned closer. She thought she must have a dust-smut or some other blemish on her face and opened her mouth to ask.

The words died unspoken, for he came closer yet and gently kissed her lips.

Sheer surprise held her still. His lips were warm and firm, softly cradling

hers. She had never encountered anything like it, and yet the birds still sang, the breeze still stirred the fabric of her gown. His masculine scent mingled with those of the outdoors, and she seemed to be held spellbound in his kiss.

It can only have lasted a moment, but her eyes fluttered open when he drew back. She realized she was clinging to his hand and immediately released it in shock, jumping to her feet.

“I should go back,” she said breathlessly. “I have things to do before the decorator comes.”

He rose in a more leisurely way. “We can go via the dower house and collect Gates if you like.”

In sheer panic, she was about to leave him to do that while she simply ran back to the house alone. Except it came to her, she didn’t want to be alone. She wanted to be with him. Her husband, the man who had kissed her.

“Very well,” she murmured, walking beside him, aware of his easy stride, his every movement, the brush of her skirt against him.

Theirs was a marriage of convenience, she reminded herself, with each free to follow their own hearts. He must never know that her heart seemed to be following him.

*

CHRISTOPHER DIDN’T KNOW what had made him kiss her. Except that she had looked so pretty and wounded and brave, and that he’d wanted to do it since last night when they had parted at her bedchamber door. He could have ruined everything with that kiss, and certainly she had jumped up like a startled gazelle when it had ended. But she hadn’t stopped him. It hadn’t been a threatening kiss, merely a moment of impulse, to see...what?

If she could tolerate his advances? He had only won her on a promise of keeping his attention to himself and leaving her free to pursue her own interests. And if she did...if she took a shine to Dudley? Or Letchworth? Or Gates? Or any other man in the country? He’d expire of possessive jealousy.

Dog in the manger, he mocked himself. *She’s only your wife in name.*

But did she have to remain that way?

He began to smile, reining in his stride as he realized she was trotting to keep up with him. He liked her being there, so close. He liked her

partnership. He didn't want to fall in love with his wife.

Although it might be fun, a tempting voice began to whisper, to see if he could win her...

You'll ruin everything, idiot, he warned himself.

Or win everything?



Chapter Seven

AWARE THAT HIS wife was going to find dinner something of a trial, Christopher made sure to go early to the drawing room. He found only his cousin Dudley there with a glass of sherry.

“You’ve brightened this place up, old fellow, I’ll give you that,” Dudley observed.

“Deborah’s doing.” Christopher poured himself a glass of sherry from the decanter and turned to find Dudley looking uncomfortable.

“Sorry about all of this,” Dudley murmured. “But he would come right away, especially when he heard about the scandal surrounding the girl.”

“How *did* he hear about that?” Christopher inquired, perching on the arm of a chair.

“Might have been me, Chris. Sorry! Never entered my head it was the same girl, only then I had it from a friend that it was...”

“Having met her, you’ll realize it’s a parcel of nonsense.”

“Oh, of course, yes,” Dudley said hastily. “Charming lady, everything that’s proper. But you can’t pretend she married you for anything other than money and position.”

“Same reasons I married her. It may not be a grand love match, but I won’t have her slighted or insulted, and if either of you dares—”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, old fellow, I assure you.” Dudley threw up one hand to signify surrender. “And even the old gentleman knows that approach isn’t going to work.”

“Hmm.” Christopher regarded him with a quick frown. “Why the devil are you here at all, Dudley? Not like you to involve yourself in my grandfather’s fights.”

Dudley shrugged. “Wasn’t sure if I should hold him back or let him have at you, to be honest. Don’t bite me, but I heard nothing good about the girl.”

“Hmm.” Christopher frowned. “You mean this scandal at the Princess of Wales’s house? You read the article?”

“I did. Don’t normally pay attention to these rags—full of petty gossip and innuendo—but the women named by initials were all Her Highness’s ladies.”

“But only two of them are on duty at once. Don’t you think it odd that four of them were named as being there?”

Dudley shrugged. “Never struck me, to be honest. Not really privy to the workings of the princess’s household. To be honest, I wouldn’t have paid much attention, but a friend of mine was there and saw them, including Juliet Lilbourne and Meg Winter, and no one would dare name them without some truth!”

“Perhaps, but who would know who Miss D.S. is?” Christopher demanded. “A duke’s daughter is news, but by the world’s standards, the daughter of a country clergyman is not. She doesn’t move among the ton.”

Dudley picked up his sherry once more and sat down. “Someone *au fait* with Her Highness’s household. Don’t see what you’re getting at, old fellow.”

“The whole thing smacks of malice,” Christopher said bluntly. “Who told you D.S. was Deborah Shelby? My wife?”

“Don’t recall now. Wait, I think it was Grassic, had it from Barden—who may be the Regent’s snake, but at least he knows the princess’s household.”

Christopher thought about that. “And you told my grandfather this?”

“I did when I heard who you had married.” Dudley cast him a defiant look. “Seemed only right.”

“Well, you may take it from me, it’s lies. She was tricked into that house by a false summons purporting to come from the princess, and she spent the night locked in a room with the other ladies for their own safety. Far from participating in the orgy, they had nothing to eat or drink all night and fled when it quietened down at dawn.” He cast his cousin a challenging look. “Willing to tell *that* to my grandfather?”

“Tell him yourself, old man,” Dudley invited, and indeed the sound of stately footsteps could be heard approaching the door. “But take my advice. Don’t wind him up.”

Christopher had already resolved on civility unless his grandfather lapsed into insult, and so merely welcomed him with a smile and poured him a glass of sherry. There was no further time for conversation since Deborah and Gates arrived then, and he was obliged to introduce the latter.

As he did so, he noticed his grandfather's gaze flickered to Deborah, and then came back for a second glance.

Christopher didn't blame him. She wore a simple evening gown of dusky pink silk with a single string of pearls at her throat. Her shining blonde hair was becomingly dressed to emphasize the delicate features of her face. Her calm, gray eyes and pleasant smile concealed whatever turbulence went on beneath.

Christopher swelled with pride in her. She looked ladylike, dignified, and beautiful. The contrast between this reality and whatever harpy his grandfather had imagined was complete. And only Christopher could have known what it cost her.

Without asking, he took her a glass of sherry, which she accepted gratefully with a fleeting smile, but she did not cling to him. Instead, she sat near his cousin and asked him if his chamber was comfortable.

"Perfect, I assure you, ma'am," Dudley replied.

"We've begun redecorating some of the bedchambers," she explained. "In fact, a large part of the house, so I'm afraid you will find it all a bit chaotic and inconvenient."

"Not at all," he assured her. "It is visitors who must be inconvenient at such a time."

Normal social politeness had been restored, Christopher thought wryly. His cousin's words acknowledged her as lady of the house and placed his grandfather firmly in the role of visitor. Which was sensible, for there was really nothing anyone could do to change matters. Although there were endless possibilities for unpleasantness if his grandfather chose to take them.

In fact, over dinner, his grandfather seemed to be biding his time where Deborah was concerned and chose to pick a quarrel over the school instead.

"So you're the poor dupe my grandson has roped in to run this ridiculous school?"

"I shall be running it, yes," Gates said with a faint smile. "Although I don't consider myself a dupe, and I respectfully take issue with the description of ridiculous. In fact, it was I who laid the idea before Mr. Halland."

"Well, it's a dashed silly one," the old gentleman retorted. "Waste of time and money. There may be merit in teaching the lower orders to read, write, and count, though most of the time, even that isn't necessary, to educate them

beyond that is pointless. For one, they have no aptitude, and for another, even if they did, there is no opportunity for them to work. What gentleman would employ a laborer's son to educate their children? Or have such a person ordained in the Church? Who would trust a quack with such a background?"

He smiled thinly. "Even if you manage to educate these people—and I take leave to doubt you will—all you will achieve is a group of over-educated young men, unemployed and unemployable. Too discontented to go back to laboring and so with nothing else to do but foment trouble among their own class and threaten the proper order of society."

"That is speculation and opinion, sir," Christopher pointed out. "Not fact. We hope to have the evidence to prove you wrong before too much longer."

"Having run through your entire fortune in the effort," his grandfather said with contempt. "And you won't do it. The very idea is flawed, and I very much doubt you will ever get it off the ground. What poor man is going to give over his son to be educated for years when he could be working and contributing to the family?" Without warning, he swung on Deborah. "You want to tell him this, my dear, before he spends your pin-money along with all the rest on this foolish enterprise."

She may have felt like a hunted deer suddenly facing a gun, but she showed no sign of it, merely looked up from her fish, and smiled faintly. "Oh, I believe the finances of the project are already calculated. Besides, I am quite in favor of the school. It seems an excellent idea to me."

The old man's lip curled. "You will be advocating for them to take in girls, too, next."

"Actually, I believe that would be an excellent idea. Although, practically speaking, it would require more change in society's attitudes. And those of the universities."

The old man stared at her, and Christopher tensed, ready to step in before the outburst. Then his grandfather broke into laughter. "It would," he agreed between gusts of mirth. "I don't know whether you're unworldly or just being humorous, but either way, I thank you for the joke. What do you say to that, Chris? Educating girls, sending them to university?"

"There's no real reason why not," he said mildly. "Though I don't see it happening in my lifetime. Pity, but there it is. However, I've never really seen reason in condemning clever women like Deborah to learning little more than accomplishments to attract husbands."

“Is that what *you* learned?” his grandfather shot immediately at Deborah, and Christopher almost bit his tongue at his own stupidity.

Deborah said calmly, “No, not really. I was educated by a governess to *be* a governess.”

“Then what happened? How did you end up with the Princess of Wales?”

“My father’s friend, who became a bishop, put my name forward when there was a vacancy. We were surprised when I was accepted.”

“And how did you then meet my grandson?”

“He nearly rode me down on the path from the village to Coggleton House.”

Lord Hawfield’s eyes gleamed as he turned to Christopher. “Immediately after quarreling with me over your inheritance?”

“Exactly,” Christopher said. “I was in an ungovernable rage and had to apologize for my recklessness the following day. When we decided we should suit very well.”

The old man’s smile did not reach his eyes as he glanced at Deborah. “I won’t wish you joy, my dear, but I do wish you luck. You’ll need it.”

“Thank you, Grandfather,” Christopher murmured, laying down his knife and fork.

It was not in Deborah’s nature to draw attention to herself and become the life and soul of a party, but her calmness and her agreeable conversation eased the family tensions. He noticed a puzzled expression on his grandfather’s face more than once, for she did not fit any of his “categories” of women. She was not an empty-headed girl or a grasping woman. She did not flirt or demand adulation. She made intelligent contributions to any topic of conversation, often with quiet wit, and yet never interrupted or disparaged her guests’ opinions.

In short, without even realizing it, she was the perfect hostess. He told her so in a quiet murmur as she left them to their wine, and she sent him a quick smile of relieved gratitude.

Thanks to Gates’s presence, even his grandfather didn’t feel able to make comments about the new Mrs. Halland over the brandy, and so Christopher was almost relaxed as they joined Deborah in the drawing room.

She was reading a book, so lost in it, that she actually jumped when Christopher opened the door. Immediately, she cast the book aside and rang for tea.

Christopher strolled over and, from curiosity, picked up the book. It was Marcus Dain's description of his travels in the east. It gave him a moment's thought, as a memory slipped into his mind—Lucy Shelby asking about wedding trips. He had never even thought of such a thing and had asked Deborah if she cared for it in the full assumption that she would not. And she had shaken her head.

It had been enough for him, then. Now, he knew a twinge of shame, for he had seen and heard only what he wanted to.

His grandfather had paused by the pianoforte and now looked toward Deborah. "Do you play, my dear?"

Christopher noted that he never called her by name, not even the formal "Mrs. Halland". Either would have acknowledged her as family, whereas *my dear* allowed him an air of amiable condescension and distance.

"A little," she replied. "But the tuner will not come until Monday."

"Oh, come, no excuses! It cannot be so very badly out of tune. Indulge me."

"If you wish," Deborah replied.

Without fuss, she sat down at the instrument and began to play.

A few of the notes were very slightly out of tune, but somehow it did not detract from her performance, which was both sensitive and charming. He found himself gazing at her, rapt, from her slender fingers to her expressive face. He felt as if he was a youth again, enraptured by the accomplishment of some beauty who had caught his erratic attention.

But Deborah was no air-headed debutante. Nor would she have been regarded as a beauty by Society's opinions. But she *was* beautiful. He had never appreciated the difference before.

He blinked, realizing he was in danger of being caught spellbound by his own wife, which would only embarrass them both. Instead, he glanced at his grandfather, who looked, if anything, slightly chagrined. No doubt, he had wished to show her up, but he should have known that anyone who intended to be a governess would have had at least some skill on the pianoforte.

Dudley led the applause when she finished. Even his grandfather clapped politely. Deborah, however, flushed and looked embarrassed by the praise. She seemed relieved by the arrival of tea and occupied herself with pouring it out.

He could not help being glad when their guests chose an early night, so he

could only imagine how Deborah felt. He was just pleased she didn't immediately run off to her own chamber.

He went to the decanter and poured two glasses of brandy, bringing one of them back to her.

"I expect you need it," he said wryly, and she took it with one of her quick, oddly charming smiles.

"I don't believe I have ever drunk brandy." She sipped it warily. Her eyes widened, and she licked her shapely lips before taking another.

He dropped into the chair next to hers. "You deserve it. Well done. You managed them beautifully. I hope it wasn't too much of an ordeal."

"Actually, no," she said, sounding surprised. "I find it easier to be with strangers when I am the hostess. I understand what I'm meant to do, and I just kept reminding myself that I was your wife with not only the right but the duty to look after them."

"Did you suffer at the princess's?"

"No. But it was...different. I had other duties, and I was always with a more senior lady. Lady Meg was most helpful."

"Meg Winter?"

She nodded. "Do you know her?"

"A little. I know all the family. If Meg is a friend, has she written to you?"

"No, not since we parted in London. Why?"

"I was just wondering about this scandal at the princess's house." He sipped his brandy, then said abruptly, "There is some spite afoot there that has included you, though I can't work out who would do such a thing or why. Whoever did it has made enemies of at least two powerful families, and no one would do such a thing lightly."

"The Prince Regent might. He need not care about mere dukes or earls, and he would not regard our lost reputations as anything important if he could humiliate his wife one last time."

"Barden," he murmured thoughtfully. "The Regent's snake."

"Lord Barden was there," Deborah said. "Hazel thought he saw us leave the house in the morning. Perhaps he thought knowing such gossip made him important."

"Perhaps." Christopher wasn't convinced. He sipped from his glass, considering it. "Do you know him well? Does he have any reason to dislike

you?”

“He never spoke to me. I think I conducted him once into the princess’s presence. Beyond that, I never spoke to him.”

“And yet you were brought there that evening as the others were.”

Deborah thought. “The princess did not like Lord Barden. In fact, shortly after I began there, she refused to speak to him and insisted the prince send a different gentleman when he communicated.”

“Did she say why?”

“She told me he insulted Hazel Curwen, another woman of the bedchamber, who was with us that night. But if Hazel spurned him and caused the princess to complain about him, why would he involve the rest of us? Including the daughters of important noblemen?”

“I have no idea,” Christopher admitted. “In any case, let us not worry about what we cannot change. I expect our marriage will make him look silly. I meant to send a notice to *The Morning Post*, but I will certainly do so tomorrow.”

She nodded without commenting. She took another sip of brandy and set the glass down. After a few moments, she asked, “How long will Lord Hawfield stay?”

“We can eject him whenever you wish.”

She smiled. “I would not be so rude to your grandfather, the head of your family! Should we halt the work for now?”

“Under no circumstances. He can put up with the inconvenience or go away. Same with Bilston. For what it’s worth, I think they are pleasantly surprised in you.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound convinced.

However, he left it there, and for a little, they sat in companionable silence, occasionally sipping from their glasses. She was a peaceful person. He hadn’t expected to like just being with her. He hadn’t expected to kiss her and mean it.

He gazed at her profile, enjoying her quiet beauty. “Perhaps, once we have set everything in motion here, we can take a trip to the continent. If you would like.”

She looked round in surprise. “But you have so much to do here.”

“I think it would be good to escape for a while, do only as we wished, and get to know each other a little better. Besides, it is always fun to visit other

countries.”

A little frown tugged at her brow as she searched his face. “Did I tell you that we all came so eagerly to the princess that evening because we hoped she was taking us abroad with her?”

He shook his head.

“Then you are not just being kind to me?”

“Oh, I’m far too selfish for that. I hope it might be kind to both of us.”

In the candlelight, her eyes seemed to glow softly before her lashes swept down, hiding whatever emotion she felt. A delicate flush stained her cheeks. He didn’t know if it was embarrassment or pleasure, and he had to force back his impulse to take her in his arms, to kiss her properly this time. He didn’t know yet what either of them wanted... But the thought of finding out excited him.

*

LIKE THE GENTLEMAN he was trying hard to be, he left her at her bedchamber door, with no more than a chaste kiss on the hand. He imagined her breathing quickened, and then, before he could do or say anything else, she slipped free and closed the door on him.

He smiled ruefully to himself as he walked the long, winding passages to his own chamber. No light shone under any of his guests’ doors. All must be asleep. He hoped his grandfather would leave again tomorrow to relieve Deborah’s stress.

Yawning, he finally reached his own chamber, lit his lamp from the candle, and undressed.

No, he told himself severely, as Deborah’s face kept swimming into his mind, smiling, laughing, surprised by his kiss, wide-eyed, walking beside him so closely her skirts flapped against his legs...

Still, he wondered how she would feel in his arms—fragile and sweet or warm and passionate?

Or simply appalled by his attention?

Or politely tolerant? That would be worst of all.

But her eyes had been warm and soft when he had kissed her, and when he had spoken of going abroad together...

“No,” he said aloud and splashed cold water over his face and body. He would not break their agreement. In fact, he would do better to find a woman to distract him from his wife. Only it seemed unnecessarily humiliating to his wife to do such a thing, whatever their agreement, and however discreet he tried to be.

Besides which, when he thought about them, he found he didn't really want any of his past inamoratas, not even Marina Belham, not even Nell.

He groaned. *Am I really going to be obsessed with the wife I married for convenience? What in God's name was I thinking of?*

He dried himself and threw the towel aside before flopping into bed and blowing out the lamp. Determinedly, he closed his eyes and prepared to sleep.

After a little, he forced his mind into different channels—the school and its funding, parliamentary problems and ambitions, the possibility of a minor cabinet post. He imagined entertaining the great and good here at Gosmere Hall, Deborah standing beside him as they greeted their guests.

Hastily, he tugged his mind away from Deborah once more, fixing instead on the room he wanted for a study, the possibility of taking a house in London rather than just the rooms he rented in St. James. He would need different accommodation if Deborah were to join him in town, an expense he had not considered. He wasn't even sure if she would wish it. She did not like crowds, though she could cope when she was the hostess with clear duties. It came to him that he did not want her simply to *cope*. He wanted her to be happy.

Outside in the passage, a floorboard creaked. Something swished. Mice, he thought with irritation. They would need a cat. Several cats.

Other sounds, from other directions, interrupted these speculations. A faint rumbling outside, like wheels on the stone yard, though he could hear no horse's hooves. A faint groan, a thump, and then a creak, like door hinges.

Frowning, he threw off the covers and walked naked to the window, which he had left open a crack because of the warm weather. He heard a horse's snort, even before he peered down into the yard and saw moving shadows close in against the wall of the house.

The bedchamber he had chosen was the one he had been given as a child when he had come to visit his grandfather. It looked on to the back of the house, to the kitchen door, and the cellar. There was no reason for a horse

and cart to be here. A silent horse that must have had covering tied over its hooves. Burglars? Or smugglers? More likely, the latter. It was not unknown for a few bottles to be left at certain houses, either because the goods were paid for or to encourage blind eyes. But no one had lived in this house for years.

He stumbled back to his bedside and lit the lamp before scrambling hastily into his pantaloons and throwing the recently discarded shirt over his head. He pulled on his boots, then lit a candle from the lamp, and left the room.

He used the side stairs, hurrying down toward the kitchen and the servants' hall. Both were in darkness. He moved silently toward the back door, opposite which was the inside door to the cellar. Both doors were bolted. But surely that was a faint light showing from the cellar?

Hoping they wouldn't screech, he carefully drew back the bolts on the cellar door. Just in time, he noticed a bottle on the top step and picked it up before he could kick it downstairs and give away his presence. It was French brandy. He set it down against the kitchen wall and then descended the cellar steps, listening intently.

He had been too busy over the past few days to do more than glance in here. After all, Hunter seemed to have kept the cellar stocked with decent port and brandy and had always sent up good choices of wine. But he saw now that the cellar had other rooms.

The stairs led into a storeroom containing a good stock of bottles and two barrels of ale for the servants. But beyond it, a half-open door with light shining through led to another space. And from there, an open door led to the yard. Barrels and crates were piled by the door and, judging by the faint rumbling and grunting, being moved onto the waiting cart outside.

A movement inside caused Christopher to spin around. A man who seemed to have been slumped on the floor was heaving himself to his feet. Christopher's candle flickered over the pistol in the man's hand, and he froze.

The man stumbled, then righted himself, blinking blindly in the sudden light. A bloody arm hung loosely by his side, but the pistol was steady.

"Don't move a muscle or I'll shoot you," he growled.

For a stunned moment, Christopher stared.

And then the hairs on his neck sprang up, and he whirled around to face a huge man about to bring a pistol down on his head.

“Wait!” The words came in perfect unison from both himself and the injured man. But almost at the same moment, a ghostly figure leapt behind the huge man and brought a bottle crashing down on his head.

The man blinked and dropped to his knees. And Christopher stared into the wide, frightened eyes of his wife.



Chapter Eight

UNABLE TO SLEEP, Deborah had been wandering around the house with her single candle, absorbing the atmosphere and the sounds that made it unique. At night, alone and without guests or servants, or even Christopher, she could almost feel Gosmere Hall was truly hers.

She even pushed open the baize door to the servants' quarters and heard furtive footsteps coming from somewhere below. She wondered if someone was ill and trying not to wake the household, so she hurried after the footsteps into the kitchen and found the unbolted, open door—not to the kitchen garden, but down into a cold cellar.

She crept down, her heart beating now with as much alarm as curiosity, and crossed the storeroom to another open door. And there, she saw her husband caught between two armed men. One pointed a pistol at his heart. The other crept up behind him, his arm lifting to bring the weapon down with force on his head.

Before Deborah could even think, her hand had closed around the neck of a bottle from an open crate. She almost flew at the immediate threat. There was a shout, but only as she crashed the bottle onto his head did she realize the other man could still shoot Christopher, but perhaps the surprise could...

She stared into his startled eyes as her victim sank to the floor. Then, although she had seen nobody touch him, the other gunman wobbled, and to her amazement, Christopher whipped around and caught him around the waist, murmuring, "There, I've got you. Sit down before you fall, you idiot. And give me the gun before you kill someone."

The words caught at her in panic. It seemed Christopher wasn't about to die, but the man she had hit was lying on his face in a puddle of brandy and glass. She sank to her knees beside him.

"Oh, no," she said in fright. "Have I killed him?"

"Him?" the other gunman, now disarmed, said breathlessly as Christopher lowered him to the floor against the wall. "God, no, he has a much harder

skull than that. Though if you could pick him out of the glass, Chris, before he wakes and cuts himself to pieces, I'm sure he'd be grateful."

Christopher came to the fallen man's other side without a word.

"I'm afraid he's rather heavy," said the man who seemed to know Christopher.

Christopher grunted, lifted the man by the shoulders, and heaved him up, dragging him over beside the other before brushing glass out of his hair and off his clothes.

Deborah could only stare. Rather to her surprise, Christopher came back to her, bent, and took her hand, raising her to her feet.

"Mind the glass," he said gently.

She swallowed. "What the *devil* is going on?"

"Good question," Christopher agreed. "But first, do you know where the bandages and medicine are kept?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Aren't you going to introduce us, Chris?" his acquaintance interrupted. "And then tell me what the devil you're all doing here?"

"What *I'm* doing here?" Christopher repeated, staring. He shrugged and sighed. "Deborah, my cousin Rupert Halland. Rupert, my wife, Deborah."

Rupert? The cousin who had killed someone in a duel and had supposedly fled the country?

"Wife?" Rupert exclaimed, startled. "Good God." He let out a laugh. "Who'd have thought it?"

"It's my house," Christopher went on, "and we're living here. What's your excuse?"

Before Rupert could answer, two other men strode in from the yard, one saying peremptorily, "Where are you, man? Do we have to do this all oursel—" He broke off, staring. Dudley, Lord Bilston.

"Dudley," Christopher said amiably.

Dudley actually stamped his foot. "Damnation, Chris, *will* you stay in one place? How am I meant to get anything done with you—and your wife!—floating around here as if..."

"As if we own the place?" Christopher suggested.

But Dudley seemed to have lost interest and was scowling at the groaning figure of the huge man who seemed to be coming around and was trying to lift his head. "What's the matter with him? Come to that, why the devil is

Rupert sitting on his—”

“Because he’s shot,” Christopher said calmly. “Did you not know?”

Without a word, Deborah ran upstairs to the kitchen, into the housekeeper’s room, and found the medicine box which Mrs. Dawson had shown her only yesterday. Pausing only to check that there were bandages as well as the usual salves, she fetched a bowl of water from the kitchen pump and rushed back down again.

By then, Christopher and Dudley had wrestled the wounded man out of his coat, and Christopher was examining the blood-soaked arm.

“I can’t see anything for blood,” Christopher said irritably.

“Sorry,” Rupert said. “I did try to be shot cleanly, but some things...”

“Who shot you?” Deborah demanded, kneeling at his side when Christopher made space for her.

“Excise men,” was the shameless reply.

“And here I thought you’d come back to help me shift all *this*,” Dudley said.

“No point, now,” Rupert said as Deborah began to cut away the makeshift bandage and shirt sleeve.

“Yes, there is,” she said severely. “I don’t want smuggled goods in the cellar, and Christopher is a member of Parliament.”

“I don’t see what that has to say to anything.” Rupert smiled at her when she glanced up, alarmingly like Christopher. “We deliver to lots of members of Parliament.”

Deborah concentrated on washing off the blood until she could see the wound. She had never dealt with a firearm injury before.

Christopher reached past her and examined it more closely. “The ball’s gone straight through the fleshy part of your arm. With luck, it hasn’t damaged anything too important. You’ve lost a lot of blood, though. I’d be happier if a doctor saw you.”

“Just bandage me up tight, and I’ll be right as rain,” Rupert said optimistically.

Deborah rubbed some salve across both wounds and held the dressings in place while Christopher wrapped a bandage around his arm.

“Who hit me?” the huge man demanded suddenly, feeling the cut at the back of his head.

“I’m afraid it was me,” Deborah said calmly. “You were about to strike

my husband, so I hit you first.”

He stared at her. “But you’re tiny. And a female.”

“You don’t have to be big to be effective,” Rupert observed.

Deborah, leaving Christopher to tie his cousin’s bandage, rose and went to the big man, who warded her off with one hand.

“Let me see your head,” she said patiently.

He lowered one arm but still looked suspicious.

“She’s trying to help you, Josh,” Rupert pointed out.

At last, the big man lowered his head and let her bathe it. To her relief, although he had a large swelling on it, the cut was not too bad. While she washed and dressed it, Christopher began to talk.

“So, you’ve been using Gosmere Hall to store smuggled goods before they’re sent off to wherever they have to go. That’s why you’re really here, Dudley. Nothing to do with my marriage.”

“On the contrary,” Dudley retorted. “When I heard you were married and intending to live here, I had to come and move it before anyone found it. And I knew Rupert was about to bring in another load.”

“I thought Rupert had gone to America.”

“That was the story we gave out,” Dudley admitted. “In reality, he doesn’t go further than France, and spends as much time on the coast of England.”

“I should have known you wouldn’t leave him to cope alone,” Christopher said.

“Didn’t stop him marrying Georgianna, though, did it?” Rupert said bitterly.

“Who’s Georgianna?” Deborah asked.

“My betrothed,” Rupert said, glaring at his brother.

“My wife,” Dudley said firmly. “You know it was never going to work. You couldn’t come home, and in any case, her father wanted the heir to Hawfield. Don’t pretend you’re broken-hearted because I know all about the woman in—”

“Dudley,” Christopher said mildly, and Dudley cast Deborah a hasty apology. “Does my grandfather know?”

“God, no,” Dudley said. “He thinks Rupert’s in America, too. We cooked up this little scheme between us. A bit short of the readies myself, Chris, for the old gentleman is not generous by nature. This makes us both a living.

Rupert brings it in, and I see it distributed.”

“Something to do,” Rupert muttered, passing another bandage from Christopher to Deborah, who began binding it around the large man’s head.

“Not fun anymore?” Christopher asked with a trace of sympathy.

“Devil a bit. It was only meant to be for a few months until—” He broke off with a shrug that made him wince and nurse his bandaged arm. “What are you going to do, Chris?”

Christopher frowned and looked at the two remaining barrels at the cellar door. “Is this lot going somewhere safe?”

“As soon as it’s on the wagon,” Dudley said.

“Well, take it away and try to make other arrangements for next time because I don’t want Deborah bothered with all this.”

Josh, duly bandaged, smiled doubtfully at Deborah and lumbered to his feet to help with the barrels.

“You’d better stay here for a day or two, Rupert,” Christopher said.

Rupert sighed and shrugged. “I’ll be more comfortable on the ship than on your cellar floor.”

“I didn’t mean the cellar, idiot,” Christopher said. “There are lots of unused rooms in this house. I don’t see why you can’t hide in one. Hunter can bring your meals since I’m pretty sure he’s in on this enterprise.”

“A bottle of brandy to turn a blind eye whenever I pass,” Rupert admitted.

“I thought the brandy was too good to have paid duty,” Christopher remarked. “Come on, Dudley, I’ll give you a hand with the last crates, and they can get off. Then we can see about smuggling Rupert upstairs...”

It was only as they began to lift the loads that she realized the total impropriety of Christopher’s dress. Dudley had removed his coat but still wore waistcoat and cravat beneath it. Christopher wore pantaloons that flapped about his calves. His shirt hung loosely over the top, but when he lifted a crate, it dragged up his shirt and revealed a flash of skin and the fact that his pantaloons were barely fastened at all from the waist down.

Hastily, she looked away and found Rupert watching her.

“How long have you been married?” he asked her.

“Three days,” she replied calmly.

He blinked and began to laugh. “One thing about my family. We can always entertain a lady. Chris, you scurvy dog, what do you mean by not taking your delightful wife on a wedding trip?”

“And thereby allowing you free rein to bleed all over my house?” Christopher said and walked out the door.

“At least you noticed,” Rupert said, eyeing his brother with disfavor. “Josh, you go back to the ship and wait for me. I’ll find you when it’s safe. Let the excisemen search it if they want, they’ll find nothing now, and you can play innocent fishermen.”

“Take care, Josh,” Deborah said guiltily to the large man in the rakish bandage, who looked surprised and then grinned at her on his way out the door.

“You take care of *him*,” he advised, nodding at Rupert, and vanished.

“Where should we put him?” Christopher asked Deborah as the wheels of the wagon and the horses’ clearly covered hooves moved softly away into the distance. “Which chamber is habitable?”

Deborah considered. “The one next to yours is clean, though the bed is not yet made up. No one but you would really have cause to be in that part of the house.”

Christopher nodded. “Very well. You go ahead, cough if anyone happens to be about, which they shouldn’t at this time of night. Dudley, you watch out behind, and I’ll hold Rupert up.”

“I can walk by myself,” Rupert said impatiently.

“Perhaps. Deborah?”

Deborah snatched up the medicine box and the bowl and rags and led the way up to the kitchen where they waited while she replaced the box, then threw away the bloody water and rags, and rinsed out the bowl. Then she led the way up the side stairs closest to Christopher’s bedchamber. Despite his protests, Rupert was leaning heavily on his cousin’s arm.

“Sit him in a chair while I fetch the bed linen,” she murmured and hurried on to the linen room.

When she returned to the room next to Christopher’s, she found them plying Rupert with brandy.

While she hastily spread on the clean sheets and pillowcases, Christopher said to Dudley, “That was you creeping past my bedchamber, wasn’t it?”

“You were supposed to be asleep. I didn’t know you were lodged away over here in any case.”

“I had a lot on my mind. But I confess, I didn’t know you could move so quietly.” Christopher came toward her, helped her tuck the sheets under the

mattress, and heaved the blankets on top.

“How domestic is Christopher?” Rupert marveled from his chair. “Amazing what three days of marriage can do for a man.”

“You just think I won’t hit you because you’re wounded.”

“You won’t,” Rupert said smugly.

“I can still torture you with gruel and noxious medicines. And the quack if you give me any trouble.”

Ten minutes later, with the patient drifting off to sleep, they left his chamber.

“Good night,” Dudley said in relief.

“Good night.” Christopher took Deborah’s arm, urging her toward his bedchamber in the other direction.

She glanced at him in sudden alarm, and a gleam of mockery shone clearly in the candle flames. “We are married, you know. It’s perfectly proper. I need to talk to you.”

He opened his door and ushered her inside. A lamp burned in the room, and he lit another candle from his own. The chamber looked slightly tidier than the last time she had seen it. Only a coat had been slung over the back of a chair. A few papers were scattered over the desk, some half-hidden beneath a large book.

He removed the coat, flinging it on the bed instead, and waved her to the chair. He sat opposite her on the edge of the bed, which somehow seemed ridiculously intimate.

“I won’t keep you,” he murmured. “You must be exhausted. I just wanted to thank you for looking after Rupert. And me. I’m sorry to drag you into it.”

“Your family seems to have an adventurous life. And you didn’t drag me. I followed someone—probably you, now I think about it—down to the kitchen and voluntarily chose to involve myself. And despite his present... er... profession, your cousin does not appear to be a vicious man.”

“He isn’t. I said at the time he could only have killed Harlow—his dueling opponent—by accident. I’d be surprised if he meant to hit him. But there, dueling is a stupid, chancy business.”

She blinked. “I thought you would be all in favor of it?”

“Why?” he shot back. “Because it fits everyone’s view of me as a reckless young man about town?”

“Aren’t you?”

He scowled, then his brow cleared, and he laughed. "I can't really defend myself when I almost rode you down."

"And are now hiding your cousin from the law and the excisemen."

"But mostly from my grandfather." He held her gaze. "You don't think I'm serious at all, do you?"

"Of course, I do. You are quite determined about the school and about politics."

"Just not in my personal life?"

"That is none of my business."

"Would you like it to be?"

She frowned, uncomprehending, and he smiled, rising from the bed and walking toward her. Her stomach tightened, for barely dressed with his rumpled hair and gleaming eyes, he looked now every inch the dangerous young buck. Attraction battered at her, drawing her to him so that when he held out his hand, she gave him hers, and he drew her to her feet. Too close to him. Much too close.

He seemed to be waiting for an answer. Wildly, she dredged up his last question.

Would you like it to be?

"Would I like what to be?" she asked breathlessly.

"Would you like my personal life to be your business?"

In that instant, she wanted to *be* his personal life. All of it, shutting out the past and the future and leaving only this moment, when he stood so close to her, holding her hand and gazing down at her as if she were the only woman in the world.

But that wasn't their agreement.

"Of course not," she managed. "I am happy to abide by our agreement."

"Then I must let you go," he said lightly. And yet he didn't release her for a long moment. His blue eyes stared down into hers as though looking for something. It felt like drowning, and yet it wasn't unpleasant. She could have stood there forever.

It was he who moved first, slowly and, she could almost have imagined, reluctantly as he walked with her to the door. He only released her hand when he relit her candle and gave it to her.

"Sleep well," he murmured and dropped an unexpected kiss on her forehead before he opened the door.

She was halfway along the passage to her own chamber, feeling as though she were walking on air, before she wondered if she had actually disappointed him.

Now that was a heady thought.



Chapter Nine

WHEN DEBORAH WALKED into the breakfast parlor the following morning, she was surprised to find everyone already there. However, it did not seem to signify Lord Hawfield's early departure from Gosmere. On the contrary, he observed what a difference she had made to the house already.

"It needs very little," she replied. "Just to be aired and brightened and lived in."

"Well, I believe I am happy to help with the last," he said jovially. "I'll stay a day or two."

Carefully, Deborah avoided looking at her husband. "You are most welcome. So long as you don't object to the upheaval going on around you."

"Not in the slightest. I am quite happy to potter about and keep out of the way."

"Come and see the school, if you like," Christopher invited.

The old man curled his lip. "I suppose you have destroyed the old place already. The dower house was a fine building in its own right, you know."

"It still is," Christopher argued. "But now it will have a purpose. After all, I have no mother to put in it. Shall we go, Gates?"

Christopher smiled at her on his way past, causing her heart to flutter for no obvious reason. She tried not to think of her relationship with Christopher, for it seemed to be changing on her part, and that way led to misery. Fortunately, Hawfield and Dudley began to leave the parlor shortly after Christopher and Deborah returned to the sideboard as though for second helpings and more coffee.

As soon as they left, she whipped a napkin over her plate of smoked fish, toast, ham, and tomatoes, and crept to the door. She could still hear Dudley and his grandfather outside the door.

Dudley was saying, "...glad to see you coming around to her, for—"

"Not coming around to her at all," growled Lord Hawfield. "I want to find out what she's up to."

Dudley groaned. "Does she need to be up to anything? It's my belief she's actually a very fine girl, and, moreover, good for Christopher."

"Nonsense. He married her to spite me, but I'll still find a way to part them. Do you see their chambers are at opposite ends of the house?"

Behind the door, Deborah flushed uncomfortably but seemed unable to move away. What was it they said about eavesdroppers?

"I don't see what good that does you, Grandpapa. If you're thinking to have the marriage annulled on those grounds, I don't see anyone buying Christopher's impotence!"

The old man gave a crack of laughter, and Deborah wanted to die. "No, but there are grounds if she's denying him her bed."

"Leave it alone, Grandpapa," Dudley said wearily. "No good will come of your interference. In fact, you being here is cementing her position with..."

Their voices trailed away, leaving her suddenly more thoughtful than embarrassed. It had never entered her head that a marriage could be ended on such grounds. Or, in fact, on any grounds other than death.

Still deep in thought, she left the room, clutching her plate and cup, and sailed along the passage to the side stairs so that she could approach Rupert's chamber without being seen.

She scratched at the door and opened it a crack. "It's Deborah," she hissed. "May I come in?"

"Please do," came the immediate, amused response.

She whisked herself inside and closed the door.

Rupert was sitting up against the pillows, his face just a little flushed, regarding her with a friendly smile.

"How are you?" she asked, bringing her plate and cup to the bed and setting them on the nightstand.

"Perfectly well, but Christopher made me promise to stay in bed, so I don't pace around and give myself away. At least that's what he said, but in fact, he wants me to look like an invalid when he brings the doctor here for no reason."

"You've seen Christopher this morning?" she said.

He blinked. "Have you not?"

"Just at breakfast, but we couldn't talk about you because of Lord Hawfield and Mr. Gates being present. Do you like coffee? And I brought

you this in case you are hungry.”

Fortunately, this seemed to distract him from her lack of conversation with Christopher, and he fell on the plate with some gusto.

“Christopher has gone to the dower house,” she said, passing his cup from the table to his good hand, “which he is turning into a school. Has he sent for the doctor?”

Rupert wrinkled his nose, drank, and passed her back the cup. “He said he would bring him straight away, though I’m dashed if I know why. He never used to be such a fuss-pot. Mind you, he never used to be such a slow-top either.”

“In what way?” she asked.

“You, for a start,” he said frankly. “But never fear. I know it’s none of my business, and my lips are sealed.”

“I’m sure you know ours is a marriage of convenience,” she said calmly. “Within that, we are friends. More coffee?”

“Thank you.” As he drank, he regarded her over the cup.

“Will your ship wait for you?” she asked.

“As long as it’s safe.”

“It doesn’t seem a very safe profession.”

“Free-trading?” He shrugged. “Safer than some, more fun than most. For a while, anyway. It was only meant to be for a few months until it was safe to come home.”

She blinked. “Did you expect your family to obtain you a pardon?”

“I expected them to prove I didn’t do it!” Rupert fumed.

“But, I thought it was a duel.”

“It was. I didn’t shoot.”

“And yet, your opponent died?”

“Shot straight through the heart, apparently.”

She frowned. “Dueling pistols have hair triggers, do they not? Perhaps you fired without meaning to.”

“I think I would know whether or not I fired my own pistol!”

“Of course, you would,” she soothed. “I was only thinking aloud.”

Rupert munched his remaining toast, appearing to recover his good humor. “So, tell me who you are and how you met my cousin. Who is your family?”

“My family’s name is Shelby. My father was a country vicar, and when

he died, we moved to a cottage on the edge of Coggleton. I met your cousin when he was in a towering rage with your grandfather for refusing to break the trust early and give him his inheritance.”

Rupert grinned. “That sounds more like Chris. I hope you made him work for forgiveness.”

She smiled faintly, taking his empty plate from him.

Rupert watched her, then said, “Thing is, I know Chris. He didn’t just marry you to get his hands on Gosmere.”

“It suited us both to be married,” she replied calmly.

“Did it, by God?” He searched her face with sharp, perceptive eyes that were too like Christopher’s. “Well, you could have done worse than Chris. He’ll do anything for you and make you laugh at the same time. Once he likes you. Do you play cards, Cousin Deborah?”

Since she was worried he had developed a fever and thought she should watch him for signs of it, she agreed to play. On her way to fetch cards, she made sure the staff and cleaners were doing as she wished, then returned to Rupert’s chamber and played a calm form of whist until the door abruptly opened, and Christopher walked in with a stranger.

“This is Dr. Nairn,” Christopher said, his brows raised in surprise to see Deborah sitting on the edge of Rupert’s bed.

She sprang up, gathering the cards, much to Rupert’s clear annoyance.

Christopher’s gaze came back to his cousin. “I told him about your hunting accident, and he thought he had better take a look.”

“Can I bring you anything, Doctor?” Deborah asked.

The doctor set down his bag and advanced on his glaring patient. “I shall let you know when I’ve seen the injury. Don’t be a baby, young man.”

Christopher grinned, and Rupert looked around for something to throw at him.

“We should wait outside,” Deborah said, seizing her husband by the arm and tugging him toward the door.

Since he didn’t resist, she released him in the passage.

“Were you nursing him?” Christopher asked mildly.

“Just helping him pass the time since he’s bored, and I don’t care for the flush in his cheeks. I’m glad you brought the doctor. Although, you could have *sent* him. Even if your grandfather saw him, he could be here to visit any of the household.”

“True, but I didn’t want any discussion about hunting accidents and injured young gentlemen. How do you find him?”

“Your cousin? Cheerful but chafing and bearing a grudge. He says he didn’t kill anyone in that duel.”

“Well, the man is dead,” Christopher said flatly.

“He claims he didn’t shoot.”

Christopher frowned. “It isn’t like him not to admit responsibility. Perhaps he learned that from his new smuggling acquaintances.”

“Perhaps,” she allowed. She thought for a moment. “Were you there?”

“At the duel? Lord, no. I was staying with friends in Cornwall. By the time I heard and dashed back to London, Harlow was dead, and my grandfather and Dudley had got Rupert out of the country. It was quite a scandal for some time.”

“But you never heard of any effort to prove his innocence?”

“No.”

The door opened suddenly, and the doctor stood there, carrying his bag and his hat. “The wound looks well enough. I’ve given him something to fight the infection. Give him some more at night, keep him resting in bed, and he should do very well. If he worsens, call me back. Good day, Mrs. Halland. Mr. Halland.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Deborah said. “I’ll walk downstairs with you.”

Leaving Christopher to sit with his cousin, she led the doctor down the side stairs to the ground floor, where Hunter materialized to show him out. She was just going in search of Mrs. Dawson when she heard Hunter loftily addressing some other visitors at the door.

“Mr. Halland is not at home.”

“Mrs. Halland, then,” came an aggressive voice.

“State your business, and I shall inquire,” Hunter said.

“My business is the business of the crown, and so you may tell your mistress! I am the representative of His Majesty’s Excise—”

“One moment,” Hunter said and shut the door.

Deborah hurried across the hall to meet him, frowning interrogatively.

“I’ll just deny you’re home,” he murmured.

“They’ll keep coming back, and that we don’t want.” She drew in a breath. “Bring them to the reception room.”

Hastily, in order to give the impression that she was a busy woman

merely allowing them a moment for their unlikely investigation, she bolted into another room, which contained little more than a large billiard table. She must speak to Christopher about that later. For now, she had to decide how to be rid of the excisemen without betraying Rupert. She was not used to lying, and the idea made her uncomfortable, but it was unthinkable to give up Christopher's cousin.

Hunter stuck his head around the door, and she nodded.

"You might tell Mr. Halland," she murmured, walking past him.

In the reception room stood two men, one stout, one thin, hats in hand. The stout one looked slightly worried, though his thinner colleague possessed an air of grim determination that suggested he had dealt with gentry before and found them uncooperative. It was, she reflected, a thankless task, with revenue-dodging regarded as a legitimate pastime by so many.

She hardened her heart. "I am Mrs. Halland. How can I help you?"

"Name's Bright, ma'am, and this is Hobbs," the thin man said. "Pursuing cargo that was landed secretly last night without paying duty."

"And how might I assist your pursuit?" Deborah asked.

"We think it stopped here, ma'am," Bright said bluntly.

Deborah twitched one brow. "My good man, you are not *accusing* me of something, are you?"

"No, no, ma'am," Hobbs said in horror. "What my colleague means is, we believe the cargo came in this direction, and we wondered if any one of your household had seen anything."

"No, they would have told me of anything out of the ordinary. To be honest, we all retired early, and I imagine the servants did, too. We are having a great deal of work done, as I'm sure you noticed, and everyone is exhausted."

"Then you had no unexpected visitors to the house? No young gentlemen, perhaps?"

"Young gentlemen? Not unless you count my husband's cousin, Lord Bilston, who arrived yesterday afternoon."

"No, ma'am," Bright said with less patience. "This man would have been wounded. We winged one of the smugglers as they landed. He would have arrived here sometime after midnight."

"That, I would remember," she assured him. "But why on earth should you imagine he came here?"

“Blood, ma’am,” Hobbs said apologetically. “On various paths and the drive.”

“And the gentleman’s name,” Bright declared, “which is Halland.”

“It’s conceivable,” she said doubtfully, “but unlikely to be a relation. I’m afraid you will not find the man you seek here. Or the goods. But I commend your industry. Good day. Hunter will show you out.”

Bright showed an inclination to object to this dismissal, though his colleague nudged him to silence.

Deborah swept to the door, then paused. “One thing? Why do you think his name is Halland? Do you know him?”

“Had it from someone else. Said the cove was Rupert Halland.”

A roar from right beside her almost blew her back into the room as Lord Hawfield strode furiously after her.

“How dare you come here hectoring and badgering my family! My grandson, Rupert Halland, is in the Americas, has been for more than a year, and I will not have you barging in here and raking up old tragedies! Be gone! And be assured I shall have words with those much farther up your command!”

There was nothing for the two alarmed excisemen to do but slither out.

“I do believe someone was having a joke at your expense,” Deborah said to them sympathetically, crossing her fingers in the folds of her skirt. “Good luck in your endeavors.”

“Dashed disgrace!” Hawfield fumed as Hunter firmly closed the door behind them. He swung on Deborah without warning. “If you’d known the family, you’d have been able to eject them at the outset.”

“They were already on their way out, sir,” she said mildly. “Although I’ll not deny you shifted them faster. Thank you for your support. Please excuse me.”

*

HOWEVER, IT WAS to be a day of interruptions. As agreed, Deborah sent the carriage to Cogleton to fetch her mother and siblings. But she had only just taken some luncheon to Rupert and returned to her cleaning in the library when the maid, Anne, appeared, saying urgently, “Come and change, ma’am!

Lady Letchworth's carriage in on its way up the drive!

Deborah, slightly irritated to be disturbed for what she was sure was an assignation between Lucy and Sir Edmund, made without telling her, sighed and rose once more.

For a moment, she glanced at her gown and then her hands, wondering if she could get away with a splash of cold water and quick hair repin.

"No, ma'am," Anne said firmly. "It's a bride visit. You must dress accordingly."

Deborah, startled enough to give in, followed the maid upstairs and submitted. Of course, she *was* a bride, but she felt so little like one that she had never expected the usual etiquette to apply to her. She supposed word must have spread about Lord Hawfield and Lord Bilston being here.

Inevitably, she kept the Letchworths waiting, but only for a few minutes. And when she eventually hurried into the drawing room, Christopher was already there, properly dressed and entertaining their guests, who included Sir Edmund, his mother and sister, and Lord Hawfield and Dudley.

Deborah curtsied. "So sorry to keep you waiting. How lovely of you to come. Christopher, did you ring for tea?"

"No, but I shall."

When the business of tea pouring and so on was done, Deborah found herself seated beside Sir Edmund's sister, Mrs. Ireton.

"So, how do you like being lady of Gosmere Hall?" Mrs. Ireton asked pleasantly.

"Very much," Deborah replied. "Of course, there is much to do, but it is exciting watching the house reemerge from its cocoon."

Mrs. Ireton's finely arched eyebrows flew up. "I'm surprised you found it in such poor condition." She smiled, and yet Deborah was sure the remark was barbed. For one thing, Lord Hawfield was listening sardonically close by.

"Oh, it isn't," she replied. "Or at least not that Christopher or I could find. It has been merely shut up of necessity for too long, and Mrs. Dawson could hardly be expected to keep the entire house clean and ready for occupation with one maid and a kitchen assistant."

"I suppose your marriage was quite sudden," Mrs. Ireton observed. "If you had waited even three or four weeks, it could all have been ready for you without the drudgery."

“I don’t regard it as drudgery.”

Mrs. Ireton laughed as though she had said something witty. She was relieved when Hunter appeared and announced her mother and siblings.

The Letchworths and Lord Hawfield looked stunned to be overrun suddenly with children, who at least remembered to curtsy and bow politely to the company before they scampered to Deborah and then to Christopher. It was Christopher who performed the introductions, while Lucy quickly discovered a seat by Sir Edmund.

Deborah, knowing it wasn’t common for children to be present at such civilized gatherings, suggested the younger ones play hide and seek as they always wanted to.

“What a lively family,” Mrs. Ireton drawled as they could be heard running and laughing along the gallery.

“I find them delightful,” Sir Edmund commented.

“Though perhaps not among the teacups,” Lucy said with a laugh.

“I’m glad to find you all together,” Lady Letchworth stated, “because I wanted to invite you to dinner at Coggleton House on Friday. I don’t know if you will still be here then, my lord,” she added to Hawfield, “but you and Lord Bilston are naturally included in the invitation. It will be nothing over-formal, just dinner with friends.”

“Thank you. It sounds delightful,” Deborah murmured.

After twenty minutes or so of conversation, Lady Letchworth declared it time to leave. Her son, who would clearly have preferred to linger and then escort Lucy home, departed with reluctance. Only just in time, for the carriage had not even left before the children burst back into the drawing room, laughing with pure mischief.

“Deb, who’s the man still in bed?” Stephen asked with disastrous clarity.



Chapter Ten

“HE’S SICK,” DEBORAH said faintly. “The doctor told him to stay in bed. But what were you doing up there? You know you’re not meant to go up to the bedchambers.”

“Sorry, we got muddled when we found the other staircase,” Giles explained.

“Do you have another guest, Deborah?” their mother asked. “Or is one of the servants sick?” She frowned at her younger offspring. “You didn’t go up to the servants’ quarters, did you?”

“Oh, no, he’s not a servant,” Stephen said, amused by the very idea. “Though he did seem surprised to see us. He growled like a bear, which was quite funny.”

“Well, leave him be,” Deborah instructed. “Play on this floor or downstairs. Or outside, if you prefer.”

Lord Hawfield muttered something about leaving them with their nurse.

“We invited them,” Christopher said evenly, not troubling to point out that the same could not be said about his grandfather.

Hawfield didn’t seem to hear. He was frowning at nothing in particular, clearly mulling something over in his head. Uneasily, Deborah met Christopher’s gaze and then glanced at Dudley, who was also looking somewhat alarmed.

However, the earl could say nothing while Deborah’s mother and Lucy were present.

Only when they waved everyone off in the carriage did Hawfield say to Christopher, “This sick man of yours who is not a servant... He wouldn’t have anything to do with the injured smuggler the excisemen were looking for earlier? A smuggler who appears to share our name?”

“Whatever gave you that idea, sir?” Dudley demanded. “We have no say in—”

“It’s Rupert,” Christopher said flatly. “Do you want to see him? If you

do, you're not to quarrel with him, for he's fighting a fever."

The old man's face was flushed as he glared from Dudley to Christopher and then to Deborah. "*She* knew. Even *she* knew, and I did not?"

"Who do you think cared for his wound and patched him up?" Christopher retorted and ushered her before him back into the house.

Without a word, everyone marched upstairs and kept going toward the bedchambers.

"Is he dying?" Lord Hawfield burst out.

"No," Christopher replied. "The doctor does not think so. As such wounds go, it is minor." He knocked peremptorily and strolled into Rupert's bedchamber. "Visitors," he announced.

Having thus made certain, presumably, that his cousin was decent, Christopher stood aside for Deborah to precede him.

Rupert scowled from his pillows. A breakfast table sat over his knees, where he seemed to have been playing patience. "What is this? A deputation to see if I'm bored to death?"

"You see?" Christopher murmured. "*Not* dying,"

"Oh God," Rupert said as his grandfather strode into the room. "Damned—dashed!—traitors, the whole parcel of you!"

"You can talk!" Lord Hawfield said. "*Smuggling!*"

"Free-trading," Rupert corrected breezily. "I had to do something."

"You were meant to do it in America!"

"We're at war with the United States."

"There is still Canada, the West Indies..."

"I preferred to be closer at hand when you proved my innocence."

"Proved your..." Hawfield touched his palm to Rupert's forehead. "How bad is his fever?"

"It's fine," Rupert growled, pushing his hand away.

"Then what are you jabbering about? Proved your innocence indeed! You deliberately fired a pistol into another man's heart before witnesses. No one can prove that did not happen."

Rupert stared, then his eyes flickered to his brother. "It didn't. I never fired. You never even told them this, did you?"

"There was no point," Dudley said wearily. "No one would have believed me. The man died of a ball in his chest while you pointed a pistol at him."

"But I didn't fire it! You only had to show the pistol hadn't been fired."

“In retrospect,” Dudley allowed, perching on the bottom of the bed, “that is what I should have done, but it seemed more urgent to get you out of harm’s way. By the time I returned to London, the pistols were with Harlow’s family. I couldn’t barge into a grieving household, demanding to see his possessions, could I? Especially when it was my brother who pulled the trigger.”

“Only I didn’t!” Rupert’s eyes locked with his brother’s. “Why didn’t you tell them, Dudley? At least my grandfather and Chris? And Georgianna? To make sure I was out of the way while you married my betrothed?”

Dudley dragged his hand over his face. “It wasn’t like that,” he muttered. “Though even you didn’t blame me for stepping into the breach. And, frankly, I didn’t believe you hadn’t pulled the trigger.”

“He was many things,” Christopher observed into the tense silence, “but never a liar.”

Dudley flushed. “We all lie to ourselves. Rupert knew he’d been a fool over the duel. Of course, he didn’t want to believe he’d actually pulled the trigger and killed the man. *I* know it was an accident, but who else is going to believe that? He had to stay out of the country.”

“Only he didn’t,” Hawfield said in a hard voice. “And no one saw fit to tell me.”

“Well, if you had known, you wouldn’t have been nearly so convincing with the excise men,” Christopher observed.

“If we’re talking about *that* incident, it seems your wife is a better liar than even I imagined!” Hawfield snarled.

She might not even have been there. Blindly, she grasped a chair arm to steady herself. How had this become about her?

In the silence, Christopher and his grandfather stared at each other.

“Apologize,” Christopher said curtly, “or leave.”

The old man’s lips curled, and she knew there would be no apology. It had all become about his authority.

“You’re in the wrong, Grandpapa,” Rupert said.

“Very wrong,” Dudley said seriously.

There might have been a breath of fury, but Hawfield’s gaze fell. “Then I apologize,” he said mildly. Still, he did not look at her, let alone bow his acknowledgment, and Christopher’s angry step forward was clearly into another stage of battle.

Impulsively, Deborah reached out and seized his hand, and his head jerked around to face her.

“His lordship has apologized. Let us leave it there. Don’t tire your cousin with quarrels.” With that, she released his hand, curtsied, and walked out of the room.

*

“YOU CERTAINLY GAVE us all a lesson in dignity.”

Startled, with her arms full of books she was replacing on a cleaned shelf, Deborah glanced down from her ladder to see Christopher standing inside the library door.

“I don’t think anyone would say so now.” Awkwardly, she piled the books on the shelf and began to climb down.

“We have manservants we can send up ladders,” he said mildly, coming to meet her.

“Oh, they have been. I was just doing a little extra while they have a rest. They will be back in a few moments. What do you think of the ceiling and the upper walls?”

“I think it makes a massive difference to the place, clean and bright. I like the white, edged with gold.”

“So do I,” she said with relief. “There is a new red Turkish carpet, quite unused that I found in the attic store. I think it will look very well in here.”

“I’m sure it will. Come and change and have tea.”

She glanced at him uncertainly. “Did you quarrel further with your grandfather?”

“I didn’t need to. Your dignified exit seemed to make more impression on him than the rest of us telling him off.”

She hesitated, then. “What of Rupert. Do you believe him? Do you think Dudley deliberately kept this quiet?”

“Possibly,” Christopher said with reluctance. “Their rivalry for Georgianna was fierce. She never needed to care for money or position, so Rupert won from sheer charm. But Dudley was there very quickly to fill the breach.”

“He took advantage.” Deborah glanced up at him. “Would he do more?”

Christopher frowned. "You mean kill Harlow just to have it blamed on Rupert? No, of course not! No way he could have, in any case. He wasn't a second and wasn't there."

"Then how did he get Rupert out of the country so quickly?"

Christopher stared at her.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm only thinking aloud."

"Maybe you should be," he said slowly. "One can be too close to family to see clearly."

"I don't believe for a moment that Dudley is a bad man," she said anxiously.

"But, we all do bad things occasionally." His gaze came back into focus on her face. His lips twitched into a faint, rueful smile. "I know I do."

Throughout the remaining day, those words kept coming back to her. She gathered he had a reputation for behaving badly and recklessly, that there were incidents with women and with dangerous wagers. But mostly, she thought his reputation came merely from a failure to conform. Apart from quickly controlled flare-ups against his grandfather, she had seen no further signs of the temper that had endangered her and Lizzie on their first encounter. In fact, she had found only kindness in him, to her and his household, and in his ambitions to better the lives of others. There was no wickedness in him.

And yet, he confessed to doing bad things. Did he mean marrying her? It hurt that he might regret doing so, but she had seen no other signs of this. In fact, she thought he was pleasantly surprised by the friendship growing between them. A friendship that made her heart ache for something more.

After his outburst in Rupert's sick room, Lord Hawfield seemed to have subsided into courtesy toward her. He watched her a good deal, which was not comfortable, but at least she sensed no outright hostility. In fact, she hoped he was readjusting his view of her, though that was probably over-optimistic.

They had just gathered in the drawing room for dinner when letters were brought in on a silvery tray by George, the new footman. He presented them to Christopher, who immediately passed one to Deborah and one to Dudley, before breaking the seal on the first of the others.

Surprised, Deborah unfolded her missive. She did not recognize the writing and glanced first at the signature. *Your friend, Hazel Curwen.*

“Hazel,” she said, startled. She had barely known her fellow woman of the bedchamber to the Princess of Wales, until the night they had hidden together in the tiny sitting room from the party—*orgy*—raging below. By the morning, the four of them had parted as friends sharing the one trouble.

And Hazel had not forgotten. She wrote from Brightoaks in Sussex, where she was the guest of Sir Joseph Sayle’s family. That in itself was odd, for Hazel had been going to her old governess in Essex, and she had always seemed to disapprove of Sir Joseph. However, while her hastily scribbled letter did not explain such matters, it did go straight to the point.

“Bad news?” Christopher asked, and she realized her expression must be betraying her.

“No,” she said, lowering the letter to meet his gaze. “It’s from one of the princess’s other ladies. She has discovered who tricked us, for he is trying to use that night against her. She is warning us against him.”

Lord Hawfield appeared to be listening with interest. At the other side of the room, Dudley was absorbed in his own letter, plucking agitatedly at his lower lip.

Christopher scowled. “Who?”

“Lord Barden.”

“The Regent’s snake,” Christopher said disgustedly. “I should have known.”

“Barden,” Hawfield repeated. “Why does his name keep cropping up?”

“Why, what else do you know about him?” Christopher asked at once.

Hawfield’s eyebrows flew up. “Don’t you remember? He was Rupert’s second in that damned duel.”

Christopher stared, pushing his letters aside. “No. I don’t think I ever knew that. I never even inquired.”

“But the two events cannot be connected, can they?” Deborah asked.

“No,” Christopher acknowledged. “And anyway, I don’t see how a second could have shot Rupert’s opponent, let alone why he would wish to. It must merely be coincidence.” He frowned at her. “But you will tell me of any sign of Barden, any slightest communication from him?”

“Of course.”

Christopher reached out and covered her hand with his. “We won’t let this stand.”

“Where’s your paper and ink, Chris?” Dudley said abruptly. “I need to

write a letter.”

“Now?” Faintly amused, Christopher released her hand and sat back. “Before dinner?”

“Yes, at once. Georgianna talks of coming here, and I must put her off.”

“Why?” Deborah asked at once. “She is most welcome. Unless you are planning to leave us?”

Dudley closed his mouth, clearly both anxious and unhappy. And Deborah understood. He didn’t want his wife here because Rupert was under the same roof. Most distinctly, there was an unhealthy jealousy there.

*

AS ON THE previous evening, Lord Hawfield retired early to write letters, saying he would look in on Rupert to say goodnight on the way.

“If he’s awake, we could play cards with him for an hour,” Christopher suggested. “Deborah?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I think I’ll just retire, too,” Dudley said. “Look after him for me. But you know he can’t stay here forever, Chris. Word will get out, and he’ll bring the law down upon us. That won’t be good for you.”

“Nor for any of us,” Christopher said mildly.

They found Rupert awake and alert. His earlier sleep seemed to have done him good, for his fever seemed less, and he welcomed a game of cards with enthusiasm.

“The old gentleman just came to say goodnight,” he observed as they sat on either edge of his bed. “Didn’t shout at me at all. What have you done to him?”

“Nothing. I expect he’s just tired.” Christopher shuffled the cards and suggested a simplified form of whist.

“Are we playing for money?” Rupert asked hopefully.

“Why, do you have any?”

“No, which is what I was hoping to remedy.”

“You never had any luck at cards.” Christopher dealt them a hand each. “Isn’t that what your duel was about?”

Rupert wrinkled his nose. “I was winning for once, which Harlow

remarked upon. I think he was being funny, but I took it as an accusation of cheating, and one thing led to another.” He shrugged irritably. “You know the rest.”

“Actually, I don’t. What made you choose Barden as your second?”

“He was there. I simply seized on the men next to me. Barden and Fenwick.”

“Then he wasn’t a particular friend of yours?” Deborah asked.

“Lord, no, barely knew the fellow, except from the card table. Fenwick is—was—a friend, though.”

Christopher picked up his cards. “And they did everything they should to resolve the quarrel before it got to pistols at dawn?”

“Yes, for when I woke in the morning, I realized I’d been an ass. However, I must have seriously offended, Harlow, for he wouldn’t hear of any apology.”

“You know this?” Deborah asked. “It isn’t just what Lord Barden told you?”

Rupert eyed her with curiosity. “I had it from Fenwick, who said Harlow didn’t want to look a coward by avoiding facing me. What do you have against Barden?”

“We don’t know yet,” Christopher replied. “But I suspect the man is a snake on more than the Regent’s business. Where was he during the actual duel?”

“With the other seconds, between Harlow and me, standing well back from the line of fire.”

“So you would have seen if he was armed? If *he* shot Harlow?”

Rupert’s smile was twisted. “I thought about all four of the seconds, over and over. None of them carried overcoats or anything else that could have hidden a weapon. Their arms were visible the whole time. And hung at their sides.”

“Hmm.” Christopher’s fingers flicked distractedly at the corner of a card. “Then who else was present? A surgeon?”

“Yes.”

“Was he with the others?”

Rupert frowned. “Actually, no. He didn’t approve of violence and refused to watch. He stayed in the coach.”

“Did he, by God?”

“Yes, but Chris, he’s a *doctor*,” Rupert exclaimed. “He wouldn’t shoot anyone!”

Christopher raised his eyebrows. “A doctor who disapproved of violence and took your money to attend a duel? Did he attend Harlow when he fell?”

Rupert rubbed his forehead. “That bit’s something of a blur...but yes, he was there. We were all crowded around Harlow. I could see he was dead. But the doctor took his pulse and declared him deceased. I was stunned. My pistol was wide of the mark, Chris. I was deloping. Even if I had pulled the trigger without knowing, I could never have hit him. But he died.” He raised rather haunted eyes to his cousin. “And do you know what else I think about? I think he was deloping, too. I don’t think he meant to hit me either. And yet, he died.”

“What happened then?” Christopher asked.

“His seconds carried him to the coach. Fenwick and Barden hustled me away to Dudley, who had me down at the docks before breakfast.”

“And the doctor?” Deborah asked. “Where did he go? With you?”

“No. I think he went with Harlow.”

“What is his name?” Christopher asked.

“No idea. Barden would know, though. Or Fenwick, probably. Does this mean you believe me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Christopher asked evenly.

Rupert’s smile was twisted. “My own brother doesn’t.”

His own brother, Deborah reflected, had conflicting motives.

“Are we going to play?” Christopher asked. “Or jabber all night?”

From then on, he seemed to relax into a mood of casual entertainment, more like the Christopher who had walked with her to the lake and kissed her. He bantered with her and with his cousin, making them both laugh. Deborah was almost surprised to realize that worry over Barden and Hawfield’s dislike and Rupert’s problems had faded into the background and that she was genuinely enjoying herself.

It was tempting to stay in this comfortable companionship, but it came to her as it grew late, that the cousins might wish to have a conversation without her, not least about the possible arrival of Dudley’s wife. So, at the end of the next game, she announced, “I am for bed, so I’ll bid you good night.”

“One more game,” Rupert coaxed as she rose from the bed.

“No, I shall only fall asleep. Remember, you need plenty of rest, cousin.”

Christopher rose with her, accompanying her to the door. There, he paused a moment.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“For what?”

“Your company.” He took her hand and kissed it. Sensation flooded out from beneath his lips, spreading heat and a helpless wish that things between them were different. “Good night.”

“Good night,” she managed as she dragged her hand free and fled.

*

CHRISTOPHER CLOSED THE door behind her with a slightly twisted smile. It would not be so easy to win his wife—if and when he decided he wanted to.

Becoming aware of Rupert’s gaze, he dropped onto the bed once more and gathered up the cards. “What?”

“You don’t need to stay. I know you would rather be with your wife.”

Christopher lifted one eyebrow. “No, you don’t.”

“You can stop pretending this marriage of convenience nonsense. No one would marry that girl for mere convenience. She’s beautiful, and she’s funny and kind and clearly worth at least a dozen of...of most other females I’ve ever met,” he finished rather lamely.

Christopher shrugged. “It’s true. I liked her. It wouldn’t have been terribly convenient if we hadn’t liked each other.”

“Oh, stop it, Chris. I’ve never seen you look at a woman as you do your wife.”

“And how is that? With the respect she deserves?” Christopher retorted.

“Yes,” Rupert allowed. “But also...as though she were some precious piece of porcelain that might break. You protect her like a mother hen, watch her like a hawk, and when you think no one is looking, you make any excuse to touch her, and your expression is positively—”

He broke off under Christopher’s dangerous glare.

“Positively, what?” Christopher encouraged.

“Moonstruck,” Rupert said defiantly. “Glare at me all you want. You might have married her for convenience, but you’re more than half in love with her.”

“No, I’m not,” Christopher said, revolted. *Am I? Please, God, no.*

“Cheer up. She clearly adores you, too.”

I wish she did. “Oh, stop your flannel. This marriage suits us very well, and I’ll thank you to stay out of it. One more hand.”

“Well, don’t hang back too long,” Rupert warned, his eyes gleaming mischief. “Or someone else might just step in and win her from under your nose. I might be tempted to cut you out myself.”

“Ha!” Christopher said derisively. “Stop jabbering nonsense and play.”



Chapter Eleven

THE FOLLOWING DAY was a good one for Deborah. Rupert looked much improved and was up and dressed by luncheon. Lord Hawfield seemed to have withdrawn his hostility, at least temporarily. In among the work of finishing off the library and the terrace room, and seeing off Mr. Gates, who was traveling in search of pupils for the school, she and Christopher found time for a pleasant walk down to the lake.

“Oh, look, there’s a little boat,” she exclaimed in delight, catching sight of the bobbing vessel, which seemed to be tied to the willow tree at the end of the path.

“There’s a tumbled-down boathouse at the far end. I found this among other damaged vessels. I patched it up, and it seems to be water-tight. Would you care to go out?”

“I’d love to,” she said eagerly, and they ran the rest of the way like children.

Unhooking the rope from the tree, he pulled the boat to the edge of the water and handed her in. She sat on one of the two benches. Christopher clambered in and sat on the other. He took up the oars and began to row toward the center of the lake and from there around the bend toward the boathouse.

They did not speak much, but a feeling of contentment stole over her. Her muscles relaxed, and she enjoyed the sensation of floating in the sunshine as if they were the only people in the world. There was only the gentle whisper of the breeze in overhanging leaves and the soft splash and creak of the oars. Birds sang in the distance, and a bee buzzed past her face.

Christopher propped up the oars and let them drift, leaning back and lifting his face to the sun. She basked in his lazy company—another facet of his character, beguiling in its contrast to his usual, constant activity. He looked happy and handsome, and her heart fluttered to think this man was her husband.

She moved her foot from a sudden, uncomfortable chill, and a small splash attracted her attention.

She sat up straight. "Oh, no! Christopher, we're letting in water!"

He sat up so quickly, he almost lost an oar. Grabbing for it, he caused the boat to rock precariously, and more water flooded in around her feet. Hastily, he kicked a small tin bowl toward her. "Can you bail out the water?"

At once, she began dementedly scooping the water from the bottom of the boat and throwing it out into the lake. At the same time, Christopher was heaving on the oars with such speed that they glided toward the shore.

At some point, she realized she was laughing. Christopher cast her an anxious glance, as though afraid she was hysterical, and then an answering grin lit his face. She laughed so hard it was difficult to bail, and in the end, a few feet from the shore, he gave up rowing and jumped over the side, up to his thighs in water. Seizing her around the waist, he hauled her into his arms and waded to the shore.

There, he collapsed, and they lay side by side on the grass as the boat disappeared into the depths.

"Poor, gallant little boat," she mourned.

"Never mind. We'll get another." He turned his head to look at her, smiling. "Most ladies would be shrieking and telling me off for my unforgivable carelessness and their ruined gowns."

"Oh, well, this is only my old working gown, and I have always lacked sensibility."

His brow twitched. Unexpectedly, his hand came up and smoothed her hair. "No, you don't."

In surprise, she turned her head to face him, and her cheek came into contact with his hand. His finger moved, idly caressing, catching at her breath. It struck her that she could lie here with him like this forever, saying nothing, just drowning in his warm, intense eyes, melting beneath the sweet, lazy stroke of his fingers.

His lips quirked, and his hand fell away as he leapt up. "Come, we must get you home and dry."

"It's you who are soaking," she protested, ashamed of her selfish preoccupation. She rose quickly. "We should hurry."

*

AN HOUR LATER, Deborah supervised the laying of the red Turkish carpet on the polished library floor, and she and Christopher sat on the sofa in the window and admired their surroundings.

“You’ve worked wonders in here,” Christopher said. “I never imagined this room could be so charming.”

“I think I will like to sit in here, especially on winter evenings. But at any time, it is a peaceful room,”

He glanced down at her. “Do you feel the need for peace? Are you troubled?”

She thought about it. It had been a good day, especially at the lake. She smiled and shook her head. “No. I’ve asked them to serve tea in the terrace room, which does still smell slightly of paint, but we can go outside if it’s too much.”

“Excellent idea. Rupert will join us. I’m sure the servants already know exactly who he is and what he’s hiding from, so there seems no harm.”

However, as they approached the terrace room, it seemed the perfection of the day was being torn asunder.

Raised voices quarreled angrily, most notably Rupert’s.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re about!” he said furiously. “It’s just a repeat of after the duel. You got rid of me then so you could marry Georgianna, and now you want rid of me again because she’s coming here. And yes, I do know she is on her way because Chris told me. *Chris*, not you!”

Deborah and Chris exchanged rueful glances.

“Oh, for God’s sake, stop shouting,” Dudley said irritably as they walked in. “It wasn’t like that then or now. I *forgot* to tell you Georgianna is coming. Probably because it makes no difference to you. Now you are so much improved, you need to be away from here for your own safety.”

“*Your* safety,” Rupert snarled. “Are you afraid I’ll take her from you even now? Or just that I’ll find out what you did?”

“Rupert, sit down,” Christopher said shortly. “You’ll frighten the servants. Dudley, he’s not going anywhere for another couple of days. I know for a fact the excisemen have left the area, so he’s in no danger.”

Rupert sat, still fuming, and muttered an apology to Deborah.

Clearly, the new beauty of the room was not going to get the attention it deserved, but she tried her best, in a desperate effort to change the subject and calm Rupert's temper.

"What do you think, Christopher? Is it too bare or just elegantly spacious?"

"I like it," he said. "You have worked magic here, too. I glanced in at the salons earlier, and they are looking quite magnificent. Don't you think, sir?" he added to his grandfather, who had walked into the room.

"You have taste," Lord Hawfield allowed. "And you're not afraid of hard work."

"Thank you," Deborah murmured, stunned by the accolade.

Tea was brought in, and Deborah poured it out. She almost hoped the moment of ill-feeling had passed when Rupert burst out, "What is Barden to you, Dudley?"

"Barden?" Dudley said, startled. "Nothing. I barely know the man. You chose him as your second in your ill-advised duel."

"But you spoke to him, didn't you? You told him to bring me straight to you afterward, just as if you knew something would happen."

"Of course I did!" Dudley said, goaded. "You were fighting a damned duel!"

Rupert pounced. "So you *did* speak to him? Did you tell him to kill Harlow?"

"Of course, I did not! And how the devil could he have done so?"

"Then tell me what happened," Rupert challenged. "How come Harlow died when neither Barden nor I shot him? Did you know the doctor?"

"Oh, for the love of God! Do I have to listen to this? Forgive me, Deborah." With a hasty bow, Dudley stalked from the room.

"Nicely done, Rupert," Christopher observed. "A master-class in how to learn nothing while riling your brother to the extent he will no longer speak to you."

Rupert growled. "I've spent nearly two years doing nothing. I won't spend another with my name blackened. And I'll tell you something else, Dudley is up to his neck in this. He knows a good deal more than he's saying."

*

IT WAS, PERHAPS, as well that they dined that night at Letchworth House, giving the brothers an evening apart to cool off.

“What started the argument off?” Christopher asked Dudley as the carriage began its journey.

Dudley shrugged impatiently. “I suggested he go back to his ship first thing tomorrow.”

“Just because you are expecting your wife tomorrow?” Deborah said. “Cousin, you should have more faith in her if not in yourself.”

She meant it at the time, and yet almost as soon as they entered Coggleton House, the advice rang hollow in her ears.

They were shown immediately up to the drawing room, where her mother and Lucy were already ensconced along with Lady Letchworth, Sir Edmund, and Mr. and Mrs. Ireton. As hostess, Lady Letchworth came immediately to greet them, but for some reason, Deborah’s attention had strayed to Mrs. Ireton, whose face had lit up in animated welcome. Deborah had never quite realized her beauty before, had never seen that the smile behind it was aimed solely at Christopher.

Only then did she begin to understand Dudley’s full sense of futility, fighting against an earlier love that had never formally ended. She had heard rumors of Christopher’s amorous affairs in London, but foolishly, it had never entered her head that there was one almost on her doorstep.

Keeping the smile plastered to her face, she tried to shore up her crumbling world, reminding herself that nothing had changed, that a smile meant nothing. That even if it did, this was what she agreed to. He was free to follow his heart. She had never imagined that hers would be lost to him.

It isn’t, she tried to assure herself as she sat by her mother to hear the latest news. *It would be impossible in the mere week since we met. We are simply friends, and I am trying to adjust to my new life.* But either way made no difference. She would have to endure.

For now, she tried to concentrate on what her mother was saying. Stephen had fallen and skinned his knee. Giles thought he might like Harrow School, though it was horrifically expensive, and Lucy...

“Mama,” Lucy said between her teeth, from which Deborah gathered her

mother had been about to say something indiscreet, just as Mr. Ireton was approaching them. He was a slightly raffish looking man of medium height and smooth, good looks. His posture declared boredom, although there seemed to be a gleam of at least pretended interest in his eyes as he sat down by Deborah.

“Mrs. Halland, how charming to meet you at last. I have heard so much about you.”

“Have you?” Deborah said in surprise.

“Indeed, and I believe it is my honor to escort you to dinner this evening, so I thought we should begin our acquaintance at once.”

“How thoughtful.” For some reason, his gaze disconcerted her. It seemed to imply too great an intimacy, though she could not tell how or why. Scratching around for trivial topics of conversation, she said, “Do you and Mrs. Ireton make a long stay at Coggleton House?”

He shrugged. “My wife might stay here for the summer, but I plan to return to my own estates in the south next week.” He smiled. “So, you must make the most of me.”

She smiled politely in response, although she had no idea what he meant.

She was glad when dinner was announced. Although she would have to spend it beside Mr. Ireton, at least she would have company on her other side. Mr. Ireton rose, bowing, and when she laid her fingertips lightly on his sleeve, he covered them with his hand in a gesture that was not quite a friendly pat.

With relief, it came to her that he was flirting with her. Some gentlemen considered it the only way to converse with a lady, so she knew she should not refine upon it. On the other hand, she could not help wondering if he actually found her attractive, if she *was* attractive. This question had never much concerned her before. Lucy was the beautiful sister who would make a good marriage. Deborah, as the eldest, had been more concerned with duty and earning enough money to keep the family until said marriage. She had never expected to be married at all, and it had never entered her head that she might be pretty, let alone that she might care.

I don't care, she assured herself as Ireton held her chair and bent solicitously over her. Dudley sat on her other side.

“So, are you not terribly bored over at Gosmere Hall?” Ireton asked as they began to eat.

“Oh, no. There is much to be done in the house to open it up and refurbish it. Then there is the garden, and Christopher is founding a school in the old dower house.”

Ireton looked amused. “Which is why I ask about boredom. Forgive me, but it sounds deadly dull. Do you not miss London?”

“No. I prefer a quieter life.”

He smiled. “That isn’t what I hear.”

Startled, she couldn’t help her gaze flying to his. His eyes glittered, warm and knowing and absolutely without respect.

He knew about the scandal, the ruin from which her marriage was supposed to save her.

She forced an amused smile to her lips. “I assure you, I know my own mind best.” She turned to Dudley, who, fortunately, had reached a gap in his conversation with her mother. “Did Christopher warn you against the boats you might find by the lake?” she asked, seizing at the first topic to enter her head.

“Why, no, are they rotten?”

She entertained him with a shortened version of the afternoon’s adventure. He laughed, and she even won a quick grin from Christopher seated on the other side of the table beside Mrs. Ireton.

Of course, she could not avoid talking to her other dinner companion for the rest of the meal, but she tried to preempt unsuitable or insulting subjects by throwing out mundane comments about the excellence of the food or the charming decoration of the dining room. He responded in kind, although his voice was indulgent rather than chastened. He was playing with her.

Avoiding looking at him meant she also had too much time to observe other people. Christopher seemed quite engrossed in his conversation with Mrs. Ireton and laughed frequently. The fascinating smile Deborah had grown used to was suddenly annoying when she saw it directed at another woman.

“What is it?” Ireton murmured. “You didn’t expect him to be faithful, did you?”

“I have no idea who or what you are talking about.”

“My dear lady, we all know yours is a match made in heaven. And what is sauce for the goose...”

“You must excuse me, sir.” With relief, she rose to follow Lady

Letchworth and the other ladies from the room. Mrs. Ireton lingered just a little too long, bending over Christopher to speak in familiar, bantering tones.

“I’m so glad you are here, Deb,” Lucy said beside her, linking arms as they left the dining room. “You must know Sir Edmund is going to announce...oh hush, here comes his sister.”

Deborah gave Lucy’s arm an affectionate squeeze. “Good,” she murmured. She was glad for her sister’s happiness, but also, practically speaking, once the betrothal was announced, whatever scandal Mr. Ireton had heard could no longer hurt Lucy. At least, not to the same extent.

After visiting the cloakroom set aside for their comfort, the ladies repaired to the drawing room where, on Lucy’s inquiry, she retold the story of the capsizing boat on the lake.

“You must have got soaking wet!” exclaimed her mother.

“Were you very frightened?” Mrs. Ireton asked, smiling sympathetically.

“Actually, no, I probably should have been, but at the time, it just seemed funny.”

“Funny!” her mother repeated in outrage. “Christopher must take better care of you, and so I shall tell him!”

“He took perfect care. It was he who was wet to the waist while I suffered little more than a damp hem. And water-stained boots. And in any case, we were never in any real danger. Is that a new headdress, Mama?”

Her mother allowed herself to be distracted, and a few moments later, Deborah noticed she and Lady Letchworth sat together in quiet conversation, no doubt on the subject of the betrothal about to be announced.

Before very long, Sir Edmund led the gentlemen into the drawing room, and while his mother rang for tea, he suggested a walk for the younger people. Since this was clearly a thinly veiled invitation to Lucy, Deborah rose at once to play chaperone.

“What an excellent notion,” Mrs. Ireton agreed. “Christopher, you and Lord Bilston must come, too.”

“Will your shawl be warm enough?” Mr. Ireton’s voice sounded too close to Deborah’s ear, startling her. At the same time, he adjusted the folds around her shoulders, and she drew away from him under the pretense of hurrying after Lucy. Inevitably, as they crossed the front hall to the door, Lucy held Sir Edmund’s arm, while behind her, she knew Mrs. Ireton had claimed Christopher’s. To avoid Ireton, Deborah attached herself to Dudley, but to

her annoyance, a footman accosted them with a note on a silver tray.

“My lord, this was brought from Gosmere Hall.”

“For me?” Dudley said in surprise, picking it up. Almost at once, his face lit, and then fell ludicrously into something very like despair. “It’s from my wife... Go on, cousin, I’ll join in a moment.”

There was nothing for her to do but walk on to Mr. Ireton, who was civilly holding the door for her. Outside, it seemed uncivil not to accept his arm, especially since he was ushering her in the same direction as the others, into a pleasant garden. The light was fading, but a few lanterns had been lit to avoid any gloom.

“You are much more beautiful than I expected,” he said.

“You are very kind to say so,” she replied somewhat mechanically, for her attention was on Christopher and Mrs. Ireton in front of them. She clung to his arm, turning up her lovely face to his. Jealousy clawed at Deborah’s stomach, the sharp pain taking her by surprise.

“Not kind. There is a certain glowing quality to innocence that draws one. I suppose I am impressed that you radiate such a glow.”

She blinked. “There is no need to be impressed. There is no cleverness. I always look the same.”

“If that is what your husband tells you, he has lost his touch. I am quite a connoisseur of the female sex, you know.”

“Congratulations,” she said politely, drawing a surprised breath of laughter from him.

“You have a nimble tongue,” he murmured, leaning closer. “Let us see what else you can do with it.” A sharp tug drew her toward a path on the left that led straight toward a maze of high hedges.

Instinctively, she dug in her heels, which clearly amused him.

“Don’t be afraid. I am very good at love play and shan’t disappoint you.”

“Sir, I am already disappointed,” Deborah said indignantly as she pulled free of him. “I find you offensive!”

His arm slid around her waist, hauling her into the maze path, out of sight of those in front. “No, you don’t. But if you insist, we can make it quick and exciting with your husband and my wife only yards away. And yet, no one will guess our mutual pleasure.”

“What is wrong with you?” Deborah demanded and stamped so hard on his foot that his hold loosened. Immediately, she whisked herself away and

came face to face with her husband and Mrs. Ireton. “Mr. Ireton slipped,” she said shortly.

Christopher’s eyes narrowed as he glanced swiftly from her to Ireton. She had no idea how he would regard her detour with Ireton, but from the flash of fury in his eyes, he would at least defend her right to choose.

He took a hasty step toward Ireton, and at once, Deborah caught his arm. She could not have a fight ruining Lucy’s engagement. “Perhaps you could catch up with Lucy?”

He scowled down at her for an instant, and she forced a smile. “I am fine. And I have Mrs. Ireton to keep me company.”

His lips twisted into a rueful smile, and then he strode off along the path.

“Clever,” Mrs. Ireton drawled. “But there is no need. I am not angry with you.”

“I see no reason why you would be.”

Mrs. Ireton searched her face as though looking for signs of intelligence and finding none. “Of course, you do not. Shall we send my naughty husband inside?”

“He is your husband, ma’am.”

Mrs. Ireton’s eyes narrowed. “But would you complain about him?”

“I am not so vulgar,”

“And she would have us believe,” Ireton said, a slight edge to his amused tone, “that she is not so guilty.”

Deborah tilted her chin. “Then, *you* would complain of *me*?”

“I am not so crass,” he shot back. “Besides which, you are of no concern to me beyond your colorful past that promises such pleasure for the future... to your husband, of course.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Deborah turned away in the direction of the house, putting one foot determinedly in front of the other.

Ireton laughed. “Little liar. My dear, there is no point. The world knows it was you who spent the night in orgiastic pleasures at Connaught Place—the night *after* Her Highness departed.”

A gasp behind made Deborah spin back. She had been too agitated to hear the return of the others. Lucy’s panicked face gazed at her in horror and fear. Beside her, Sir Edmund stared in shock. As if involuntarily, he stepped away from Lucy.



Chapter Twelve

“**F**REDERICA, TAKE EVERYONE back inside,” Christopher said in a hard voice.

“Chris, please—” Mrs. Ireton began to plead.

“Now,” Christopher said pleasantly.

The damage was done. Nothing could save this evening for Lucy now. Deborah, white-faced, seized Lucy’s cold hand and dragged her away, but Mrs. Ireton was before her, her arm linked to her brother’s, hauling him away with something very like fright.

As she reached the front steps, a thud and a groan made Deborah look behind her. But she could not see the garden path, and there was no sign of either Ireton or Christopher.

Lucy said nothing at all. Pale and silent, she returned to the drawing room with Deborah and went immediately to sit by her mother. Sir Edmund sat at the other side of the room. The mothers of the supposedly happy couple looked perplexed.

Now was, presumably, to have been the moment of announcement, but Sir Edmund, stiff-lipped, said nothing at all.

Almost blindly, Deborah took a cup of tea from Lady Letchworth, murmuring a word of thanks before going to seat herself on a vacant sofa. She wondered with despair if Christopher would fight a duel with Ireton, or if Christopher would just try and persuade him to keep his mouth shut.

Dudley sat down heavily beside her. “I don’t suppose you’d agree to order the carriage early?” he suggested quietly.

“Why, is something wrong?”

“No, oh no, it’s just that my wife is at Gosmere Hall. She arrived this evening shortly after we left, and she doesn’t know...”

“About Rupert?” Deborah murmured. “I’m sure you and I could go once we’ve finished tea, and if the others wish to stay longer, we can always send the carriage back. But Dudley—” She broke off as Christopher strolled into the room.

He didn't appear to have a hair out of place, although for some reason, he was wearing gloves, which he seemed to have forgotten as he took his tea from Lady Letchworth. He came and perched on the arm of Deborah's sofa.

"Where did you leave my husband?" Mrs. Ireton asked with a reasonable imitation of amusement.

"He got lost in the maze, silly clunch," Christopher said mildly. "He sent me away. So I wouldn't be surprised if he has fallen over in the dark. Send a search party to fetch him in ten minutes."

"Lady Bilston is at Gosmere," Deborah said bluntly. "She arrived early. Do you think Dudley and I should go and welcome her? The sad choice is between being rude to her or to Lady Letchworth."

"Oh, you must not stand on ceremony with me, my dear," Lady Letchworth declared. "The dinner was quite informal, and Lady Bilston will be all alone at Gosmere, will she not?"

This, of course, was not Dudley's chief concern, but Deborah merely agreed and thanked her hostess for her kind understanding. "You must come for dinner at Gosmere now we have got the most useful rooms in order," she said recklessly.

A footman appeared at the door. "The carriage is ready for Mrs. Shelby, my lady."

Lady Letchworth's eyebrows flew up, "Oh my, are you going so early, too?"

"Miss Shelby is feeling unwell," Sir Edmund said with odd abruptness. "I took the liberty of ordering their carriage."

"Oh, thank you, sir, most kind," Deborah's mother said worriedly. "No, don't come down with us, Lady Letchworth, you have your other guests. Thank you for the most enjoyable dinner! Goodnight! Deborah, come and see us tomorrow." Her voice disappeared out of the door with Lucy, after one stony curtsy, trailing after her.

"Excuse me," Deborah murmured and hurried out in their wake. She found them in the hall, already wrapped in cloaks, being shown out of the front door to the waiting carriage. Deborah all but ran after them.

"Lucy," she called urgently.

In the flaring lantern light, Lucy turned on her a face of such mingled misery and anger that Deborah was brought up short.

"Don't," Lucy said, her voice trembling with emotion. "Don't speak to

me, Deborah. Not tonight. Maybe never. I wish you had never come home.”

Deborah could only stare helplessly as her sister vanished into the carriage after their mother. The door was closed and the steps raised, and the carriage trundled off toward the drive.

Deborah found she was shaking. How could everything have gone so horribly wrong? Only this afternoon, she had been so foolishly content, so hopeful.

Slowly, she turned and walked back into the house. The footman closed the door behind her, and she tried to compose her features for her return to the drawing room. At least the evening would soon be over.

But it seemed there was one more hurdle to overcome. As she rounded the corner to the drawing room, she came upon a tableau that seemed to slice straight through her heart.

Christopher stood in the shadows. Close beside him leaned Frederica Ireton, her hand tenderly cupping Christopher’s cheek. She stood on tiptoes as if they had just kissed or were about to. And Christopher’s fingers were wrapped around her wrist. He was smiling—until he glanced up and saw Deborah.

“Are you ready to go?” Deborah said somehow. Her voice did not even shake. “I shall just say my farewells to Lady Letchworth.”

Somehow, she got past them without looking, said everything that was civil to her hostess and Sir Edmund, and collected the others to leave.

As she left the drawing room once more, Christopher was nowhere to be seen. But Mrs. Ireton stood where she had left her.

The woman smiled at her. “Don’t be angry, Mrs. Halland. Chris and I are old friends.”

“He has many old friends,” Deborah said without thought. Only when the smile died on Mrs. Ireton’s face did she realize how her words could be taken. That Frederica Ireton was merely one of many.

Only Deborah was not.

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SHE SAT OPPOSITE Christopher in the carriage, gazing mostly at his hands, ungloved once more. She kept her expression carefully amiable. Dudley was

fidgety, and his grandfather watched him sardonically.

“Well, that was a difficult evening,” Christopher observed.

The glow from the lanterns on the outside of the carriage flickered over his hands and thighs, emphasizing strange patterns on one hand. He covered it with the other, and she finally understood and raised her gaze to his face.

“Did you fight?” she asked abruptly.

He shook his head. “Not really.”

But he had hit him. It was all that explained the marks on his hand. It was all that explained Ireton’s absence from the drawing room and the farewells. In spite of everything, she wished to bathe the abrasions for him.

“You shouldn’t have,” she said flatly. Not that she minded Ireton being struck. Reprehensibly, she wished it was for the insult to her and not for that given to Ireton’s wife.

He shrugged. “It was purely for fun. But, yes, I seem to have contributed more than my share to the awfulness of the evening. I shouldn’t have brought Lucy and Letchworth back to you. I just didn’t want to leave you alone with those two.”

Those two. Was that contempt? Or just his careless way of talking? Impossible to tell, and in any case, Lord Hawfield broke in with, “What are you talking about? It was a very odd evening. Started off very pleasantly, and with some hint of a great event, and then everything seemed to fizzle out. Dudley starts jumping about like a scalded cat, the son-in-law goes to bed, and we’re all in the carriage home by ten! What is going on?”

“Dudley got word his wife has arrived at Gosmere,” Christopher said. “It’s natural he should want to see her.”

Hawfield gave a bark of laughter. “Less natural that he’s afraid to leave her alone with his brother.”

Dudley glared but said nothing.

Deborah spent the rest of the journey pondering the point of marriage. There seemed to be no trust, no happiness in Dudley’s. There could certainly be none in her own. As for the Iretons, they seemed more interested in other people’s spouses. And Lucy... She was desperate to marry a man who was paltry enough to reject her on the grounds of lies told by a rake about her sister.

When they eventually arrived back at Gosmere Hall, Dudley strode inside, demanding of George the footman, “Where is my wife?”

“I believe Lady Bilston has retired, my lord,” George replied. “Immediately after a light supper. She was fatigued after her journey.”

Dudley seemed to deflate.

His grandfather laughed. “No need for us to have left early after all. Might as well have stayed!”

Clearly, Dudley did not think so, for he set off immediately upstairs, going in the direction not of his own and his wife’s rooms, but of his brother’s.

Lord Hawfield shook his head. “They’ll come to blows over this, Chris. You’ll have to stop them.”

“Don’t you think they’re old enough to sort it out themselves?” Christopher said impatiently.

“Obviously not,” Hawfield said dryly.

“Last drink?” Christopher suggested.

“No, I’m for bed,” his grandfather replied with a sardonic twist of the lips. “I’m sure I’ll need my strength for the morning’s histrionics. Good night.”

“Goodnight,” Deborah murmured. She barely glanced at Christopher as she made to follow Hawfield toward the stairs.

He caught her hand. “Wait. I would like to talk, to explain.”

She forced a smile. “There is no need. I am not offended. The rest of it, the scandal finally catching up with me, its effect on Lucy, we can discuss tomorrow. I am too tired now.”

His piercing eyes searched hers, and she had to work hard to keep from betraying her distress. She was only too aware of the latent strength in his fingers. God knew she liked his touch, but at this moment, she didn’t feel strong enough to bear it. She could shatter at any moment. Unthinkable to do so in his company.

“Deborah,” he said gently. “A moment clears up any misunderstanding.”

She smiled as kindly as she knew how. “There is no misunderstanding, Christopher. I was content to accept this marriage on the terms you offered it. I am still content.”

A frown tugged at his brow, as though he was either surprised or displeased, but it seemed his mind was not on his own indiscretion. “Ireton is a bit of a loose screw, but he now understands the line he cannot cross. We will get to the bottom of this scandal and reverse it.”

“Of course,” she said brightly, slipping her hand free. “Goodnight, Christopher.”

It was, of course, ignominious flight. But she forced herself to tread lightly, without obvious care or hurry. And she thought he watched her with something like consternation. Was there hope in that? Or was she still clutching at straws that would break in the slightest breeze?

*

A NIGHT OF pointless, foolish tears that she could not prevent was not conducive to restful sleep. She woke from an unhappy doze only a little after dawn. Grief for lost hopes she had barely acknowledged lay heavy on her, but she could not bear to wallow any longer. She threw off the covers, and while she washed and dressed without the aid of Anne, she planned her day of work.

But first, she should check on Rupert’s health and make sure she was available to welcome Dudley’s wife when she should awake. Accordingly, she walked briskly along the passages toward the sick room, trying to thrust from her mind the possibility of encountering Christopher either in the passage or in Rupert’s chamber. Nothing had changed. They were still friends.

She scratched at Rupert’s door and, receiving no answer, opened it a crack. “May I come in?” she asked, low.

Since her only reply was silence, she assumed he was asleep and went in to check on his temperature, though she would leave the dressing on his wound until later. But as she walked toward the bed, she realized it was empty. The covers had been pulled back, and a folded sheet of paper lay on the pillow.

With unreasonable foreboding, she picked up the paper and turned it. It bore no name, no direction. But when she glanced around the bare chamber, she knew he had gone.

She swallowed and unfolded the paper.

My thanks for everything. I find it necessary to return to the ship at once. Hope you understand. R.

She frowned at the unsatisfactory words. What did he mean? Why was it necessary to return to his ship? Because Lady Bilston had arrived? Whatever his reason, she doubted his recovery would be aided by careering across the country to wherever the ship was moored.

Drat, the boy.

Crumpling the paper, she left the chamber and walked back toward her own, thinking. Should she wake Christopher and tell him? Should they make an effort to bring Rupert back? Whatever the physical risks concerning his wound, he was a grown man, and pursuing him, surely, would only draw attention to him. Besides which, she had no idea where the ship was.

As she approached the guest bedchambers where Lord Hawfield and Lord and Lady Bilston were quartered, she saw a woman standing by the open door of Lady Bilston's room. A well-dressed lady's maid, facing into the chamber, with her hands clutching her cap.

Deborah walked faster. "Whatever is the matter?" she asked.

The woman whipped around, expressions of fear and despair and determination chasing each other across her stern-featured face. She gave a grudging curtsy. "Nothing, ma'am."

"Are you Lady Bilston's maid? Is her ladyship quite comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you, ma'am."

Deborah would merely have walked on, leaving the maid to sort out her own problems, except that the woman made an instinctive movement to block the doorway. Deborah paused again, regarding her.

"If you please," she said amiably.

"Her ladyship is asleep."

"I don't think so," Deborah said, although she couldn't have said why beyond the obvious fact that the maid was hiding something. She walked forward, forcing the maid to step back, and entered an empty chamber. The bed had been slept in, and clothing was scattered about.

"What is your name?" Deborah asked.

"Marvin, ma'am."

"Why are you so concerned, Marvin?"

Marvin's shoulders slumped. "She's dressed without me, and it's too early for breakfast."

"Then she has probably gone for a walk, either inside or outside."

"Yes, ma'am."

It crossed Deborah's mind that Marvin knew something of the situation here, that her mistress had once been betrothed to the other, disreputable brother who was here on a secret visit. Did she doubt her mistress? Or Rupert.

"Set your mind at rest," Deborah advised. "Go and ask in the servants' hall. Mrs. Dawson and Hunter are both helpful and discreet. And your dramatics will do your mistress no good."

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am."

Once in her chamber, still uneasy, Deborah decided to set her own mind at rest. The gown she wore was an old walking dress that had doubled as a riding habit. Hastily, she found her hat and her cloak, donned boots instead of her indoor shoes, and sallied forth to the stables.

In the yard, Matthew, the groom, was brushing Nightshade, Christopher's favorite horse. Seeing Deborah, he came toward her, tugging his forelock. "Morning, ma'am. You come to try out the mare?"

The mare was a gift from Christopher. She had met and made friends with the animal but not yet had the opportunity to ride her.

"Yes, I thought I would...is anyone else out at the moment?"

"Why, yes, ma'am. Seems everyone's up and about early this morning. Mr. Rupert went out an hour ago."

So much for Rupert remaining incognito. She just hoped the servants would be discreet if and when the excisemen returned.

"And her ladyship with him," Mathew added, relinquishing his brushes to a boy who trotted back to work on the big horse.

Deborah blinked. "Her ladyship? Lady Bilston?"

"Aye. Rode out with Mr. Rupert, happy as a lark."

Deborah's stomach tightened with unease. Dudley would not like his wife riding alone with Rupert. Obviously, Marvin knew that. All Deborah could do was insert herself into the party to dilute Dudley's inevitable jealousy.

She blinked, realizing two horses were now being saddled, one for Matthew. "Oh, you don't need to come, Matthew. I shall do fine on my own."

"He'll have my guts for garters if I let you ride alone, especially first time on a new horse. Don't worry. I won't get in the way."

It was a fight she was hardly guaranteed to win, and, in any case, she could not spare the time. So, she gave in gracefully and even used the groom's presence to her advantage. "Which way do you suppose the others

went? I would like to catch them up.”

Matthew pointed laconically westward. Toward the sea where, presumably, lurked Rupert’s smuggling vessel.

This was not good. Why would Dudley’s wife ride out with Rupert on such a journey? When her husband remained at Gosmere.

Oh, no. They could not be...eloping?

Of course not. Rupert would not do such a thing!

He was angry with Dudley last night. If he’s anything like Christopher—and I think he is—he does stupid things when he’s angry.

Which doesn’t mean that Lady Bilston does. She has made her choice. She will be saying goodbye to Rupert...

They rode off along the path, Deborah leading the way, Matthew staying respectfully several yards behind. She urged the mare into a canter, enjoying the animal’s quick response and the powerful movement beneath her. She kept her eyes peeled, peering through woods and over fields, in among grass and rocks, searching for any sign of other riders.

But they had an hour’s start on her. And after half an hour of riding, she began to worry that there was no sign of Lady Bilston returning.

Surely, surely, Rupert would not abduct her?

She increased her speed. Anyone under the threat of ruin through no fault of their own deserved her sympathy and her help.

With a surge of hope, she spotted a horse among the long grass on the side of the hill. She urged the mare off the path, over the uneven slope, and without warning, a huge man loomed up out of the grass, causing the mare to whinny in fright. With some effort, Deborah held the mare in check.

“Lummy, it’s yourself!” exclaimed the huge man, clutching his heart.

“Joshua?” she said, staring at the smuggler over whose head she had once broken a bottle. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“Came to fetch His Nibs back to the ship. Something came up.”

“He’s gone,” Deborah said blankly.

Joshua was looking despairingly at the sun. “I know. I’m late. I was meant to catch him up an hour ago at Branwell.” He loped further up the hill to catch the horse Deborah had seen from the path.

Branwell was a small but busy coastal town. Surely Rupert had not moored his smuggling vessel somewhere so public? But then, he had told Joshua days ago that it didn’t matter if the ship was searched. Perhaps this

wasn't as reckless as it seemed.

"Wait!" She urged the mare after him. "Joshua, why are you not with him?"

Joshua grinned and heaved himself awkwardly into the saddle. "He wanted time alone with the lady."

Her heart plummeted once more. "Oh, no. Did she go with him, Joshua?"

"They left side by side."

"Oh, the *devil*! Was he compelling her? Did he constrain her?"

"Course not!" Joshua said indignantly. "She seemed happy as a lark to me."

Deborah rubbed at her forehead in an effort to think. She wished she had slept better. Then she straightened in the saddle. "Very well. You must take me to the ship."

"Can't do that, ma'am!" Joshua said, shocked.

"You can, and you will. One moment." She turned the mare carefully on the uneven ground and rode back down to the path to where Matthew was just catching up. "Matthew, ride back to the house as quickly as you can, and speak alone to Lady Bilston's maid, Marvin. Put her in a carriage—discreetly—and send her to Branwell, where she is to meet her mistress and me. Do you understand?"

"Course I do," Matthew said affronted. "But, ma'am..."

"No time to argue, Matthew, just do it!" She wheeled the mare around and cantered off, catching up with the bewildered Joshua.

A quick glance behind showed her Matthew galloping off for home.

She *could* save this. She could, and she would. It wasn't just a determination to preserve her husband's family name when her own had been dragged so unfairly in the dirt. It was something to do with an expression in Dudley's face, a deep and all-consuming love for his wife. And her own barely acknowledged belief that Rupert, if he had ever loved Georgianna with such intensity, no longer did. If he was eloping with her, he did so from mere anger, and both his brother and sister-in-law would pay the price.

She couldn't allow that. Not if she could possibly prevent it.



Chapter Thirteen

CHRISTOPHER WOKE WITH a fuzzy head, which wasn't surprising since he had resorted to the brandy once Deborah had rejected his company.

She had never done that before, and he hadn't expected it to hurt. Certainly not when it was done with civility and grace and everything he had asked for in his wife. A complacent spouse who would follow her heart as he did his. A civilized marriage of convenience with the agreeable addition of the friendship forming between them.

Alcohol was not known for bringing clarity of thought, but after two glasses, he had realized there was more than friendship on his side. She made him comfortable, laughed with him, indulged him, behaved exactly as he wished when other women flirted with him. And yet he was ungrateful.

He hadn't wanted her to be hurt by Frederica pawing at him as she had. For that reason, he had been anxious to put the matter right. But she had seemed to care more for her sister's disappointment and simply wasn't interested enough to discuss anything with him.

During the third glass, he had wondered what it was he *did* want of her. By the time he'd poured the fourth, his imagination was full of ever-changing scenes in which she laughed up at him with her beautiful, shining, grey eyes, which sometimes clouded in the warmth of passion as she lay writing and naked in his arms. She walked at his side, rode with him, talked with him, told him her troubles, and supported him in his. She kissed him with those soft, yielding lips and cried out with joy.

As he had approached the end of that fourth glass, he had finally realized that nowhere in these increasingly warm scenes of his imagination was the cool, complacent wife he had asked for, the hostess and housekeeper and turner of blind eyes to his love affairs.

He had stared into his glass and finally understood that he didn't want affairs. Not now and not in the future. He didn't want Deborah, cool and civilized. He wanted her wild with love and tender with a wife's affection. He

wanted her true friendship. And worst of all, he wanted her to love him back.

I love my wife. How can I have been so blind and stupid?

He took one more drink, grinning with delight. He had thought of trying to win her before, just to see if he could, and if they would like it, but never had the desire been so strong, so desperate, and so relentless. This was recognition.

He wanted to storm into her chamber and tell her all this, kiss her until she was dizzy, and beg her to love him in return.

But the truth was, she didn't. Or she would have given him some kind of sign of jealousy over Frederica. Besides, he had poured large measures of brandy, and he had swayed as he got to his feet. Not an ideal condition in which to convince any woman of one's love, especially not one's wife.

And so he had stumbled up to bed, curiously happy despite his solitude.

And he thoroughly deserved his thick head the following morning.

Two cups of strong coffee, followed by immersing his head in the washbowl, helped considerably. He managed to shave without mishap and was mostly dressed and tying his cravat when an urgent knock heralded the arrival of his cousin Dudley.

"She's not here, and neither is Rupert," Dudley burst out.

"Deborah?" Christopher said, startled out of his reverie.

Dudley scowled at him. "Of course, not Deborah! My wife!"

"Well, they can't have vanished into thin air," Christopher said impatiently. "Try the breakfast parlor."

"Neither of them are in the breakfast parlor."

"Then ask the servants where they are," Christopher said. "They always know,"

Dudley sat down on the edge of Christopher's bed and buried his head in his hands. "Rupert is gone," he said indistinctly. "He has left nothing in his room, and he has taken my horse."

"He didn't come with much to leave in his chamber. He has probably ridden out with Georgianna. I imagine they need to clear the air. Have you spoken to Deborah?"

Dudley shook his head. "I haven't seen her. But what worries me more than anything is that no one can find Marvin, either. She is Georgianna's maid, and she never goes anywhere without her."

Christopher paused in the act of fastening his waistcoat buttons. "You

really believe she has run away with Rupert?”

“Don’t you?”

“No,” Christopher said flatly. “She never showed the remotest signs of pining for Rupert, and if he pined for her longer than a week, I’ll eat my own coat.”

“Perhaps they were carried away by seeing each other again.”

“What, in twelve hours? During most of which, they were both asleep? Separately!” Leaving Dudley to digest that, he rang the bell and demanded Hunter’s presence.

Dudley frowned at him, but with a hint of hope in his eyes. “You really believe I’m making a cake of myself?”

“Completely. She didn’t just marry you because she couldn’t have Rupert, you know. There’s too much trouble attached to our family for anyone to think that would be an easy option. Ah, Hunter, close the door.”

The butler entered and obeyed.

“Hunter, is Lady Bilston aware that Mr. Rupert was here?”

“Yes, sir, I believe Mrs. Dawson told her.”

“Did they spend the evening together?”

“No, sir. Mr. Rupert didn’t come downstairs after you left. He went to bed. Her ladyship ate a light supper and retired.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” Christopher said, casting his cousin an I-told-you-so look that made him grin reluctantly. “And where are they now?”

“I believe they went riding together, sir.”

Dudley’s face fell, and Christopher groaned.

Dismissing the butler, he said cajolingly, “There’s no reason they shouldn’t take a ride together.”

“Taking Marvin? And clearing out Rupert’s chamber?”

Christopher waved one disparaging hand. “You are making too much of that. Go and have breakfast. I’ll speak to Deborah.” *What a fool love makes of us*, he thought ruefully as Dudley left all but wringing his hands. For example, his heart should not be trying to jump into his throat just because he was going to talk to his wife in her bedchamber.

He made a point of sauntering there, though he could not help thinking that this was the first time he had ever called on her in her own rooms. It felt a little like a diplomatic visit to a foreign potentate whose friendship was not assured. Laughing at himself, he knocked on her door. Receiving no response

—after all, he was her husband—he walked in.

She was not in her rooms. He knew that before he looked, by a sense of emptiness, an absence of Deborah.

No doubt she was in the library or working on some other apartments. She was an industrious little... His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a crumpled piece of paper on the dressing table.

He hesitated, for they had agreed to respect each other's privacy. And if he was going to change the rules of their marriage, he would have to do so with her agreement. Only...only despite his dismissive words to Dudley, there really was something ominous about all these people vanishing so early in the morning.

He picked up the crumpled ball and smoothed it out. *My thanks for everything. I find it necessary to return to the ship at once. Hope you understand. R.*

Rupert *had* gone. Foolish with his arm not yet fully healed.

And if he had gone back to his ship, where was Georgianna? Unease twisted through him.

Five minutes later, he entered the breakfast parlor where Dudley breakfasted alone and morose.

“Rupert has gone back to his ship,” he said abruptly. “He left a note. But Dudley, because they left together, does not mean they *are* together.”

Dudley let his knife and fork fall with a clatter. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them to stare up at Christopher. “This is my fault. He was right, you know. I never told you about his claims after the duel, that he had never fired his pistol. I didn't believe him, didn't want to, and I made no effort to find out because I thought if he was innocent and came back, she would marry him. And then that he could still come back and ruin my life. I salved my conscience by keeping my eye on him, meeting him occasionally on these free-trading adventures. He actually seemed happy enough, and I convinced myself it was all for the best.”

He drew in a shuddering breath. “But in my heart, I knew why I did it. So did Rupert.”

“But Rupert would not run off *with your wife*,” Christopher insisted. “And she would not go!”

Dudley's mouth twisted. “Wouldn't he? In a temper? You saw how he was yesterday—quite rightly angry with me as I tried to get rid of him yet

again. In that mood, he could do anything, even if he regretted it the next day, the next hour.”

Christopher had to admit this was true. That damned temper, inherited from their grandfather, was a family failing he and Rupert shared.

He said reluctantly, “I think Deborah must have suspected the same thing and gone after them. I’m going to see if I can pick up their trail.”

Dudley jumped to his feet. “I’ll come with you! We need to go *now*.”

As he spoke, the door opened quietly, and a beautiful woman walked in. “Oh, where are you going now, Dudley? I have only just got here!”

Dudley’s mouth fell open.

Christopher suspected his was in much the same state, so he hastily pressed his lips together and swallowed. “Georgianna. How good to see you here. You have no idea how welcome you are.”

Dudley stumbled forward and swept his wife into a bear hug that made her laugh and protest together, although Christopher noticed she still returned the embrace with enthusiasm, even while she talked.

“Oh, Dudley, I am glad you missed me! Chris, this is a beautiful house, and I can’t wait to meet your wife. Oh, and I met Rupert this morning! Off on some mysterious adventure, but I’m so glad we met and talked, for I wouldn’t like him to hate me.”

After the initial relief of her arrival and the knowledge that Rupert’s temper hadn’t led him into elopement or, worse, abduction, Christopher began to realize that her presence left too many other mysteries.

“Was your maid not with you?” he asked as Dudley ushered her into the place next to him and went off to fill her a plate from the sideboard.

“Marvin?” she asked, amused. “Why would I take Marvin riding? I don’t think she *can* ride!”

“Then you don’t know where she is? Georgianna, where exactly have you been?”

“We rode west along the long, winding path that skirts the hill. And then I left Rupert to his adventure and rode back, although I’m afraid I got a little lost, but it was a lovely ride and—”

“Excuse me,” Christopher said abruptly and walked out of the room.

Another devastating possibility was clawing at his mind. A ridiculous idea born of jealousy and shame at his own selfish behavior in tying Deborah to this stifling marriage. She was doomed to give all and be uncomfortable

while he followed his heart in politics, educational experiments, and love. He hadn't expected love to lead to her, and neither had she.

But they had been married little more than a week. He must not be like Dudley and assume the worst before discovering any evidence.

Still, as he strode out of the house toward the stables, he could feel the pressure building behind his eyes. He clenched his hands and stretched his fingers as though that could catch and dissipate the swelling emotion.

He found Matthew closing one of the horses into the paddock behind the stables. "Matthew, has Mrs. Halland ridden out?"

Matthew looked uneasy, which made Christopher flex his fingers again. "Yes, sir."

"When?"

"About an hour ago."

"Alone?" Christopher snapped, hating himself and yet unable not to ask.

"No, sir, I accompanied her."

"But, she isn't back."

"No, sir," Matthew agreed unhappily. "She sent me back at the hill."

"Why?"

Matthew swallowed. "She told me not to say."

The weight behind his eyes pressed harder. Curiously, it felt more like pain than anger, but it had the same effect on his boiling blood.

"Did she meet someone?"

Matthew hesitated, then nodded once.

"Who?"

"I couldn't see, sir," Matthew said miserably. "He joined her on the path after she told me to go back. I only saw him from behind—tall man."

Rupert. He felt his whole being would explode with betrayal and fury. And care for Deborah, that too, although it was so buried in his own shame and rage with Rupert that he barely recognized it. He had totally misunderstood the friendly camaraderie he had sensed between Deborah and his cousin. Each smile, each laugh they had shared, was now a fresh tear in his heart. And Rupert's mischievous words took on a much more sinister meaning. *Don't hang back too long. Or someone else might just step in and win her from under your nose. I might be tempted to cut you out myself.*

No wonder Rupert had written, *Hope you understand.* The letter had not been for Deborah but for him. Perhaps he hated Christopher, too, for failing

to follow up his claim of innocence in Harlow's death.

"Do you know where they went?" he demanded.

Again Matthew hesitated. "I think...Branwell."

"Saddle Nightshade," he barked.

*

IT WAS A longer and much more grueling ride than Deborah had imagined. Joshua was anxious to make up time after sleeping in, and Deborah was determined to get to Rupert and Georgianna as soon as humanly possible. But this had to be balanced against the difficult country and the need to rest the horses.

During one of their rests, Deborah actually found herself envying the horses, cropping grass and leaves where they found it, for she had had no breakfast, and her stomach was rumbling.

As though he heard it, Joshua took a roughly wrapped parcel from his saddlebag and opened it to reveal a large hunk of bread, half a chicken, and an apple. Deborah was delighted to share this feast, although conscious of the fact she had inflicted her company upon him, she was careful to leave him more than half of everything. Especially the flask of ale he offered her.

"Is there really something urgent happening at the ship?" she asked him.

Joshua's eyes slid away. "Course there is."

Which might mean he didn't want to discuss it with her. Or that the only emergency was escaping with Dudley's wife. She jumped to her feet. "Then we'd better get on."

It was late afternoon before Joshua led her by a maze of paths that barely seemed to be tracks, to an inn that looked both deserted and in a state of severe disrepair.

"I thought we were going to Branwell?" Deborah said as her body sighed with relief and she slid from the saddle.

"We are, The Branwell Arms."

"This is where you were to meet Rupert?" she exclaimed. "But Marvin's bound to go to the town!"

Joshua didn't seem terribly interested. He handed both their horses to a grubby, silent ostler who led them away to a tumble-down stable building

adjoining the inn. At least Rupert was here, for he strode out of the front door, scowling.

“Where the devil have you been, Josh? I—” He broke off, goggling at Deborah. “Cousin Deb? What the d... Dear God, what is wrong?”

“Wrong?” she repeated. “You *dare* ask me that? Oh, Rupert, how could you?”

“How could I what?” he asked, apparently bewildered. “Didn’t you get the note I left? Is something wrong at Gosmere?”

“Of course it is! What did you expect when you ran off with your brother’s wife?”

“Ran off with my...” He stared at her, unblinking, and then swung away. “If that doesn’t take the cake! You made Joshua bring you halfway across the county because you thought I’d run away with Georgianna? Or have I abducted her?”

“I was hoping for the former,” Deborah admitted. “Although I would have preferred neither.” She moved to peer into his face, a growing relief mingling with several other new fears. “I was wrong, wasn’t I? But if she isn’t with you, where is she?”

“I left her at the hill. She claimed she knew the way back, but she has no sense of direction, so the chances are she got lost. Still, even Georgianna couldn’t stay lost in Gosmere for this length of time. So my best guess is that at this moment, she’s having tea at the hall with everyone but you.”

Deborah felt her shoulders droop. She rubbed tiredly at her forehead. “I knew I was too tired to think. I should have stayed at home.”

“Yes, you should.” Relenting, Rupert took her hand and drew it through his arm. “Come inside and sit. I’m sure Old Peg can conjure you a cup of tea and something to eat.”

“Can I change horses here?” she asked hopefully, accompanying him into the gloomy inn. Joshua lumbered in behind them.

“Not really that kind of an inn.” Rupert led her into a tiny room with a table and bench. It smelled unpleasantly of stale ale and tobacco. “Peg!”

A thin woman in a mob cap with very few teeth shuffled into the room as Deborah sank onto a bench. “What you shouting about now?” she demanded. “Don’t want you here when the law comes nosing around.”

“I know that. Bring my cousin some tea and whatever you have that’s edible. In fact, fetch Joshua some, too, he’s always starving.”

“I ate his breakfast,” Deborah confessed while the old woman left muttering something that sounded like, “Cousin, my foot!”

Rupert grinned. “Left yourself open to that one.”

“And worse,” she said ruefully. “You’d think one major scandal in a month would be enough for anyone, but I seem to keep creating more.”

“Never mind. Christopher will see the funny side. I hope.”

“Please tell me that Joshua brought me the long way to preserve secrecy and that there is a quicker way back to Gosmere.”

“Not much quicker, I’m afraid.”

“The mare will be exhausted. Do you think if I give her an hour’s rest, she will be fit to carry me home?”

“No. Besides, I can’t take you just now or spare anyone else.”

“I don’t need you to take me,” she said with dignity, “just give me directions.”

“Don’t be silly. You can’t go yourself. Christopher would string me up. Besides, you won’t get home before nightfall. You’d better stay here. Not where I’d choose for you, but all we can do.”

“What about Branwell?” she asked, brightening.

“You could get there in an hour. And from there, you could probably hire a chaise back to Gosmere, only I can’t take you there now either! We have to shake the excisemen.”

“What excisemen?” she asked, trying to keep up with the changing subjects.

“The ones who’re watching the ship for me to return. They searched it and found nothing, but someone’s told them I’m the captain, and I’m still wanted for murder, so they’re waiting for me to try and get aboard to capture me. They probably mean to persuade me to tell them about our free trading activities in return for—I don’t know—leniency? Escape? Avoidance of brutality? In any case, I’d rather not walk into their trap, so we have a plan to move the ship from under their noses.”

He sat back as Old Peg brought in a teapot and a chipped cup with a matching cream jug. “Don’t worry, Coz. You’ll easily find your way back into Christopher’s good graces. In fact, if you ask me, it will do him good to worry for a bit. He takes you for granted.”

“No, he doesn’t,” she retorted, pouring herself a cup of very pale tea. “We haven’t been married long enough for him to take me for granted. Or, I, him.”

“Well, he still needs shaking up a bit. Not sure he realizes what he has in you.”

She smiled with difficulty and sipped her tea. “A very poor hostess. Lady Bilston will think me very odd, not to say rude.”

“She’ll laugh herself silly when she hears you thought I’d abducted her.”

Old Peg came back with a plate of greyish mush. “Vegetable stew,” she announced.

“Thank you,” Deborah murmured. She forced the first forkful for politeness, but in fact, it tasted much better than it looked.

“Good,” Rupert said, standing up. “Wait here, and I’ll send someone to take you on to Branwell once we’re –.”

“She can’t stay here, Cap’n,” Joshua said reasonably. He cast his eyes toward the ceiling.

“Ah,” Rupert said, scowling. “Fair point. Why can’t Old Peg run a respectable house?”

“Because there’s no one but smugglers to drink here,” Peg retorted from the doorway. “Had to diversify, didn’t I?”

“Dash it,” Rupert said, dragging his hand through his hair. “I suppose I’d better take you with me.”

“Is it far?”

“For you, ten minutes.”

“Then, since I can’t ride the mare for an hour, I’ll come,” Deborah decided. “And after that, I’m going to Branwell to find Marvin and a post chase.”

“Who the devil is Marvin?” Rupert wondered.

Deborah had another idea. “Madam,” she addressed Peg. “Do you have someone you can send to Branwell with a message?”

“There’s me grandson,” Peg said thoughtfully.

Deborah fished inside the pocket she had sewn into her cloak. It had proved useful in the past for carrying her own things and the princess’s. She found a sovereign and gave it to Peg, whose eyes widened with plain greed. “He has to find a Miss Marvin at one of the respectable inns and tell her to wait there for Mrs. Halland. Then he has to come back here and tell me where he found her.”

“Miss Marvin,” she repeated. “To wait for Mrs. Halland.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Halland, ma’am.”

Deborah drew her cloak closer around her to pass through the narrow hall. “Will she do it?” she asked Rupert doubtfully.

“Oh, yes. In the hope of another sovereign. You shouldn’t throw that kind of money around in a place like this.”

“It was all I had.”



Chapter Fourteen

EMERGING INTO THE blessedly fresh air, she noticed for the first time the salty tang on the breeze, the plaintive cry of distant seagulls.

Rupert looked up at the hazy sky. “Rickett was right,” he said with satisfaction. “The mist is coming down. Let’s hope the timing is right for us.”

After only a couple of minutes’ walk from the inn, they came to a rocky cliff edge that dropped down to the sea. Here, the mist was more obvious. The sea faded into it, and odd wisps scudded across the sky directly above.

“There’s a mostly hidden path down to a narrow inlet,” Rupert murmured, crouching down in the long reeds to peer over the cliff. “That’s where the ship is. Around the first bend, you’ll see it. You’ll also start seeing signs of the excisemen below. They’re expecting us to come around the coast from the river, so they won’t pay much attention above their positions. But we still have to be quiet. We don’t want them to see us until we mean to. Stick with Joshua.”

She cast him a suspicious glance. “Why, where are you going?”

He grinned. “It’s me they’re after. Naturally, I’m going to lead them the wrong way.”

“But then how will you get on to the ship?”

“Trust me, Coz,” he said carelessly and began to lead the way down.

Since he moved fast and silently, she kept her many questions to herself. At the first bend in the track, she did indeed see a ship floating gently in a narrow inlet, and as they crept on, she saw odd flashes of movement among the rocks below. After a while, the downward track forked, one leading along a ledge around the coast, the other sharply downhill to the inlet.

Rupert paused here and jerked his head toward the downward track. Joshua brushed past her, and she followed him on downward. Only when she glanced back did she see Rupert, bold as brass, walking along the ledge in the other direction, peering downward as though looking for a path. She and Joshua continued on their track, although as they drew level with the

watchers, she knew it was only a matter of time until they were seen.

Then a shout went up. Several men sprang out of the rocks, yelling upward. One even had a large gun, which was a danger Deborah hadn't thought of. But she had no time to dwell on it, for Joshua suddenly seized her by the arm and pulled her onward.

"Run," he growled, and she did. She had to pay too much attention to her footing to be able to see Rupert, but at least there was no crack of a gunshot. And she was vaguely aware of his pursuers swarming up to the ledge and around the side of the cliff to keep him in sight.

She and Joshua almost fell onto the beach below, where a small boat awaited them with a man already at the oars.

"Who the devil is she?" he demanded.

"Cap'n's cousin," Joshua snapped, picking her up as though she were a mere toy and dropping her into the boat. He pushed it farther into the water and splashed after it to clamber in and seize the oars.

"We're going to the ship?" she said in dismay.

No one troubled to answer her, since it was blatantly obvious, and, in the end, she merely shrugged, for the longer she rested the mare at the inn, the easier it would be to reach Branwell.

Up on the cliff, there was only one figure still visible, clambering around below the level of the ledge. And then the boat bumped against the side of the ship, and Joshua half-helped, half-carried her up the precarious ladder until urgent hands pulled her on deck. It seemed the anchor was already up, for a sail unfurled without warning, and the ship rocked and creaked. An instant later, it began to glide toward the mist, in the opposite direction to the one Rupert was leading the excisemen.

"But how will he get to the ship?" she wondered aloud.

"He's already doubled back," Joshua said, "leaving Jake—Peg's son—to lead the excisemen on. He'll catch us up at the next inlet, where we should be able to wait until dark to slip past the cutters."

It seemed an unlikely plan to her. From her own point of view, she hoped they wouldn't sail too far from the inn, so she could still ride to Branwell and Marvin before dark. However, the most immediate anxiety was clearly for Rupert to escape capture and get back on board.

She could no longer see the inlet where the ship had been anchored. Clearly, it had been a good hiding place. She looked up the rugged cliffs,

fringed with mist, wondering how Rupert fared. A figure caught her eye, standing almost level with them. He did not appear to be moving.

“Is *that* him?” she asked, pointing.

The man who appeared to be in charge snatched a seaman’s glass from his pocket and peered through it.

“No,” he said grimly. “It’s a damned exciseman. They must be watching this inlet, too.”

“Damn, you were meant to be watching out for that!” Joshua fumed. “He’ll have seen us by now. We won’t be able to wait until dark if he brings the others down on us.”

“I don’t think he has seen us,” the other said in tones of surprised relief. “He’s got his back to us, gesticulating. God, he’s not talking to the captain, is he?”

Whoever he was talking to, he began to run like a hare in the same direction as his fellows and vanished into the thickening mist.

By the time they sailed into the next inlet, which was even narrower and made Deborah afraid of the ship being crushed, the mist was drifting across in great clouds, making the sea and the cliffs only intermittently visible.

“Will he find us?” she asked doubtfully.

“Oh, aye,” Joshua said.

Despite the crew’s apparent confidence, it was a tense wait. Someone took the small boat and rowed the short distance to the narrow shingle shore. They waited. Deborah shivered as the mist blocked the heat of the sun. Then a gust of wind blew it on, and as the slivers of mist parted, the unmistakable figure of Rupert slid down the bottom of the cliff to the beach and ran for the boat.

Joshua grinned.

Only a few minutes later, Rupert scrambled aboard, clearly exhausted after his long run over difficult ground, but grinning with triumph.

“Well done!” he gasped to his men as he collapsed on the deck. “I thought I was never going to get past that exciseman.”

“Did he see you?” one of the men asked uneasily.

“No, he just ran off in the other direction.”

“He was talking to someone,” Joshua said. “Maybe they had another man nearer the road.”

“Maybe. You were right about the mist, though, Rickett. Saved my

bacon!”

“Yes, and I’m very glad of it,” Deborah said sincerely, leaning back against the rail. “But I don’t see why you wanted me on board. I should have waited ashore.”

“Couldn’t have the excisemen falling over you by accident,” Rupert said apologetically. “They’ve met you, remember, and we’d never have shifted them if they’d seen you. I did suggest you stayed at the inn.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It smells.”

“You don’t notice it after a bit,” Rupert assured her. “But don’t worry. Just give us a bit longer to make sure all’s quiet, and then someone will take you back to the inn. Can’t be me, unfortunately.”

“I know.” She frowned. “It’s time you stopped all this.”

His lips twisted. “What’s the point? I can’t come home.”

“Christopher will prove your innocence,” she said confidently. “Now that he knows about it.”

“Hmm. Anyone have a tot of rum?”

Deborah politely declined as Joshua offered her a flask, which was then passed to Rupert. The sun winked through the mist, warming her. She wondered how long a hired chaise would take to Gosmere. She wondered if anyone had noticed yet that she was gone...

“Rickett!” one of the smugglers said urgently, starting forward.

Like everyone else’s, Deborah’s startled gaze flew to Rickett, who looked bewildered. Behind him, swarming over the rail, loomed a man with water running off him. He looked impossibly like...

Her heart lurched. A soundless cry stuck in her throat as Rickett spun around, wrenching a wicked-looking dagger from his belt just as the dripping man launched himself over the rail. He landed on top of Rickett, and the two men fell to the deck.

Shouting instruction, Rupert threw himself to the side, peering for any other attackers, while his men lurched toward the interloper. A sharp crack of bone on flesh chilled Deborah’s blood and, then she realized the interloper was leaping to his feet, dragging Rickett with him by the neck. Somehow the dagger had changed hands and was pointed at Rickett’s throat.

The smugglers all halted, staring. The attacker’s chest heaved with his panting breath, but his hand was rock steady, unlike his eyes, which blazed with fury, a hundred times more terrifying than the first time she had seen

him.

It really was Christopher. His rage seemed to batter Rupert. “Bring me my wife,” he snarled. “Now.”

Deborah didn’t consciously order her body to move, but suddenly she was walking, then rushing across the deck. She saw his eyes widen. His dagger hand moved, his arm jerked, almost as though reaching for her. Impatiently, he shoved Rickett away, and that was enough for her.

She flung herself into his arms, and they closed about her, cold and wet and blissfully strong.

She began to blurt, “I’m fine, I’m not—”

“You’re mine,” he interrupted fiercely, and his mouth came down hard on hers, possessive, ruthless, and utterly wonderful.

She clutched at his shirt, anchoring herself in the storm as she responded from blind, helpless instinct.

And then he tore his mouth free and pressed her to his chest, glaring over her head at Rupert. “If you’ve hurt one hair—”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Rupert retorted. “What in hell do you take me for? Why would I hurt your wife? And what do you mean by sneaking onto my ship like a damned pirate? If you’ve led the excisemen to us—”

“Who do you think sent them the other way?” Christopher demanded.

Rupert peered at him. The tension seemed to seep away into the mist.

A twisted grin formed on Rupert’s lips. “You wanted to stop the excisemen getting to me so that you could? Why does everyone always think I’m the villain of some Godawful melodrama? *She* thinks I’ve abducted Georgianna. *You* accuse me of abducting *her*, or eloping with her, damned if I can work it out, and I’d be surprised if you could. What the devil do I want with other people’s wives? Do I not have enough trouble on my hands?”

Christopher’s hold on her loosened, though he didn’t release her. A rueful smile formed in his eyes. “I’m behaving like Dudley. I’ve made a complete cake of myself.”

Rupert laughed. “Devil a bit. I don’t see Dudley swimming across a misty sea and swarming over my deck. But I will say you make an impressive pirate.”

“For a cake? Add to your goodness,” Christopher said, “by lending me some dry clothes.”

“Go below. Cabin on your left,” Rupert said resignedly, waving toward a

hatchway. "Someone give Rickett the rum. And then pass it to me."

Deborah tried to tell herself she was supporting her husband after his recent exertions. But the truth was, despite the baffled observation of Rupert's crew, she just liked the feel of his wet arm around her. He wasn't leaning on her in the slightest.

On the other hand, she did owe him an explanation, and by the way he swept her through the hatchway, he was determined to receive it.

"How did you find us?" she asked, just a little shakily, as he climbed down the ladder before her.

"We came to these beaches as children. I knew the inn and guessed it was there rather than the town that Rupert would hide out. From there, I guessed where the ship was and watched Rupert's antics from above. And yours."

She followed him down the ladder. "I made Joshua take me to Rupert. I was afraid he'd abducted Lady Bilston, and I had to stop him."

"Why?" He waited for her at the foot of the ladder and took her arm, urging her into the cabin on the left.

"He doesn't love her." She watched him close the door and raised her gaze to his face. "Dudley does. Abduction or elopement would have been wrong and horrible for everyone, including Rupert, who would have been sorry once his temper cooled."

"Why do you think that?" He walked toward her, holding her gaze, and she stepped backward to give him space. He kept coming.

"Because he's like you in many ways," she said nervously. "He's liable to act on impulse and temper. But I wronged him. If he *is* angry, it isn't with her. It seems he merely had a pleasant talk with Lady Bilston and rode here while she went back to the house. I almost fell over Joshua, and so I sent Matthew back to the house to send Marvin to Branwell. I was trying to cover for Lady Bilston and make everything right."

A smile flickered across his face. He came to a halt in front of her. He must have been freezing cold, yet he seemed to radiate heat. "You thought of everything. Except that I might mistake the tall man you rode off with for Rupert."

She blinked. "I still don't understand why you imagined Rupert would elope with me."

"Don't you? He told me once he might try to cut me out with you. And you obviously like him."

“I do. He’s like another brother, one closer in age than my own.”

“And I?” he asked. “How do you regard me?”

“As my husband, of course,” she said breathlessly. She slipped past him, hurrying toward the trunk chained to the foot of the bunk. “You should get out of these wet clothes. Let me find you some dry ones.”

It was the first remotely intimate wifely duty she had performed, and his eyes seemed to burn into her face as she brought out a towel, a shirt, a pair of pantaloons, and a rather ragged coat.

“Did you lose your coat?” she asked, rummaging for stockings and footwear.

“No, I left it on the beach with my boots.” His voice came from too close. His hand reached out and picked up the towel.

She stared blindly into the trunk for a moment longer. When she plucked up the courage to look, he had dropped the wet shirt on the floor and was unfastening his breeches. The scrunched towel lay across his shoulders.

For a moment, her gaze clung to him. In the strange, misty sunlight permeating the porthole, his skin glowed, drawn tight over broad shoulder bones, ribs, and muscles. A scattering of hair darkened his chest, drawing to a thicker line leading down from his waist into his opening breeches.

Her mouth went dry. He was beautiful. It had never felt so good to look at anyone, and yet the emotions were too strong, too confused, too...wrong. And when she lifted her gaze to his, he was watching her.

She rose hastily to her feet, but he reached out and caught her arm.

“As your husband, you say.” His voice was husky, vibrating deep within her. “Then, perhaps it is time I claimed a husband’s privilege.”

Deliberately, he drew her against his naked chest, which was beguilingly, excitingly warm. He tipped up her chin when she tried to speak in panic about boots and cupped her cheek.

His hold was light. She could have avoided it, but a delicious lethargy held her in place. He bent his head slowly and took her mouth.

His lips were tender, caressing, and exploring hers. His tongue traced their shape, and she opened wider to him. The kiss strengthened, absorbing her, overwhelming her with profound, sensual awareness. Heat flamed, melting her into his arms. Her palm rested on his naked chest, slid upward over his shoulder, and she sighed into his mouth. She had never imagined the sweetness of such intimacy, the strange, thrilling arousal.

“This,” he whispered against her lips, “is convenience.”

He let her go, unwinding his arms, and she had to grasp the trunk lid to be sure of keeping her feet. As he began to pull down his damp breeches, she spun away, her back to him while she rummaged in a cupboard for a pair of shoes.

This is convenience. Was he making fun of their arrangement? Or reminding her of it? After her astonished joy at seeing him come for her in such a way, after that kiss, she badly needed reminding of it.

Nothing has changed, she reminded herself. *An emotional moment does not alter our agreement. I may be his wife, he may value me, but he does not want me as he wants Frederica Ireton, or those other woman people keep hinting at. He does not love me.*

The trouble was, kisses like that gave her the added agony of hope. She had to avoid them if she was to be the wife she had promised to be and still keep some kind of contentment in his companionship.

“You don’t need to hide your eyes,” he said. “You are my wife.”

“I remember,” she managed, turning with her gaze cast down to place the battered boots she had discovered on the floor.

He had donned the pantaloons, so she dared look up to see him pulling the shirt over his head.

“So, what was your plan?” he asked.

“One of Rupert’s men is going to take me ashore, to the inn, and from there, I meant to ride to Branwell, collect Marvin, and hire a chaise. What was yours?”

“Oh, I had many. Most of them involved beating my favorite cousin to a pulp. Beyond that, I’m not sure I should tell you. I hadn’t got as far as returning to Gosmere. So, by all means, let us go to Branwell to begin with.”

He shrugged into the ragged coat, which barely buttoned across his chest. He changed his mind and left it loose. Swiping up the boots, he sat on the bed and stamped his feet into them. “Very well, let us go and thank Rupert for his hospitality.”

A breath of laughter caught her unawares, and his eyes gleamed in response. Walking past her, he opened the door and held it for her.

She led the way on deck, where the men sprawled about against the rails, keeping their eyes on the cliffs and the sea and the lifting mist. Rupert held the rum flask casually by his side. It appeared to be stoppered, but as they

approached, he raised it again, offering it to Christopher, who accepted with a wry inclination of the head.

Christopher unstopped it and offered it to Deborah. She hadn't tasted rum before and was unlikely to get the opportunity again, so she took it recklessly and tipped some of the liquid into her mouth. It burned pleasantly.

"It's better than brandy," she allowed, passing it back to Christopher.

"And considerably cheaper," Christopher said before raising it to his cousin and taking a healthy swig. He gave it back to Rupert. "I'm sorry for thinking the worst. And I will do what I can to prove your innocence."

"You've a few matters to sort out on your account first," Rupert observed. "I will keep."

"Well, don't do anything else silly," Christopher advised. "How is your wound?"

"Almost completely healed. I'm fine."

Christopher searched his cousin's face, then changed the subject. "I've left you my riding breeches and a decent shirt. I can send your threadbare coat back with whoever rows us ashore."

"Do that. It's a useful coat. I take it this means you wish to go now?"

"If you'd be so good," Christopher said civilly.

"You're mighty cool for a man who threatened my lieutenant and accused me of abducting your wife."

Christopher walked across the deck to Rickett, who eyed him with rigid hostility. Deborah couldn't hear what her husband said, but it brought a reluctant grin to the man's face.



Chapter Fifteen

CHRISTOPHER HAD TIED his horse to a tree at the top of the cliff, near the path they labored up from the shore.

“Anyone could have seen him there,” Deborah observed as Christopher untied the animal.

“But no one likely to interfere. I’d already sent the exciseman running after his fellows.”

“What if we meet them on the way back to the inn? Or at the inn?”

Christopher bent, clasping his hands to form a step for her. “We’ll deal with that if and when it happens. I expect they’re still pursuing whoever it was that took Rupert’s place.”

“Peg’s son.” Deborah regarded the big horse warily, then stepped onto Christopher’s hands, and was boosted into the saddle.

She expected him to lead the horse, but to her surprise, he mounted behind her, enclosing her with his arms. Which made her feel a great deal safer since it was not a lady’s saddle, and she was very liable to slide off in this position.

As the horse broke into a canter, she clutched his arm, and he held her around the waist, guiding the horse with one hand. She liked the closeness. She liked it too much, especially when she relaxed back against his chest, and she felt the whisper of his breath against her cheek.

“How do you know Rupert does not love Georgianna?” he murmured. “Did he tell you that?”

She shook her head. “No, I just know. I could tell by the way he spoke of her. He was angry with Dudley’s betrayal, not at losing her.”

“But you know nothing of love. Or so you told me.”

“I can still recognize it in others,” she said calmly. He would never know how fast her heart beat just because of his nearness. Love, it seemed, was something she understood only too well, but she would never embarrass him with the admission.

It was not a long ride to the inn, where the same surly youth came to take the horse.

“Give him water and a bite to eat,” Christopher instructed. He slipped to the ground and lifted Deborah by the waist. “And have the lady’s mare saddled.”

Old Peg stumped out of the front door, glowering at Christopher. “I thought you were customers.” She sniffed and addressed Deborah. “My grandson found your lady at the Lion’s Head. Was there and back in no time, just to please you.”

Christopher tossed her a coin. “The rest is for the horses’ feed.”

“Have some dinner if you like,” Peg suggested to him. “I suppose she’s *your* cousin, too.”

Christopher stared at her. “No. She’s my wife.”

Peg cackled. “Pity the young captain, then!”

“I buried him behind your inn,” Christopher said amiably, and Peg looked so worried that Deborah laughed.

*

THEY REACHED THE Lion’s Head before dark, but thick clouds had formed overhead, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

They discovered Marvin at the inn’s coffee room, sitting rigidly upright in the corner. She greeted Deborah with obvious relief while looking anxiously about for Lady Bilston.

“I’m afraid I got it all wrong,” Deborah told her. “Her ladyship never left Gosmere. I have inconvenienced you for no reason. And her! However, she knows this was my fault, not yours.”

Marvin looked dismayed. “But it will be dark before I get there! In fact, *how* am I to get there?”

“The weather is turning filthy,” Christopher said. “If you wish, I’ll hire a chaise for you to Gosmere, but I think we are all best staying here until morning.”

Deborah glanced at him in surprise, for she had assumed they would leave their horses here and travel back in the chaise with Marvin. Which would not be terribly comfortable.

“Perhaps you are right,” Marvin said indecisively. “I would disturb the whole household arriving in the middle of the night. Do you think her ladyship will understand?”

“Of course. I shall tell her everything,” Deborah assured her.

“Then I shall bespeak bedchambers for us all,” Christopher said. “And supper!”

Deborah watched him saunter across the room, which was surprisingly busy. He was a poised and distinguished figure, and the innkeeper himself had come to meet him before he even reached the door.

Hastily, she looked away. “Have you dined?” she asked Marvin, who shook her head. “You must be even hungrier than I!”

Christopher joined them a few moments later. “We have bedchambers, but there are no private parlors free. Apparently, it is market day tomorrow. So I have asked for supper to be sent up to our chambers. The innkeeper’s wife is waiting to show us the way.”

Marvin looked relieved to be out of the public way and, no doubt, to escape Deborah and Christopher. She said goodnight with a curtsy at her chamber door, and they followed the landlady to the end of the hall, where she threw open another door.

“It’s our best bedchamber,” she said proudly, “and quite spacious as you see, so I hope you won’t feel the lack of the parlor. Your dinner won’t be long.” She curtsied and hurried away.

Deborah’s gaze flew to her husband’s. “I thought...”

“They only had two bedchambers available. I hoped you would rather share with me than with Marvin.”

Approaching voices sounded in the passage, and Deborah hastily stepped inside the chamber. As their hostess had boasted, it was a spacious, pleasant room, with a table and two chairs in one corner, a wardrobe and almost-matching chest of drawers. The curtains were open, allowing in the last of the grey daylight and a view of the church across the square.

But there was only one large bed. Draped with heavy linen curtains, it became all that she could see.

“It is large enough for us never to find each other even if we were looking,” Christopher said dryly. “But if you wish, you can easily form an impregnable barrier of pillows and blankets.”

She flushed. “I would not dream of such a thing. I know you have no

desire to change our agreement.”

His lips quirked as he regarded her from his intense blue eyes. “And how do you know that?”

“I am not unobservant, sir,” she retorted, removing her hat and placing it on top of the chest of drawers.

He set his beside it and stepped back to admire the effect, before turning his gaze back to her. “And what have you observed, wife of my bosom?”

“Your penchant for Mrs. Ireton, for one thing,” she retorted, then bit her lip, annoyed by her indiscretion. But his gentle mockery had inspired a rare spurt of temper.

“I have no penchant for Mrs. Ireton.”

Her gaze flew back to his, but a knock at the door heralded the innkeeper’s wife and servants bearing a tray of delightfully fragrant dishes. The table was speedily set with cutlery and glasses, plates, and bowls. A tureen was placed in the middle of the table with some newly baked bread and wine poured into glasses. A tray containing three further covered dishes was left on a side table.

“We thought you would prefer to serve yourselves,” the clearly overburdened innkeeper’s wife declared, making a virtue out of necessity.

They bustled off again, and Christopher politely held one of the chairs for Deborah. He sat, too, and she busied herself with serving the soup while he sliced some bread.

“Mrs. Ireton,” he said unexpectedly, “seems to have developed a penchant for me—although, of course, that may just be retaliation for her husband’s interest in you.”

Amazed that he was even prepared to discuss it, she paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth. Then she drank the soup. “I am not offended. You need explain nothing. I am aware you are old friends.”

“And how are you aware of that? Did she tell you?”

She paused again. “Yes, actually.”

“For what it’s worth, Frederica Ireton and I have never been friends. I’ve known the family forever, and recently, when we’ve met at London parties, she seemed to expect a little public flirtation. To be frank, I barely noticed it. Which may have been unkind or idiotic, but I never suspected she was taking it seriously. It certainly never got beyond that.”

Deborah laid down her spoon. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I hope you might care that I was not embracing her last night, but trying to keep her hands off me.”

She reached blindly for her wine glass, wishing she was not so pleased to hear it. “I suppose it was a rather vulgar display for our civilized agreement. Though not quite so vulgar as my stamping on Mr. Ireton’s foot. Or you, hitting him, I imagine.”

Christopher pushed his bowl away with his left hand, hiding his right in his lap. “I’m not a saint, Deborah, but even at my worst, I would never have humiliated you in such a way. And I will always defend you.”

She thought of him swarming over the rail and holding Rickett’s own knife to the smuggler’s throat. “I seem to cause you more problems than I have solved.”

“Funnily enough, I like dealing with your problems. Don’t give up yet on Lucy, or on the whole scandal behind it.”

She nodded, removing their soup bowls and the tureen, then placing the dishes of meat and vegetables on the table instead. This time, he served her.

“Which brings me to another matter,” he said. “As you know, I made my offer of marriage while I was still angry with my grandfather and focused solely on getting my own way. There were things—many things!—I did not consider, including your feelings or my own.”

She picked up her knife and fork. “I am happy with the bargain we struck,” she said with difficulty. “There is no reason for you to feel guilt.”

“I think there is, but it is not, I confess, my primary emotion.”

They ate in silence for a little.

“Don’t you want to ask what is?” he asked at last.

“No. But I am happy to listen if you wish to tell me.”

He sat back, a faint, curious smile playing around his sensual lips. “You.”

Her heart leapt. Somehow, she said calmly, “I have never been called an emotion of any kind before.”

“But you are. You intrigue me, soothe me, worry me, arouse me, turn my selfish world upside down. In short, you inspire so many emotions that I have named the unique mixture after you.”

Heat seeped into her cheeks. “You are making fun of me.”

“No, but of myself, a little.” He held her gaze, his eyes secretive. “Tell me, Deborah, would you be opposed to changing the...boundaries of our relationship?”

Her heart beat uncomfortably hard. “In what way?”

“In, perhaps, allowing nature to take its course. In imposing *no* boundaries, simply following our...emotions.”

“I thought that was what we agreed on in the first place,” she said, making an effort at lightness.

“With regard to other people,” he said, waving that aside. “We did not take account of each other.”

She dragged her gaze free. She could not think when she lost herself in those profound, exciting eyes... She swallowed, casting wildly around for possible reasons behind his words. And it came to her in a rush of painful understanding.

“You want an heir,” she blurted.

He blinked. “Eventually,” he allowed, “it is a consideration, though hardly an urgent one.”

“Of course, none of this is urgent,” she said hastily, returning to her dinner, which was tasty and deserved more attention than either of them were providing.

“Isn’t it?” he said, waving one hand to encompass the whole chamber. “Here we are, alone and without servants, respectably married and... intrigued.”

“It was you who said intrigued,” she retorted. “You cannot speak for me.”

“You mean you are *not* intrigued by the idea of expanding our relationship?”

She could not see the bed, but it filled her mind’s eye. Worse, in her vision, it contained Christopher’s beautiful, golden body as she had seen it on the ship, only sprawled across the sheets, waiting for her...

“Not at this time,” she said desperately.

He sat back, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Your lips said otherwise when I kissed you. Both times.”

The flush spread through her whole body. Again, she reached nervously for her glass. “I was emotional,” she excused herself.

He smiled, causing a swarm of butterflies to soar in her stomach. “Is that not exactly what I have been saying?”

A breath of laughter took her by surprise. She set down her empty glass, and he leaned across to refill it and his own. She stood a little too quickly to avoid his nearness and removed their plates. As she hoped, the thread of the

conversation was lost in investigating the sweet-tart and custard.

But as the talk lightened, the tension tightened. In truth, given the way she felt about him, she should have been delighted to “expand the boundaries”, but the intense glow of his eyes spoke of immediacy, which panicked her. If she did not have to fear Frederica Ireton, there were too many other unknown women in his life, and she could not give up his friendship and her own pride for one night of his attention. Or even a few nights. She was in far too deeply for that.

And yet, she wallowed, gloried, in his company. As they moved from the table to the sofa to finish their wine, she came to the very odd realization that she actually *liked* this strange edge to their companionship. It changed nothing, of course, but it was undeniably exciting, intriguing, just as he had said...

In the glow of the candles, she felt the world outside recede, leaving only herself and Christopher. Her confusion mounted as she realized that, despite what he had seemed to offer, he kept to his own corner of the sofa, making no effort to touch her, let alone seduce her. She should have been relieved, though it felt more like pique.

At last, he said, “Feel free to retire when you wish.”

Her gaze flew to his.

Perhaps he read the uncertainty there, for his smile was sardonic. “You are concerned about privacy. Never fear, I have the perfect solution.” He rose and, with a courtly bow, offered her his hand.

She took it in the same exaggerated style and walked with him to the bed. Her heart thundered. *What will I do? What should I do if he kisses me?*

He released her and drew back the bedclothes, bowing to indicate she should get into bed. Nervously, she sat on the edge.

“Right in,” he said like a cajoling nurse.

Hesitantly, she lifted her legs onto the bed and lay down rigidly with her head on the pillow.

Christopher drew the covers up to her chin. “Now, you may undress in perfect privacy. Unless you need me to unfasten your gown?”

“It was never properly fastened in the first place,” she confessed, “and I had no use for stays.”

His lips twitched, and she wished she had never mentioned the undergarment. He turned and sat on the bottom of the bed. “Pretend I am

your maid and pass me your gown. And anything else you wish to remove.”

While she wriggled, warily removing her stockings, garters, and gown, he gazed into space as though his mind was somewhere else entirely. On his school, or Parliament, or other women...

She drew the discarded garments together and slid them up over the sheets. Solemnly, he picked up the pile and carried it to the sofa where he left it. Then he began to unbutton his coat, and she turned hastily on her side so that she could not see.

It did not stop her imagining.

She tensed as the bed creaked under his weight. He blew out the last candle, and she gazed into the darkness while he rolled and heaved himself into a comfortable position.

Into the silence, he said thoughtfully, “If you are not intrigued, you will at least not object to a goodnight kiss.”

Her breath caught. “On the contrary, I do not see the point.”

“To give me another chance to intrigue you.”

“You are foolish.”

“Is that a *yes*?” He loomed in the darkness, and she realized he was lying on his front and much closer than she had imagined. “I would consider it a kindness.”

Laughter hissed between her teeth. “No, you wouldn’t. Just one?”

“Just one.”

“Very well.” She knew it was insane as soon as she felt his breath on her lips. He would not take one mere kiss. As he cupped her face, she had the terrifying idea that he was completely naked, and then his mouth sank on hers and all conscious thought vanished. It was tender, yet wondrously sensual, bathing her in hopeless, delicious weakness. The butterflies in her stomach seemed to take flight, spreading bliss through her whole body.

Her arms ached to hold him, but she retained at least enough sense to understand that if she did, she was lost. So, she lay still, utterly absorbed in his kiss and in her own sweet, heavy arousal. She wanted it to go on forever, but it didn’t.

His lips left hers at last. “I don’t know about you,” he said huskily, “but I am more intrigued than ever. Good night, my wife.” And he moved away to the far side of the bed.

Her heart hammering, her body tingling with fire, she lay perfectly still.

He was keeping his word, but it was several moments before she could bring herself to be grateful.

*

FORTUNATELY, SHE WAS too exhausted to stay awake, and she fell from a wary doze into a deep, satisfying sleep. At least, she thought it was satisfying when she half-woke in the darkness to the heavy warmth of a large, male body wrapped around her back, his legs fitting around hers, his arm across her waist.

She could tell from his regular breathing that he was asleep. She thought she should probably push him away, but in fact, it felt so comfortable, so curiously...*intriguing*, that she merely closed her eyes once more and let herself drift back into sleep.

Until the arm at her waist tightened, wakening her fully as it drew her closer against him, against unfamiliar, hot hardness. His hand slipped upward and over her breast. The same, heavy sweetness she remembered flooded her once more with new, disturbing sharpness. She turned her head on the pillow, desperate, whispered words tumbling from her lips.

“What are you...?” But the rest was smothered in the heat of his mouth as he kissed her with wild, all-consuming urgency.

And, dear God, he *was* naked, for his body slid over hers, breast to breast, hip to hip, in a complete caress, and she arched up into him from blind instinct. His hand swept up her leg, beneath her rumpled chemise, and she gasped with a joy and despair that should not have been possible to feel together.

“Oh, dear God, Christopher, are you even awake?” she asked brokenly when his mouth moved down her chin to her throat.

“Of course I am,” he said huskily. “And so are you.” He kissed her mouth again before descending to her breasts in a trail of fire that made it impossible to think. His hand stroked up the inside of her thigh, and sensation exploded within her.

She caught his head between her hands. “Stop this. Stop. You don’t care who I am,” she blurted. “If I am to have nothing else from this marriage, at least leave me pride!”

He stilled, and then his hands and his lips left her. She wanted to weep as he rolled to the other side of the bed once more, but then she heard the striking of tinder, and the candle on his bedside table flared to life.

She dashed her hand across her face in case he saw the foolish tears. His eyes were still clouded by desire, but his expression was serious, almost... helpless.

“Deborah, I do not seek to destroy your pride by loving you this night.”

“This night,” she repeated. “And tomorrow night? Next week? Next month? I am not like you. I can be your best friend, but I cannot be one of many lovers.”

He stared at her, his mouth slowly twisting into a deprecating smile. “Perhaps we are more alike than you know. For what it is worth, I ended whatever trivial liaisons I had before we were married. I confess I did not enter this marriage with fidelity in mind, but that seems to be what has come to me. I don’t want other women. Only you.” His smile grew difficult. “I am impatient and urgent by nature. Forgive me.”

He turned his back and got out of bed, swiping up the candle and allowing her a glimpse of his spectacular, naked back and hips and thighs... Her mouth went dry.

Dear God, what am I doing? Am I so frightened, so pathetic that I will not take this chance for love? Have I so much stupid pride that I will make us both wait...and for what? Carpe diem. Seize the day. Seize what could be the only chance before...

“Christopher.” Her hoarse voice interrupted her own, racing thoughts.

He paused but did not turn. “You tempt me too much. I can sleep on the sofa.”

She swallowed, her heart thundering, her body aching. “Let me tempt you again.”

He turned, very slowly, and she had to lick her dry lips. She had never understood before how beautiful a man could be. For a moment, she read uncertainty in his face and found it utterly endearing.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I am a coward. I am afraid to feel.”

He began to walk back toward her and set the candle back down on the nightstand. “No, you are not,” he said, sitting down on the bed. “You’re afraid of being hurt. It’s not the same thing at all. Come here.”

She sat up and wriggled toward him. Greatly daring, she raised her hands

and placed them on his shoulders. Then she lifted her face and kissed his lips.

They parted under hers. She felt the touch of his tongue, the quickening of his breath, but he accepted the kiss as hers. Only when she drew back did he take hold of the hem of her chemise and pull it up from under her and over her head in one shocking, thrilling movement.

Then he took her in his arms and laid her on the bed beneath him. From the first touch, she received him eagerly, trembling from need.

With gentleness and tenderness, he taught her passion. And with increasingly wild abandon, he led her to joy.



Chapter Sixteen

CHRISTOPHER WOKE TO daylight and a feeling of massive contentment. He remembered why and was already smiling when he opened his eyes to find his wife watching him.

He had never seen anything so beautiful. But there was something both sweet and momentous about waking next to her. He had known many women and found something to value in each, but nothing and no one compared to this. Love had come quickly to him, in the end, but he knew in his heart it was no less lasting for that.

When her smile answered his, it was curiously shy, tentative, and uncertain. He could not allow that to spoil what they had found, and so he reached for her, kissing her tenderly, but with enough passion to show her he was not abandoning her. Ever.

He loved the way she melted into his arms, his lips. Only concern for her wellbeing prevented him from taking her again before they rose.

“Do you wish to travel in the chaise with Marvin or ride with me?” he asked.

“The chaise has already gone,” she replied. “You were sleeping so peacefully, and I didn’t wake you.”

“Then we have a whole day together,” he said, enchanted at the prospect.

“Will you come down for breakfast? Or shall we have it here?”

“We had better go down,” he said reluctantly. “Otherwise, I don’t know how long I can keep my hands off you.”

She blushed adorably, tempting him all over again. He rose determinedly, loving the way her eyes followed him as he washed and dressed. It was a simple intimacy that had never been important before.

She is my wife...

He found profound new pleasure in helping her fasten her gown, brush, and pin her luxurious blond hair, which last night he had wound around his fingers in passion. Even breakfast in the busy coffee room was agreeable with

her by his side. He was proud and happy in her company, bursting with energy and emotion because of last night's love.

The journey home was delightful, too. They talked and laughed, and he learned more about her life and her thoughts. She was a perceptive and observant person and yet, as she had just shown, subject to reckless impulses.

Once, he asked, "Why did you not come to me when you thought Georgianna had gone off with Rupert? Willingly or not?"

"I suppose I was hoping I could sort it all out before anyone knew she had gone. And then I could not waste time to go back."

"And you didn't know if I would take Rupert's side or Dudley's?"

She considered it. "I don't believe I thought about that at all."

"Do you trust me, Deborah?"

"Yes," she replied as though surprised by the question, which made him smile.

"Then don't keep things from me. I think we can do better in alliance."

She smiled, a full, brilliant smile that transformed her face to heart-stopping beauty, and he felt compelled to lean across the space between the horses and kiss her. He loved the eager response of her lips, the soft caress of her hand on his cheek.

"I am a lucky man," he whispered.

Her eyes shone, and his heart seemed to burst with the knowledge that he made her happy.

They arrived back at Gosmere Hall before tea time. Matthew himself ran around from the stables to receive their horses and relayed the news that Marvin had arrived some two hours earlier. That was all there was time for because Dudley and his wife flew down the front steps to greet them. Inevitably, although they both smiled, they looked tense and anxious. For they could have had no idea how things stood between Christopher and Deborah if she had truly run away with Rupert or been abducted.

Christopher felt exuberant enough to pick Georgianna up and swing her around in a huge hug, but he suspected Dudley would not approve, so he merely grinned and kissed her cheek before introducing her to Deborah, his wife now in more than name.

"I can tell we are going to be great friends," Georgianna said eagerly, with a quick, worried quirk of an eyebrow at Christopher. "Come inside, and tell us everything!"

They all repaired to the terrace room where his grandfather was already ensconced.

“Well?” Hawfield demanded, bounding to his feet, his fierce eyes jumping from Christopher to Deborah and back again. “Did you find the reprobate?”

“If you mean Rupert, yes,” Christopher replied, closing the door, “and it seems we have all been maligning him, casting his as the villain of the piece when he had no idea we were all looking for him. Deborah was afraid he had abducted Georgianna, and discovering his henchman asleep on our land, made him take her to Rupert—although with the forethought of summoning your maid, Georgianna, to add respectability and throw gossipmongers off the scent.”

“I thought it must be something like that when I heard Marvin’s story,” Georgianna said, nodding wisely. “So, when did you discover *you* were wrong about Rupert?”

“When I sneaked onto his ship, and Deborah was... pleased to see me,” Christopher said casually, although his heart still melted at the joy in her eyes and his fiercely possessive embrace.

“What the devil were you doing on his ship?” his grandfather demanded, staring at Deborah. He might have softened toward her, but clearly, the trust was not deeply rooted.

She said, “I thought I was passing the time until I could ride the mare home, but in fact, Rupert was keeping me out of the way of the excisemen. But, of course, Christopher did not know that. In any case, it was all a great waste of time, and I’m sorry to have worried everyone. Apart from that, the adventure was quite fun.”

“And we believe Rupert is safe,” Christopher added, “although he has left England again. Before he comes back, I want to have this murder nonsense disproved and allow him to come home.”

“And how will you do that?” his grandfather mocked. “After nearly two years? Rush up to London and start nosing into people’s business?”

“Yes,” Christopher retorted. “If necessary. In fact, I know a man who is very good at ferreting out information. If he can find what we need, then he will save me the time. I would like to take Deborah on a wedding trip before Parliament resumes.”

“What an excellent notion,” Georgianna enthused as servants began to

carry in tea trays. “Dudley and I had a wonderful month in Scotland. I hope you don’t mind, Mrs. Halland, but I ordered tea before you arrived!”

“It’s most welcome,” Deborah assured her. “And I wish you will call me Deborah.”

“Then, I am Georgianna. I knew we would be friends!”

The servants laid out the little sandwiches and cakes, placed the teapot close to Deborah, and presented Christopher with a handful of mail. There was one from Gates, a couple from colleagues in London, a scented one from Marina Belham which he would rather not have received, and one addressed to Miss Deborah Shelby at her mother’s house in Coggleton.

“Someone didn’t see the notice in *The Morning Post*,” he observed, passing the letter to her.

“Are you sure you sent it?” she asked wryly.

“Actually, no,” he said, struck. “I remember writing it, but beyond that... I’ll make sure.”

Deborah put the letter beside her and poured the tea, which he passed to the others.

Only when they had caught up on events at Gosmere since they had left—very little although Georgianna was impressed with the salons—did Christopher open his letter from Gates, which gave him an early list of four bright boys whom he had earmarked for the school and whose parents were willing to allow the opportunity.

He glanced up to tell Deborah and found her reading her own letter. Her face was transfixed, but she did not look happy. On the contrary, a flat, stricken look in her eyes wiped the excited words from his lips.

Instead, he said, “What is it?”

Her gaze flew up to his, but almost at once, she blinked, hiding her expression beneath her lashes. She smiled brightly, folding the letter and stuffing it into the folds of her gown.

“Oh, nothing. Just trivial gossip from an old friend. What does Mr. Gates say?”

He told her and let the conversation flow from there. But he knew she was lying.

*

IT WAS NOT a complete lie. It was gossip, although hardly trivial to herself, and never in a thousand years would she have called Lord Barden her friend.

His letter stunned her. It referred openly to the scandal of Connaught Place, implying without saying so, that he had caused it. This, she already knew from Hazel. But he also went on to say that it was in his power to have the newspaper recant and claim to be mistaken in listing her presence. To this end, he would meet her at the Cogleton Arms on Monday the fifteenth of August at eleven of the clock. He advised her strongly, for her own wellbeing and that of her family and friends, to come alone and to tell no one.

To read this at all was bad enough. To discover it in company, in *Christopher's* company, was unbearable. To keep this from him went against all her instincts as well as the promise she had only just made him. But Barden had already hurt her and three other innocent, decent women, for no good reason. Lucy had already suffered in the wake of that. She could not allow him to hurt Christopher or her family any further. She had to speak to Barden before she could make such a decision.

And so, she pretended all was well and felt her soul shrivel because Christopher knew she was lying.

Somehow, she got through the ritual of tea, went to inspect the work that had gone on without her, and finally escaped to her own bedchamber, where she ordered the luxury of a hot bath.

There, soaking in the warm, scented water, she felt the aches of two day's riding ease. As she began to relax, she accepted there was nothing she could do about the Barden matter until Monday, so there was no point in worrying. On the other hand, she also had to keep it from Christopher until then, and the knot of that refused to unwind in the steam.

When she had left Gosmere yesterday, she had never expected to return with such happiness. She did not know if Christopher loved her as she loved him, but he did care, and she had the chance to win him completely. Keeping things from him was hardly the way to his heart or to her own comfort. However, she could not risk his wellbeing or anyone else's for her own comfort. Until Monday, she would have to maintain a certain distance while still assuring him of her affection...

Of course, she had not said the words. She had not told him she loved him. To tell him now seemed wrong, like pulling the wool over his eyes so that she could meet Barden in secret. Everything else depended on Barden.

As the water began to cool, she climbed out of the tub and wrapped herself in the large towel Anne had left on the nearby chair. Rubbing her hair with the smaller one, she wandered into the bedchamber. A sound in the outer sitting room took her to the door.

“Anne, you may tell—”

She broke off abruptly, for it was not Anne the maid walking across the sitting room toward her. It was Christopher, fresh and handsome in his evening clothes. Desire sparked in his eyes and showed clearly in the suddenly predatory nature of his approach.

“Christopher!” she croaked. “I am not dressed.”

“I can see that,” he said gravely. “I came to see if I could help.”

She stepped back, stumbling against the door, and dropped her hair towel as she steadied herself. His knowing smile and his glittering eyes made him dangerously attractive, and she was too distracted to notice his hand until it plucked the large towel from her grasp, and it, too, fell to the floor, revealing her in all her damp nakedness.

His eyes dipped, and he made a hoarse sound deep in his throat. Then he took her in his arms, holding her close against him, and kissed her mouth with slow, unmistakable intent. She tried to speak, to maintain whatever distance she had imagined was possible with him, but it seemed she could not, and by the time he carried her to the bed, there seemed no point in denying him. Or herself.

“Do you trust me?” he asked breathlessly as he made tender love to her.

“Yes.”

“Remember that.”

“I will, if you trust me, too...” And then they could talk no more, or at least not in words.

*

DINNER PASSED IN pleasant lethargy. She rather liked Lady Bilston’s chatter, which was generally amusing and always good-natured. Dudley was beamingly proud of her, and she unquestioningly, if casually, affectionate toward him. To Deborah’s mind, Dudley’s jealousy had no basis except in his own guilt concerning Rupert.

It was also pleasant to have female company while the gentlemen enjoyed their port.

“I don’t know how you put up with all these men so soon after your wedding,” Georgianna remarked. “If I were you, I would turf them all out. Except Christopher, of course.”

“*Can* one turf Lord Hawfield out?” Deborah asked wryly.

Georgianna laughed. “If anyone can, it’s Christopher. However, I daresay his presence is quite useful to you just now.” Georgianna sat beside her, a little hesitantly. “I heard about your trouble. At the princess’s house. And Ralph Ireton’s big blabbermouth.”

Reality pinched at her. “Is it all around the neighborhood?”

“I think it already was. But no one had told Lady Letchworth. Or Edmund.”

“I had thought better of Sir Edmund. He cut my sister, who is even more innocent than I.”

“That is what could really hurt you,” Georgianna said bluntly. “If you are being portrayed as some wicked seductress, you could have pulled over Christopher’s and even Hawfield’s eyes. And so, the Letchworths’ behavior will win the gossip war. I have been thinking that to counter that, you and I should be seen together as best of friends. And you should hold a party of some kind.”

Deborah smiled with difficulty. “And if no one comes?”

“They’ll come from curiosity and invite you in return because you are clearly not the vulgar creature they have been told about by gossips.”

“I’ll speak to Christopher,” Deborah said doubtfully.

“Do. And tomorrow, you and I shall go to the village.”

“I should have called on my mother today.” Deborah wondered if Lucy would have spoken to her if she had. “Come with me tomorrow, if you like.”

“An excellent plan. And on Sunday, we shall go to church.” Georgianna smiled. “*En masse*,” she added with relish.

*

“I’VE BEEN THINKING,” Christopher said to her the following morning as he pulled on his shirt. He had entered her chamber the previous evening “to kiss

her goodnight”, as he had said, and had ended by brushing her hair and undressing her and then sleeping by her side. It had all felt wonderfully intimate, and if it hadn’t been for the secret she was keeping from him, her happiness would have been perfect, especially when she woke to love at dawn.

“What are you thinking?” she asked in reply.

“That if I moved into the rooms next door—which are connected to yours—I wouldn’t have to trail the length of the house to make love to you. Or to dress.”

Meeting his gaze in the dressing table mirror, she blushed with pleasure. “They are the rooms of the master of the house, are they not?”

“Actually, I believe those are the ones above the drawing room, so the master and mistress could avoid living too closely together. Which is another option, since your excellent decorators are currently making them more habitable.”

Her meeting with Barden loomed so large in her mind that she actually found herself wondering if she would find it harder to escape to the inn unseen if he occupied the rooms next door. Then angry with herself for even considering allowing the vile Barden so much control of her life, she forced a smile to her lips.

“I like your idea better,” she said lightly.

But he must have seen her brief conflict, for he said, “Do you?”

She rose and went to him. “Of course I do. I was only surprised you seemed to want my approval.” In fact, it was more wonderful than that, for his suggestion reinforced what he had said at the inn, that he was leaving his rakish lifestyle behind.

She reached up and kissed his cheek, inhaling the distinctive, now-familiar scent of him that she loved so much.

His arms came up at once to hold her loosely. “What are your plans for today?”

“Georgianna is coming with me to my mother. Cravenly, I am hoping her presence will deflect Lucy’s ire.”

“I hope so, too.”

“Do you think she is right about holding a party here?”

“Probably. Either way, it is a good idea—if you don’t hate it too much.”

“I believe I agreed to be your hostess at the beginning.”

“We agreed to a lot of nonsense at the beginning.”

She laughed and kissed his lips before slipping free. “And what are you doing today?”

“Going to look at the school and make some decisions about partitions. Dull stuff, but it’s almost habitable now, and Gates is eager to begin the actual teaching in September.”

“Do you agree?”

“I plan to be on my wedding trip, so he may do as he likes.”



Chapter Seventeen

“WHAT DO YOU think of a garden party?” she asked Georgianna as the carriage rattled down the drive. “Spilling out from the terrace room? We could have sunshades on the terrace, and pall mall or something similar on the lawn. I know we have hoops and mallets at my mother’s house—if the children have not lost them.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. Elegant but informal. Only, what if the weather lets us down, and it rains?”

“We could use the salons instead, even for a form of pall mall.”

“That would work!” Georgianna enthused. “Something less usual. Who would you invite?”

“All the families in the neighborhood with a claim to gentility. Or wealth. I wondered about using the event to raise funds for the school. I thought it might convince people to put up with my scandal for the sake of charity.”

Georgianna frowned. “If any need to be convinced. But certainly, it gives a focus beyond you, which is good. And I presume the school will need money before much longer.”

“Christopher plans to raise most of it in London and the big industrial cities, create a trust that will eventually pay for everything. But I see no harm in making a start.”

“Won’t you dislike having the little monsters at the bottom of your garden?”

Deborah laughed. “They won’t be as close as that! Besides, there won’t be so many, and they might learn, too, from how the estate is run.”

Georgianna looked amused. “You have thought of everything. You are good for Christopher, you know. Somehow you manage to encourage him and keep his feet on the ground at the same time. He is subject to enthusiasms.”

“You mean he will tire of the school?” *Of me?*

Georgianna considered. “Not necessarily. But he will almost certainly

find other obsessions that will take up more of his time.”

“It won’t matter if Mr. Gates is running the school, and the money is secure.”

Georgianna cast her a wry look. “You do understand him, don’t you?”

I love him.

Georgianna insisted on stopping in the village first and going into the shop in search of ribbons. She took Deborah’s arm to walk across the road, chattering away, though she paused to return the vicar’s bow. As they left the shop again with a box of sweetmeats for the children and a length of shell-pink ribbon, Mrs. Copsley, the squire’s wife, was gossiping in the square with another woman Deborah didn’t recognize. She inclined her head before walking back to the carriage. Mrs. Copsley returned the gesture, and Georgianna squeezed Deborah’s arm in triumph.

“There, you are acknowledged by whoever she is,” Georgianna crowed.

Deborah did not have the heart to tell her that the squire’s wife was a close family friend and was unlikely to give her the cut direct under any circumstances.

“Shall we walk to your mother’s house since it is such a fine day?” Georgianna suggested.

Agreeing, Deborah told the coachman he might wait in the square for an hour. Walking the length of the village felt a little like marching into battle through enemy fire, but Georgianna seemed to manage everything, including pinching her arm to draw her attention to Miss Figgis, the retired governess who had once given a few lessons to the children. Miss Figgis bowed to her from her cottage garden, a hesitant smile on her lips.

“Good day, ma’am,” Deborah said politely. “Your roses are looking quite brilliant this year.”

“Oh, thank you,” Miss Figgis said breathlessly. “I believe it is all in the pruning.”

“I’m sure you must be right. I shall ask your advice about the new garden we’re planning at the hall. Georgianna, this is Miss Figgis, who has been most kind to us since we came to Coggleton. Miss Figgis, Lady Bilston, my husband’s cousin.”

The two women bowed to each other. Miss Figgis’s cheeks were pink with delight and interest.

“Excellent,” Georgianna murmured when they had walked on far enough

not to be overheard. "Our friendship will be all over the neighborhood by evening. Now we can visit your mother."

Georgianna seemed very pleased with these results, so Deborah didn't mention that Miss Figgis was so unworldly she was unlikely even to have heard of the scandal in London.

However, her younger siblings were undeniably pleased to see her, and Georgianna took their boisterous welcome in her stride.

"Oh, Deb, I thought you were coming yesterday," Mrs. Shelby exclaimed, emerging from the parlor. "Lucy has been so low and—oh!" She broke off at the unexpected sight of the brilliantly fashionable Georgianna bending to admire Stephen's wooden sword while Lizzie and Giles spoke at once.

"My mother," Deborah murmured as the children fell silent at last. "Mama, Lady Bilston."

"Forgive my descending on you uninvited," Georgianna said, extending her hand with a friendly smile. "I have heard so much about you all, and Deborah assured me you would not mind."

"Indeed, not! Your ladyship is most welcome," Deborah's mother assured her. "Lizzie, run up and tell Lucy to come down."

"I will go, Mama," Deborah said, leaving Georgianna to the tender mercies of the rest of her family.

At the top of the stairs, she knocked on the door of the chamber she had once shared with Lucy and Lizzie. Receiving no answer, she went in anyway.

Lucy sat by the empty grate, dry-eyed, although from her stained cheeks and swollen eyelids, she had clearly wept a good deal recently.

"If the welcome below is not enough for you, I cannot help it," Lucy said. "You are not welcome to me."

"I can see that," Deborah said calmly. "But Mama would like you to wash your face and come down and greet Lady Bilston."

"Lord Bilston's wife?" Lucy said, clearly interested in spite of her own tragedy.

"Yes. She is very friendly and kind-hearted."

Lucy curled her lip. "Vising the sick and the shunned?"

"Helping the shunned," Deborah said. "This does not affect her at all. Her life is in London. Yet, she gives up her time to prove her friendship to me and to you."

Lucy's eyes flickered, but she said only, "What is the point?"

“The point is not wallowing. You are not disgraced except by association with me. I am trying to improve things, not crying over the unfairness of life.”

“You have things to improve,” Lucy retorted. “You *have* a husband.”

“Yes, I do. He never believed the scandal nonsense in the first place, and he married me in the full knowledge that it could erupt at any time.”

“Do you expect my congratulations?”

“No, I expect you to think about what you actually had and what you lost by this. Do you think Sir Edmund was a good man, that he loved you? Did you love him?”

Lucy stared at her, then her eyelids drooped, and she frowned down at her hands. “I don’t know,” she said dully. “I suppose I never thought about it. I liked him. He is a baronet with several beautiful homes. I liked that he liked me, that he loved me.”

“Did he?”

“Of course he did,” Lucy exclaimed. “He would have married me if it had not been for your...*trouble!*”

“If he truly loved you, do you really think he would have been deterred by an accusation flung by his disreputable brother-in-law? An accusation *against me* that did not deter *my* husband.”

Lucy shrugged impatiently. “He only married you to get at his inheritance.”

“He could have married anyone to get at his inheritance. Lucy, you are nineteen years old, and you have lost one suitor you’re not even sure you love and who may not be worth loving. If I were you, I would pick myself up and show the world he is nothing to you. And that he has nothing to blame you for.”

Lucy raised her eyes with a hint of curiosity. “Is that what you are going to do? Show the world you are not to blame?”

“I hope to. And if you help me, it’s probable you will help all of us. We’re having a garden party next week.”

Lucy swallowed. “Will *he* be there?”

“I don’t know. I shall certainly invite him.”

This appeared to have given Lucy enough food for thought, so Deborah turned to go. “Wash your face, and come down. You will like Lady Bilston excessively. She is very fashionable.”

She was rewarded barely five minutes later by her sister's entrance to the drawing room, looking very pretty and bright-eyed, with her sociable manners in perfect place.

"Oh, well done," their mother murmured to Deborah. "I only wish you had come yesterday."

Deborah laughed. "I'm not sure I would have known what to say yesterday. A great deal seems to have happened since then!"

*

CHRISTOPHER, HAVING MADE the necessary decisions for the workmen in the dower house, rode over to Coggleton House. He was interested to see what his reception would be.

Although he didn't truly expect the Letchworths to be *not at home* to him, he also knew that receiving him today was no guarantee they would receive Deborah. But he wanted a hint as to their feelings, and he wanted a blunt word with young Letchworth. Beyond that, he was quite prepared to cut the connection with them or anyone else who insulted his wife.

By ill luck, Frederica Ireton was crossing the hall as he was admitted.

"Why, Christopher," she said, smiling, "What a pleasant surprise. Come into the drawing room. Don't worry, Alfred isn't here."

"Good."

She glanced at him. "You didn't need to hit him."

"I beg to differ. In fact, he's lucky that's all I did."

"Such heat." She lowered her amused voice. "Did your wife give you such terrible grief for catching us?"

"My wife gives me no grief at all."

"She does not seem very spirited," Frederica said with barely disguised contempt.

Christopher laughed. "You have no idea how wrong you are. My wife understands perfectly how things are."

Seeing she had erred, she smiled pleadingly and tried to take his arm, but he avoided her touch, bowing her instead into the drawing room.

"Mr. Halland," Lady Letchworth said in surprise, laying aside her needlework. "What a pleasant surprise."

He didn't miss her quick glance over his shoulder, or her not quite concealed relief to discover his wife was not with him. She hadn't yet decided what to do about Deborah, he deduced.

"Deborah sends her regards," he said blandly. "And her thanks for the other evening's delightful dinner. She has taken my cousin's wife to meet her family."

"Of course, I had almost forgotten Lady Bilston was with you now. How is the dear young lady?"

"Very well. You may see for yourself if you care to join us next week. Deborah will send you a card."

"Ring for tea, Frederica," Lady Letchworth said, presumably to avoid answering.

"Not for me, ma'am," Christopher said at once. "I am not really fit for the drawing room since I rode over from Gosmere. Is Letchworth about?"

"At the stables, I think, fussing over some fetlock or other."

"Then, if you will excuse me, I'll beard him there. Good day."

He bowed and sauntered away, closing the door to lessen the likelihood of Frederica following him.

He encountered Letchworth just coming from the stables, an unusual scowl on his brow that vanished when Christopher hailed him.

"Halland! I didn't know you were here."

"Just dropped in to pay my respects, but I'm more suited to the stables right now. How is the fetlock?"

"On the mend, but I won't ride him for a few days."

"Walk with me then and explain to me your unforgivable rudeness to my sister-in-law."

Letchworth's scowl came back. "I knew you had come about that."

"Do you blame me?"

Letchworth sighed. "Not entirely. But you must see my difficulty, too! I thought her sweet and pure and honest."

"Do you have evidence that she is not?" Christopher asked dangerously. "I believe the accusation was against Deborah. And it's arrant rubbish peddled by the Regent's snake. Who the devil are you to judge my wife?"

"I don't," Letchworth protested. "But you cannot judge me either since you had married her before this came out."

"I knew all about it before I married her," Christopher said

contemptuously. “Do you seriously imagine she did not tell me?”

Clearly, that was exactly what Letchworth had thought, for he gaped at Christopher in astonishment.

Christopher curled his lip. “I see that you do judge her. Loath as I am to end the friendship between us—”

“Wait, Halland, let a man speak!” Letchworth interrupted with some indignation. “I confess I have not truly been thinking of this from your point of view, but you must see it from mine. Lucy may well be pure as the driven snow. In fact, I know she is. But she is not honest. *She did not tell me.*”

Christopher allowed him that point.

“In fact,” Letchworth said bitterly, “the truth paints that silly joke about her sister being the governess in a whole different light.”

“Has it not struck you,” Christopher said carefully, “that the secret of this scandal was not hers to tell? And what kind of creature repeats scandalous lies about her own sister?”

Letchworth stopped in his tracks, staring at him.

Christopher nodded curtly. “Think about *that.*” He turned on his heel and strode back toward the stables and Nightshade.

*

ON HIS RETURN to Gosmere Hall, he discovered that not only had his things been moved into the set of rooms next to Deborah’s, but they had been largely put away, too. There were advantages to having a valet, even if he was a lad with no experience that Hunter had wanted to employ as a footman.

Grinning, he kicked off his boots, then strolled through his much more spacious and pleasant rooms to the connecting door, meaning to invite Deborah, if she was there, to admire. Receiving no reply to his soft knock, he strolled through to her sitting room. Although it was empty, a faint scent told him she was close by. He walked to her half-open bedchamber door and raised his hand to knock.

But he could already see her. She sat on the side of the bed, lost in a letter she clutched in one hand. He could not see her face, but there was such concentration in the way she bent over the epistle, such powerful emotion emanating from her, that his light-hearted greeting died in his throat.

He thought it was the letter she had received yesterday, the one she had dismissed so unconvincingly as unimportant. He had allowed her that privacy, even imagined he understood it to some degree. After all, he had held in his own hand a scented message from his one-time mistress that he had no intention of reading to Deborah. Or replying to. Lady Belham lay firmly in the finished part of his life.

But something uneasy and unpleasant clawed at his stomach now. She had told him from the beginning that there was no suitor, no lover in her life, no one who had ever touched her heart. And now... But the letter could be from anyone. Because he had thought of his own past indiscretions did not make this one of hers. Nor would he let jealousy blind him.

She gave a little gasp, as though trying not to weep, even dashed her hand across her eyes.

“Deborah?” he said at once. “What is it?”

Her head snapped up. She crumpled the letter as though involuntarily and shoved it into the drawer of her bedside table as if she didn’t want to see it ever again.

She jumped to her feet, smiling and coming to meet him with both hands held out. “Hunter said you were out on the estate. What have you been doing?”

He caught her hands, drawing her to him for a brief kiss. “Dull stuff for the most part, but I’m afraid I have promised your presence for two sick visits and a baby admiring session.”

“Why afraid? I said I wanted to be involved.”

“So, you did.”

“I also called at Coggleton House.”

“Did they receive you?” she asked lightly, although she searched his eyes at the same time.

“Of course, they did. I told Lady Letchworth she would receive a card of invitation from you, and I had a word with Letchworth.”

“About Lucy? Is he completely turned against her?”

“Not completely. I gave him some food for thought, but beyond that... Well, if there isn’t enough between them to get over this, they shouldn’t even be considering marriage.”

“I came to the same conclusion, talking to Lucy.” Deborah sighed. “She wanted to pretend I had ruined her life when I don’t think she had truly

thought much beyond the triumph of catching Sir Edmund and being the mistress of Coggleton House.”

She laughed suddenly, “Do you hear us, disapproving of them for not knowing each other well enough, when we married after half an hour’s conversation.”

He smiled back, though his heart twisted again. He thought he had begun to know her, but the truth was, two weeks ago, they had never even met. For him, love had come fast. And he would not ruin that with stupid doubts and jealousies.

“Come and see my chambers,” he invited, and she blushed and held his hand as they walked together through the connecting door.

He enjoyed watching her flit about his rooms, examining things she had never seen before, including his collection of Roman coins, the book his sister had given him for his tenth birthday, and the dueling pistols that had been the last gift of his father.

“Have you used them?” she asked in surprise, gazing at them in their elegant, inlaid case.

“Lord, no. Apart from shooting practice for fun. I regard them as works of art.”

She ran her fingers lightly over the decoratively carved wood and engraved silver. “Are they loaded?”

“I wouldn’t let you touch them if they were.”

She closed the box and replaced it in his cabinet, examining instead the cravat pins he rarely wore, preferring a plainer style.

She smiled as everything she saw taught her more about him. That, too, was a novelty and curiously touching. He could not resist dropping a kiss on her exposed nape, enjoying the catch in her breath as she turned to him in immediate response.

Perhaps inevitably, one thing led to another. Afterward, as she lay content in his arms, he said, “You would tell me if something was troubling you?”

She kissed his chest, hiding her face. “Of course, I would.”



Chapter Eighteen

CHRISTOPHER KNEW SHE was hiding something from him, knew it was to do with that wretched letter. Her own silly, instinctive reaction had contributed to that. The doubt in his eyes, swiftly banished, was like a knife in her heart, and she was only grateful for his continued tenderness, even though it made everything worse. Part of her wished she could stay well away from him until after speaking to Barden on Monday.

Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow, I will tell him everything, once I'm sure Barden can't hurt him.

In the meantime, there was the social ordeal of church, although she hoped the service might provide some spiritual comfort and guidance.

They traveled sedately in two carriages—*en masse* as Georgianna had commanded, even Lord Hawfield allowing himself to be bundled out of the house before breakfast. The journey was just long enough to let dread build in the pit of Deborah's stomach. Despite her walk yesterday with Georgianna, she did not relish the stares or possible rudeness from the rest of the congregation. For her family's sake, for Christopher's, she hoped there would be no confrontation, no awfulness.

Christopher handed her down outside the church and held her hand comfortingly in his arm. "You're going to church," he murmured, "not walking into the lion's den."

She smiled gratefully in response, and they followed Lord Hawfield up the path. The vicar welcomed them kindly, and Christopher introduced him to his family. Then they were inside the church and walking up the aisle with all curious eyes upon them. Beside her, Christopher nodded to people he knew. Deborah tried to do the same. She noticed her mother and Lucy and smiled encouragingly. Behind her, she heard Georgianna greet them like old friends.

As important members of the community, they had pews at the front of the church, and there was a little shuffling to make way for them all. Then, she could sit down with some relief and wait for the service to begin.

On the other side of the aisle, she noticed Lady Letchworth, Sir Edmund, and Mrs. Ireton. It must have been them Christopher had acknowledged as they walked to their own places.

Mr. May was a kindly, soothing sort of clergyman. The familiarity of the rituals, the atmosphere of peace in the church, the wise, comforting words of the sermon all played their part on Deborah's mood. By the time the service was finished, she felt much calmer and walked back down the aisle with considerably more confidence. Of course, the real challenge was still to come, as everyone gathered to greet and gossip outside the church.

Lord Hawfield paused to hail the Letchworths, commenting on the fineness of the day and thanking them for last week's dinner. There was little for Deborah to do but smile and murmur greetings and move on as if she did not care whether or not they snubbed her. It came to her that if it wasn't for Lucy's unhappiness, she truly would not care.

Behind her, Georgiana was greeting them with great pleasure, although she paused to call, "Oh, Deb! Don't let your mama and Lucy go before us!" Thus clearly announcing her friendship with Deborah and her family.

"One must admire Georgianna," Christopher murmured in her ear.

"I am in awe," Deborah agreed.

They found her mother and Lucy in conversation with the squire's family. Their eldest son, Ned Copsley, was clearly besotted with Lucy, at whom he gazed worshipfully while he talked. Lucy was listening politely, occasionally inserting a smile or a nod.

"Ah, there you are, my dear," Mrs. Shelby said, receiving a kissed cheek from both Deborah and Christopher. "I have just been telling Mrs. Copsley about all your renovations up at the hall."

Of course, there was a difference now from yesterday's distant bows exchanged across the street. Here, Mrs. Copsley was with her husband and daughter, under the eyes of all her friends, and for an instant, her gaze did flicker over Deborah with dismay. However, without causing a scene, there was little for the Copsleys to do but greet her with civility. And once the civility was made, it was harder to go back on, as Georgianna had pointed out. As they talked, the Bilstons and the Letchworths walked up the path together.

"Goodbye," Georgianna said to them cheerfully, turning with a smile to give her hand to Deborah's mother. As the squire's family was introduced,

Deborah noticed Sir Edmund standing awkwardly beside young Ned Copsley.

“Good day, Miss Shelby,” he said.

If it was meant to be an olive branch, Lucy did not rush to pick it up. She merely curtsied and smiled pleasantly, a gesture that encompassed Lady Letchworth and Frederica, too. Then she turned back to the squire’s son. “You were saying, sir?”

It was very well done, Deborah thought. She was being polite to both young men and favoring neither. She certainly had no intention of interrupting the squire’s son, who looked positively ecstatic. Even as Sir Edmund hesitated and then strode off, she kept listening and nodding.

Deborah felt proud of her and told her so. “He need not think he can pick you up and drop you whenever his mood changes.”

All the same, Deborah didn’t know if it was good that Sir Edmund had clearly wished to speak to Lucy alone. In her opinion, there needed to be a great deal more understanding and honesty between them before they considered marriage.

Then she thought of her own situation, about meeting Barden tomorrow without Christopher’s knowledge, and looked forward fiercely to her own honesty.

*

LORD BARDEN ENTERED the village of Coggleton before dark on Sunday evening. A pleasant, picturesque kind of place, he thought contemptuously, if one didn’t have to live there. He was sure it would perfectly suit the dull Miss Shelby, whom he had only ever noticed once in his life.

“Remember, my name is Crosse, here,” he told his valet.

“I do remember,” Rogers replied, clearly bored. His moments of insolence were growing more frequent the longer Barden failed to pay him. Well, he would just have to wait until Barden’s biggest gamble of all paid off. He hadn’t meant everything to depend on the final part of his complex plan, but his disastrous attempt to acquire the hand and fortune of Juliet Lilbourne had gone so horribly wrong that he could do nothing else.

In fact, so much depended on his final throw of the dice that he had

almost decided to give up the Deborah Shelby portion entirely. But if all worked out with Lady Meg Winter, then he wanted no unpleasant surprises to creep up behind him.

He knew little about Deborah Shelby beyond where she lived and the relatively humble background of her family. Her father had been a mere country vicar, and Deborah had got her place with the Prince of Wales through, apparently, the recommendation of a bishop who happened to be a family friend. Or some such.

Still, the village looked prosperous enough, and the inn didn't seem overawed to receive one of such obvious standing as himself. He supposed that might bode well for his comfort and the stock of the wine cellar. And he might as well push the boat out a little tonight since he had no intention of paying for any of it—hence his assumed name of Crosse. Well, that and the fact that he didn't really want anyone knowing he had spoken to the Shelby girl.

The innkeeper's wife showed him to an adequate bedchamber and asked if he would care to partake of supper downstairs or here in his room.

He considered. "Here, I believe. Do you have a decent claret? Then send that up now."

"Of course, sir. And how long will you require the room?"

"Just for tonight. I am on my way to London. This *is* Cogleton, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"I once met a young lady," he mused. "A very charming young lady whose family lived in Cogleton. A Miss Shelby, I believe."

"Ah, Miss Lucy Shelby," the innkeeper's wife said fondly. "Beautiful young lady and almost betrothed. Possibly."

"No. No, it was not *Lucy*."

"Ah, of course, silly me! If you met her in London, it will have been Miss *Deborah* Shelby, only she isn't any longer."

Barden knew a moment of increasingly familiar disappointment. "Isn't what?" he asked flatly. *Here? Alive?* At least if she was dead, he would have nothing to worry about.

"She isn't Miss Shelby anymore," the innkeeper's wife said in surprise. "She's Mrs. Christopher Halland of Gosmere Hall."

"Oh," he said inadequately. "Perhaps I shall run into her and offer my

congratulations to Mr. Halland. Mr. *Christopher* Halland, you say?”

But as the innkeeper’s wife departed, Barden’s mind was spinning. Christopher Halland, once a rather wild young buck, was currently making his name as a fiery and ambitious member of the House of Commons. In short, he had embraced respectability.

And married a woman mired in scandal.

Barden began to smile. Oh, yes, he was very glad he had kept Deborah Shelby in his plan after all, for it seemed she was now worth a good deal more than her silence.

How much would she be willing to pay for her good name and smooth marriage?

*

THE MONDAY MORNING post brought Friday’s newspapers from London. Deborah eyed them askance in case they contained any further repeat of the Connaught Place scandal. But Christopher did not read such newspapers. He read *The London Gazette* and *The Morning Post*.

“So, what are your plans for today?” he asked over breakfast as he spread open *The Morning Post*.

“I believe I shall call at my mother’s and begin the arrangements for our party. What about you?”

“I have some reading to do and letters to write. Tell me, would you rather sail from Liverpool or from Dover?”

Her eyes widened. “You mean for our wedding trip?” she asked excitedly.

“I thought I might begin to make arrangements, at least to get us as far as the continent.”

“Oh, wonderful!” she exclaimed. “I know nothing of travel. Where would be best to depart?”

“I suppose we could travel south and buy a few things in London that we’ll need for the journey.”

“Perfect,” she said happily. Providing he still wanted to go once he learned of her deceit. Well, with luck, all that nonsense would be over by lunchtime, and she could depend on his understanding. She just could not

imagine what Barden had to say to her.

He looked up with a quick grin, then returned to the paper. "Tell me, what was the name of your friend who wrote to you?"

Her stomach lurched as she thought first of Barden's letter.

"The other one of the princess's ladies," he said.

She laughed with relief. "Oh, Hazel! Hazel Curwen. Why?"

"She seems to have married Sayle."

Deborah blinked. "Not Sir Joseph Sayle," she said positively.

"Yes, Sir Joseph Sayle. Is that a problem?"

"Obviously not! She just never seemed to like him. But that is wonderful for Hazel! And she will get to travel at last with Sir Joe! As I will with you." She jumped up and took his hand, dropping a quick kiss on it, and then hurried away before he could perceive the state of her nerves.

She could not wait for this meeting with Barden to be over. She really could not see how or why he would wish to hurt her or her family. All she could think of was some misunderstanding, for, in reality, the man had no grudge against her. Perhaps, once he saw that, he would be sorry and retract the newspaper story, giving all four of them their reputations back.

She had hope, inspired by the wonderful omen of her impending trip to Europe. She had found unexpected joy with a man she had not known when she left London. Lucy would find her way, her family were taken care of, and everything was wonderful.

Only it wasn't.

*

SHE GOT THE coachman to let her down in the village square, then walked on to the inn and entered the front door as if she had every right to be there.

I have! She threw off the guilt as best she could, and realized suddenly, she was being watched.

Mrs. Briggs stood just outside the open coffee-room door, gazing at her in surprise. Just behind her stood the easily recognizable figure of Lord Barden, also watching her, his face expressionless.

A shiver of revulsion ran up her spine.

She had an excuse ready for being there, but in truth, she had imagined

this meeting would take place in a much more furtive manner, and she had no idea how—or even whether—to acknowledge him.

She decided on a distant inclination of the head without words and was about to turn to Mrs. Briggs when Barden spoke.

“Why, it *is* you! I do hope you remember me, ma’am. My name is Crosse.”

She stared at him as he all but shoved Mrs. Briggs out of the way to stroll toward her and bow.

“I remember your face, sir, though not your name.”

“We met last at a most pleasant party. I recalled you mentioning this village as your home, and I was just saying to this good woman that I would have liked to pay my respects before I departed. And you walked through the door. It must be fate.”

Deborah chose not to help him, but merely stood still waiting to hear what he had to say. While Mrs. Briggs gazed avidly from one to the other.

“Dare I hope you might join me in a cup of coffee, Mrs. Halland?”

“I have five minutes before I am expected elsewhere. Mrs. Briggs, might I trouble you for another bottle of your best sherry?”

“Oh, of course, ma’am, and I’ll send in another cup if you are joining the gentleman.”

Mrs. Briggs hurried off, and Barden bowed, ushering her into the coffee room. Deborah’s strange sense of mingled wrongness and familiarity suddenly made sense. The last time she had come here to buy sherry, she had drunk coffee with Christopher and left engaged to marry him.

Now, she sat with a stranger who had ruined her reputation on what she could only imagine was a whim.

“Please state your business, sir. I have little time to spend here.”

“Now you are the great Mrs. Halland of Gosmere Hall?” he mocked.

“Any greatness stems from my husband,” she retorted. “Your business, sir.”

“Well, that is rather more complicated by your recent marriage. I am only glad my letter found you.”

“I am not. I don’t appreciate threats.”

Barden smiled and sat back, waiting while Mrs. Briggs trotted in with an extra cup and saucer.

“I left the bottle on the table in the hall for you to collect on your way

out,” she said cheerfully.

“Thank you,” Deborah said to her retreating back. “You were saying, sir?”

“Yes.” Barden poured two cups of coffee, leaving her to help herself to sugar and milk. She didn’t. Nor did she touch the cup. “The threats you did not appreciate were made only to ensure you would meet me. I had no intention of hurting you or your family.”

“Beyond what you have already done,” Deborah said indignantly. “I am aware it was you who tricked us into that house and you who circulated the vile stories against us.”

“Then, you know what I am capable of,” he replied without shame. “But I can also be magnanimous. It is my intention to offer a public recantation by the paper concerned, a withdrawal of your name from the list.”

She looked at him in surprise. “All of our names?”

His smile thinned. “Two have burned their boats, you might say. There is still hope for you and the last lady.”

“Explain,” she said impatiently when he fell silent.

He drank his coffee and replaced the cup in the saucer. “Perhaps you recall a card game in Connaught Place.”

“I remember a few.”

“This one, you did not play, but I did. You brought me wine, just as I dropped a card.”

She remembered the incident. He had pushed his chair back so quickly that it had bumped into her. He hadn’t even noticed in his hurry to pick up the card—a ten of diamonds, which had somehow become an ace when he laid it on the table.

“You cheated,” she said with relish.

“A small adjustment to which I was more than entitled. As you obviously agree, since you seem to have said nothing about it.”

She shrugged impatiently. “My care was only for the princess. She had already lost.”

“A pragmatic lady,” he said, apparently amused. “Perhaps I should have cultivated you after all,”

“No,” she said flatly. “What is the point of this reminiscence?”

“That regardless of right or wrong, we have both committed what are considered crimes in the eyes of the world. I came to say only that if you

maintain your silence about mine, I can spread the word of your innocence. A quid pro quo.”

She stared at him, frowning. “You have gone to a lot of trouble when I never said anything in the first place.”

“But you knew. As I rise in the world, I don’t wish anything to leap up and bring me down again at the wrong moment.”

Deborah’s heart skipped a beat. Could it really be as simple as that? Whatever grudges he had against the others, before her now was just a weak, unscrupulous man covering his back.

“To me,” she said, thinking furiously, “cheating at games is a minor sin, perpetrated by children and a few overindulged adults who don’t like to lose. Which is why I didn’t make a fuss about your little...infringement. However, I’m aware gentlemen regard such matters differently, and I understand why you sought this talk with me.”

Her eyes refocused on his face to find him smiling faintly. He didn’t look remotely troubled. She hoped that was a good sign.

“Here is my bargain,” she said boldly. “My continued silence. Your secret goes to the grave with me. In return, you have your pet scandal sheet retract the entire story in print, proclaiming they were mistaken about the presence of all four ladies whose initials were previously published. You stop fanning the flames of scandal and admit you might have been mistaken if and when the subject comes up. In this way, to the satisfaction of all, our scandal dies away, and yours never sees the light of day.”

He regarded her with amiable fascination. It was not an expression she cared for.

“That is really quite good,” he allowed. “But I’m afraid it is you who are mistaken. I would only ever have been prepared to retract *your* name. Frankly, you weren’t important enough to merit all four. In fact, I nearly passed over you toward my larger goal. But that is all behind us. Because, my dear lady, you changed everything when you married Christopher Halland.”

At the sound of his name, alarm clawed at her stomach, but she managed to maintain her calm. “I don’t see that it changes anything at all.”

“Well, you haven’t had time to think it through,” he said kindly. “I have. So here is *my* bargain. The removal of your name from the scandal, in return for your silence to the grave as you have already offered.” From his pocket, he took a torn piece of paper and pushed it across the table to her. “Plus, this

sum of money to be delivered to me immediately.”

She stared at him, the heat of anger flooding into her face. “You would extort *money* from me? And still call yourself a gentleman?”

“Of course, I would. You now have it in large quantities, and I am in need of it to pay my servants and travel south.”

“I will not give you my husband’s money!”

“Then you give me his good name and his parliamentary career—for which I’m sure more men than I will be grateful. Personally, I never liked the man, so I shall be quite happy to destroy him.”

She tilted her chin, regarding him with clear contempt. “You could not if you tried.”

He laughed. “Oh, my dear, you have a very odd idea about what I can and cannot do. But in this case, I would barely need to do anything at all. The foundations are laid. His wife is ruined. A few reminders of the fact will reduce his influence to nil. I expect he will lose his seat at the next election, but by then, it will be a blessing to him. I suppose you could live abroad, but with the British spilling all over Europe in our new era of peace, I’m sure the scandal will follow him.”

The last of her confidence drained to nothing. Her face felt cold with shock. Would Barden, *could* Barden, really do such a thing?

He had already destroyed the reputations of four innocent gentlewomen, including the daughter of an earl and the child of a duke. Scandal was a vicious enemy, and it could destroy men just as easily. But was Christopher’s career really in such danger? Hazel had married Sir Joseph Sayle, a wealthy baronet and highly respected diplomat. Christopher and his family seemed to be winning against the rumors already.

But that was in the bubble of Gosmere. Hazel would leave the country with Sir Joseph for Vienna. Christopher would return to London, to Parliament, where his true life lay. And his friends there would not be so forgiving. As for his enemies...

Barden was right. If the rumors were not scotched, Christopher’s influence would wane. To fan the flames would at best make him a laughing stock. The proud man who had married a fallen woman.

But Christopher would have known this when he married me, her mind pleaded.

And gambled on the rumors dying down under the weight of his family’s

influence. Which would still happen if she paid Barden for his silence.

She reached out and snatched the paper from the table. When she turned it over, the figures danced before her eyes.

“I am living in the country,” she said hoarsely. “I do not have access to such a large sum.”

He rose to his feet. “You are newly married. You will find a way.”

“I do not have that kind of influence,” she said between stiff lips. “Mine is a marriage of convenience.”

“Oh, I know that,” he said carelessly. “Why else would he have married you? And he’ll find it a lot less convenient when you drag him down. Cheer up, Mrs. Halland. All is not yet lost. The world well knows his penchant for females—Lady Belham can certainly testify to that. Here, his choices are necessarily limited. However, I leave the means to you. Shall we say three o’clock this afternoon?”

“No!” she said in panic. “I could not possibly obtain the money by then.”

He sighed. “Well, let us say midnight,” he proposed grudgingly. “I suppose I could spend another night here. They have a very tolerable brandy, and the claret isn’t bad.” He sketched an ironic bow. “Until midnight, ma’am. The stables behind the inn. Goodbye.”

Dazed, she watched him walk out of the room. He actually whistled to himself as he trotted up the staircase.

She heaved herself to her feet, blinking at her untouched coffee. She felt like an old woman as she made her way through the hall, remembering to pick up her bottle of sherry, and left the inn.

Her happiness and her marriage were in tatters. It seemed almost inevitable when she went to her old home and discovered that the children were playing in the village and that Lucy had accompanied their mother to call on the Copsleys. She left her bottle of sherry with Bertha and walked away.



Chapter Nineteen

LORD BARDEN WAS pleased with his interview. He thought he had turned the tables rather well, and he liked the dazed, slightly stiff way she walked out of the inn and along the street. Watching from his bedchamber window, he saw a child of about ten waving at her. The child tried to run after her, but a larger boy held her back, sending her instead toward a group of playing children. The lad continued to frown after the retreating figure of Deborah Halland.

Nor were the children the only people to notice her. On the other side of the road, a fashionably dressed young lady was being handed down from a carriage, her attention not on the road but on Deborah's back. Unexpectedly, this lady moved her head and looked up at the inn windows. For an instant, their eyes locked, and then Barden bowed. A gentleman offered her his arm, and the pair crossed the road toward the inn. Barden didn't think he knew either of them.

Having learned from previous mistakes, Barden sat in the somewhat precarious armchair and thought over his plan and his talk with Deborah, looking for flaws. Finding none, he moved on to the rest. The worst that could happen was that he continued south with no less money than he had possessed when he arrived in Coggleton. But he really didn't think that would happen.

He smiled and rose. He might as well stroll about the village to pass the time. In fact, he wondered if he might come across the pretty young woman he had seen from the window.

"Ah, Mrs. Briggs," he said, discovering the innkeeper's wife crossing the hall with a trayful of coffee and cups. "It seems I shall need the room for another night."

"I wondered if you would, sir, since you seem to have more friends here than you thought."

He blinked. *I do? That would not be good news.*

"Mrs. Ireton and Sir Edmund from Coggleton House just asked me who

you were, said they thought you were a friend.”

Barden narrowed his eyes but managed to smile. “And what did you tell them?”

“Your name, of course.”

And, no doubt, that he was an acquaintance of Mrs. Halland’s. He thought that over, too, as he strolled out of doors, and in the end, decided it was unimportant. They didn’t know he was Barden, or they wouldn’t have asked, and he had absolutely no objection to anyone spreading rumors of Mrs. Halland’s assignations with strangers.

*

CHRISTOPHER WAS SURPRISED by the strength of his pleasure when he heard the clop and rumble of the carriage on the terrace. He had been working since breakfast on parliamentary business, and he was glad of the break. Standing up from his desk, he stretched prodigiously, pleased with the surroundings of the library since Deborah had refurbished it all. It was now a peaceful and agreeable place to work. In fact, he now preferred it to the room he had earmarked as his study in the beginning—probably because he liked the idea of spending time here with Deborah.

Instead of waiting for her to come in, he strode off to meet her, but when he reached the top of the staircase, it was not his wife he found below but Sir Edmund Letchworth and Frederica Ireton.

“Ah, there you are!” Letchworth said. “We have just been hearing that Mrs. Halland is not at home.”

“Come up, and we’ll have tea anyhow. She shouldn’t be long.” He rather wished Letchworth had come without his sister, but after their last conversation, he didn’t want to send him away.

“We received your card this morning,” Frederica said, gliding up the staircase, “and of course, we shall be delighted to come on Thursday. Mama, also.”

“Good,” he said. Other people in the neighborhood were more likely to take their lead from the squire, but the Letchworths’ acceptance would certainly smooth the way. He led them into the terrace room, although, since it was clouding over, they elected to stay inside.

“Deborah will be sorry to miss you,” he said politely. “She went to the village to call on her mother.”

“Oh, so did we,” Frederica said. “She’s not at home. Apparently, she is calling on the squire’s wife. But at least Mrs. Halland’s expedition was not entirely wasted since she met another old friend instead.”

Letchworth frowned at her.

“I hope she did,” Christopher said. “She has many old friends in the village.”

“Oh, this one was not a Cogleton resident. Just a gentleman passing through *en route* to London.”

“Frederica,” her brother warned.

Frederica smiled. “His name is Crosse.”

Christopher kept his expression amused. “Why, Frederica, you are full of surprises. I never thought of you as a small-town gossip before. And here is tea.”

Along with tea came Dudley and Georgianna, who had been out riding. Their presence and that of his grandfather, who wandered in later, was something of a relief to Christopher, for he did not wish to be constantly dodging Frederica’s poisonous arrows.

He understood she was lashing out with any weapon she thought might hurt, but he was not about to believe her nastiness. Or give in to it. There was no quarrel to be had. He preferred his wife, not just to Frederica, but to any woman he had ever known, past, present, or even future. There was no contest here.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” Letchworth murmured when he and Christopher found themselves with a moment of privacy on the terrace. “And you are right. I’ve been judging Lucy by an impossible standard, by my own wishes rather than by the reality of inevitably divided loyalties. She has done nothing wrong. But I rather think I have. Do you think I am too late to make amends?”

“That rather depends on your reasons for jumping to such conclusions in the first place.”

“You mean if I truly loved her, I would not care for her past? As you do not care for your wife’s?”

“I believed my wife’s explanation. But you were right that our cases are different,” he added awkwardly. “I had no love or belief in love to upset my

judgment.”

Letchworth thought about that. “I don’t know if she loves me either,” he said in a rush. “After all, she seems pretty keen on Ned Copsley.”

Christopher’s lips twitched. “No, she doesn’t. If you are talking about Sunday, she was polite to Copsley, but then, he has never been impolite to her.”

Letchworth flushed. “I don’t know what to do,” he confessed.

“I think the first thing you need to do is talk to Lucy, apologize for your incivility, and either part or get to know each other.”

Letchworth cast him a rueful smile. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Oh, other people’s love affairs are always simple.”

His own seemed to grow more complicated. As the Letchworths departed, he could not help looking beyond his instinctive defense of Deborah and wondering about the man Federica had mentioned. Did he have something to do with the letter she hid from him? Mostly, he worried that she was in some kind of trouble and wondered if he should force the barriers of privacy she had erected over this matter, to protect her from whatever might threaten her.

But just occasionally, nasty little suspicions tried to creep into his mind. Was this man a lover from her past? And if she kept the letter from him, what else was she hiding?

He banished such unworthy thoughts with irritation and distaste, for he had come to know Deborah, her honesty, and her loyalty. She had never said she loved him, but she had given him every hope that she did. He refused to sour his burgeoning love affair with his wife by distrusting her.

She came home about half an hour after the Letchworths’ departure. He, trying to concentrate on his work once more, heard her voice as she exchanged pleasantries with Georgianna. But she did not come into the library.

Respecting her obvious wish for solitude, he gave her the time, forcing himself to concentrate on larger matters and finish his letter. Then, to clear his head, he went out for a walk. For some reason, he would have liked the companionship of a dog as he strode into the woods. If he couldn’t have Deborah.

Returning toward the house, he wandered around the gardens, which really needed long-term work, though the lawn and the terrace garden were largely tidied and cut, ready for the garden party. His heart lifted when he

saw Deborah coming down the steps toward him.

He smiled and went to meet her. It was still a delightful novelty when she immediately raised her face for his kiss.

“Was your day pleasant?” he asked, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm and walking with her.

“It is getting better. How was yours?”

“Mostly constructive. Trying to get things in order so that we can leave for London next week. I shall need to see a couple of people there, but after that, we can flee to the continent and do just as we please.”

The flash of eagerness in her eyes was unmistakable. “Oh, I cannot wait! And yet, I shall miss Gosmere, even though I have not been here a fortnight!”

“It will still be here when we return.”

“And that will be lovely, too.” She frowned. “Will we take servants?”

“It will make things easier for us. We can hire you an abigail in London if you like.”

“Actually, I have got used to Anne.”

“Then take her by all means. I seem to have made Jordan my valet, too. They will be ill-trained by the standards of most, but if they suit us, why not?”

She squeezed his arm in agreement.

“How was your mother?” he asked, assuming she had waited for them when she had taken so long to come home.

“Oh, I did not see her. She and Lucy had gone to call on the Copsleys. The children were playing somewhere in the village, but I didn’t see them either.”

“Who did you find to spend your time with, then?”

“No one. I just walked—right outside the village, in fact, and then I had to walk all the way back to the carriage.”

Christopher felt his faint smile frozen on his lips. He had been so confident that she would mention the man Frederica had been so keen to tell him about.

She said, “Georgianna tells me they are all leaving on Friday.”

He forced his flippant response. “Even my grandfather? He must no longer feel you are a threat to the family. Rejoice.”

“Oh, I do,” she assured him. “But I was thinking. You mentioned new gowns some time ago, and I believe I would like to go to Chester with

Georgianna and buy one at least for the party—perhaps more if I see anything I like.”

“An excellent idea,” he managed. “When would you like to go?”

“First thing tomorrow, so perhaps you should give me the money this evening so that I don’t need to wake you.”

“Don’t be silly. We’ll have them send the account.”

“They don’t know me. Or you, I imagine. Besides, I can keep a better account if I watch the money go down.”

“How much do you need?”

She seemed to swallow. “Perhaps two hundred pounds?”

As it happened, he had such a sum in the house, for paying the local bills they were incurring with the renovations. Nor did he grudge her it. It just seemed out of character. But then, did he really know her character?

“Of course,” he said. “But I have a better idea. I shall come with you and let Georgianna sleep late as she would prefer.”

Deborah laughed. To Christopher, it had a hollow sound. “Don’t be silly, Christopher. You may have excellent taste, but you are a mere man. It’s Georgianna I need.”

*

HIS MIND WAS still racing in circles as he changed for dinner.

If he had to choose whether to believe Deborah or Frederica Ireton, there was no competition. He would believe his wife. He neither trusted nor much liked Frederica anymore, and she had clearly set out to sow discord, to hurt, if she could. He would not let her.

And yet, the trouble he still sensed in Deborah, combined with this mysterious man, seemed to disturb him. He did not believe he was a total figment of Frederica’s imagination. She had not plucked him out of the air as a weapon. He had been there, somewhere, connected to Deborah, however innocently.

And now she wanted a large sum of money urgently.

Was she running away from him? With this unknown man? His imagination balked at this. He could not imagine Deborah behaving in such a way. She would not run in secret. And yet, she hated confrontation.

Something was not right. She doubted him. She did not trust him with this secret. Whatever it was.

He had women in his past. He could hardly be angry about Deborah's previous affections, and he wasn't. But he did want her to talk to him about them, to understand his love was not so shallow that he would reject her for such a trivial reason as a previous attachment. And it must be previous, or she would have told him at the outset.

He paused in the act of unwinding his cravat. She had never said she loved Christopher. And he had never spoken the words to her. Which was not a conscious decision. He had merely been happy with the reality.

Throwing the cravat on the bed, he strode impulsively toward the connecting door. He didn't knock, and he found her still in her day gown, examining the gowns in her wardrobe as if she had never seen them before.

At his entrance, her face lit up, banishing all his suspicions in one smile. He went to her and took her into her arms for a long, thorough kiss. Her eager, almost desperate response melted his heart and his body. Her arms slipped around his neck, and she pressed herself to him almost convulsively.

He drew back only enough to look into her beautiful, grey eyes, which were not calm at all. "You do know that I love you?" he whispered. "With all my heart."

She gasped and buried her face in his chest. But she had not been quite quick enough to hide the expression in her eyes, which was not the joy he had hoped for, but something that looked terribly like dread. Still, she clung to him, maintaining his hope.

He waited, straining to hear his words returned. But she was silent too long, and his hope began to shrivel.

The outer door opened, and quick footsteps sounded across the sitting room.

"It's Anne," she mumbled, pulling away.

And there was nothing for him to do but let her go.

The maid stood aside for him in the doorway, but he paused long enough to say, "Georgianna knows nothing about your expedition tomorrow."

"Well, no, I have not told her yet. I wanted your permission before I asked her."

"Of course you did," he murmured and went out.

*

NEVER HAD DEBORAH imagined she would feel pain at words of love from her husband. Somewhere, perhaps, she rejoiced, wallowed in his love, but the knowledge of her secrecy, which amounted, surely, to betrayal, drowned everything in sheer misery. Nor could she speak of love when she had just asked him for money. What if, when he learned the truth, he thought she had only said it to soften him up for fleecing?

Perhaps he would never forgive her for any of this. And yet, she couldn't tell him, couldn't put him in this much danger.

While walking in the environs of the village that afternoon, she had made her plans that would hopefully save all of them and be rid of Barden once and for all. She hoped to rid Hazel, Lady Julianna, and Lady Meg of him, too, but she wasn't sure that was within her control.

But, dear God, to stay silent when he confessed his love, tore her apart. If it hadn't been for Anne's presence, she would have collapsed on the bed in a heap of anguish. As it was, she stared blindly ahead of her, letting the girl dress her as though she were a doll. Only as Anne left again did she pull herself together and force her mind to think, her ears to listen.

She opened the outer door to the sitting room a crack, then sat and waited until she heard Christopher's door opening and closing, and his rapid footsteps fading toward the stairs.

She rose slowly, for she wasn't sure if his new valet lingered in the rooms. It didn't matter if he was there. She could easily be looking for her husband, just as if she hadn't known the precise moment he left.

She knocked casually on the connecting door and went through. The rooms were empty, so it was simple to walk through and open the cabinet. She took down the beautifully polished and inlaid box and opened it to reveal the two ornately carved dueling pistols. Removing one, she closed the box and returned it to its proper place before closing the cabinet and returning to her own chamber.

There, she placed the pistol in the drawer of her bedside table, on top of Barden's crumpled, threatening letter. She closed the drawer, then straightened with grim determination. This would be the hardest dinner she had ever taken in his company.

Of course, she had no intention of going to Chester tomorrow. For one thing, she would have no money. But as soon as she entered the drawing room, she made a point of asking Georgianna for her company on the morrow.

“Of course,” Georgianna enthused. “Oh, I have such ideas on how to dress you! We shall transform you from merely beautiful to stunningly so!”

Startled, Deborah laughed. “I wish us both luck with that. It will involve an early start, I warn you.”

“I will summon my maid,” Georgianna said bravely. “With copious amounts of coffee,”

“Don’t want an escort, do you?” Dudley said uneasily.

“I have already been rejected,” Christopher reassured him.

“We’ll take one of your footmen,” Georgianna said as though bestowing favor. “He will complain less.”

The rest of the evening felt like agony. Although Deborah was tempted to flee to her rooms, where at least she could stop pretending, she did not wish to arouse suspicion. So she sat on in the drawing room, pretending to read while Georgianna chattered over her embroidery, and Dudley and Christopher talked about Rupert.

“I’ve asked my man in London to look into it,” Christopher said. “I’m hoping he will have definite answers by the time I go up to London next week. If they are what we seek, we can have the arrest warrant rescinded, and Rupert may come home at last.”

“I have written out a signed statement as to what he said to me afterward, and why I did not then act upon it,” Dudley said.

“Good,” Christopher said. “It can’t have been easy,” he added, and Dudley smiled gratefully.

“Then how in Hades do we let Rupert know it’s safe to come home?” Lord Hawfield demanded.

Christopher considered. “There’s an inn that I suspect knows how to reach him. But if we are out of the country, I should let my man handle that part of the matter, too. He is more used to the—er—seamy side of life.”

“Who is this low fellow?” Hawfield demanded.

“Not as low as you might imagine.”

Deborah closed her book. “I think I shall retire early before our expedition. Good night, all.”

As he often did, Christopher accompanied her to the door and opened it for her. Beyond, the gallery was deserted, and to her dismay, Christopher stepped outside the room and took her hand.

“Allow me to join you later,” he murmured, his eyes full of promise.

He had joined her and slept in her bed each night since they had returned from the adventure with Rupert. His presence as much as his loving had become as necessary to her as breathing. For that reason, she had hoped simply to lock the connecting door to discourage him.

And tomorrow, she could tell him all.

But for now, he awaited an answer.

She forced a bright smile. “Not this night, Christopher. I need to sleep before my hectic day’s shopping.”

“I will let you sleep.”

She swallowed hard. “I will sleep better alone.”

The hurt in his eyes almost broke her heart, but she had to be strong, had to inflict this wound to keep him safe. Tomorrow, she would explain. *Tomorrow.*

“Goodnight,” she said cheerfully and tripped along the gallery toward the staircase, hoping he could not see the shame and anguish that crushed her spirit.



Chapter Twenty

OH, YES, SOMETHING was going on.

Christopher closed the drawing room door on his wife and paced back across the floor, forcing his mind to think beyond blind hurt. Was she keeping him away because of *him*, the man at the inn? Because she had some secret assignation, or some trouble to resolve?

Had she discovered she was mistaken and his loving, in fact, disgusted her?

No, he didn't believe that. No one could fake such instinctive response, such wonder, as she had with him only hours before. She might not yet love him, but she enjoyed his body as he did hers. This trouble was rooted in something else, something he knew nothing about. And he needed to find out what.

Abruptly, he swung around to face the others. "Goodnight."

Although aware of their surprise at his suddenness, he did not explain it, merely ran up to his chamber and changed into riding breeches and coat. He seized a cloak in case the night turned cold and strode out.

A light still shone beneath the doors to Deborah's rooms. But he would not disturb her, would not distress her by asking further questions until he had more understanding.

The grooms had all gone to bed, so for speed, he saddled Nightshade himself, collected a lantern for his return, and rode off in the thickening dusk.

*

THE MAID WHO opened Mrs. Shelby's front door did not look pleased to be disturbed at this hour of the evening, although her face quickly smoothed as she recognized him.

"Mr. Halland! Come in, sir, and I'll tell the ladies you're here."

That turned out to not be necessary, for the parlor door opened, and

Stephen and Lizzie spilled out. "It's Chris!"

"Forgive the intrusion, ma'am," he said as Mrs. Shelby appeared anxiously behind the children. Lucy and Giles squeezed in beside her, which in any other circumstances would have been funny.

"Is Deborah well?" Mrs. Shelby asked in alarm.

"Yes, she is quite well, but I'm afraid she doesn't know I am here. Might I beg half an hour of your time?"

"Of course, come and sit down. Giles, light the other lamp. Would you care for a glass of sherry? We seem to have rather a lot of it..."

Christopher's lips twitched, but he accepted gratefully and sat down. Lucy presented him the glass and joined her mother on the sofa. From stools and cushions on the floor, the children all gazed at him as expectantly as the adults.

And now that he had their attention, he had no idea how to begin.

He took a sizeable mouthful of sherry. "Deborah is well," he repeated. "But I am worried that she is...unhappy."

"Oh, no," her mother said positively. "I have never seen her so content. Have you, Lucy?"

"No," Lucy agreed.

"She didn't look happy this morning," Lizzie said flatly.

Giles scowled at her.

"Well, she didn't," Lizzie insisted.

"You saw her this morning?" her mother demanded.

"Yes, in the village," Lizzie replied. "We saw the carriage, but she didn't notice us, just walked straight into the inn."

"And she was unhappy then?" Christopher asked, although his heart sank at mention of the inn.

Lizzie exchanged glances with her brothers.

"I thought she looked determined. Brisk," Giles said reluctantly.

"But unhappy when she emerged?" Christopher prompted. "How long was she there?"

"About half an hour," Giles said, shifting uncomfortably. Clearly, he didn't like talking about her like this, as though he'd been spying or was telling tales. "And yes, she was unhappy then. She walked like an old woman. Lizzie tried to run after her, but I stopped her. I could tell Deb wanted to be alone."

“Something *did* happen at the inn,” Christopher said, frowning into his glass. He raised his gaze to Giles’s. “Do you know if she spoke to anyone there?”

Again, the children exchanged glances.

“She was in the coffee room with someone,” Giles said.

“We saw them through the window,” Stephen explained, and Giles glared at him.

“I shan’t be angry about her speaking to someone,” Christopher said. “I just want to know why she is unhappy. Who did she meet in the coffee room?”

“A man,” Giles said reluctantly.

It was like a knife in the heart, but Christopher kept his gaze and his voice steady. “Did you know him?”

The children all shook their heads.

“His name is Mr. Crosse,” Lizzie piped up. “And he’s a fine London gentleman.”

“How do you know that?” Christopher inquired.

“We asked Mrs. Briggs, the innkeeper’s wife.”

Christopher was silent, drumming his fingers on his knee as he thought. Whoever this man was, either seeing him or listening to him, had changed Deborah from brisk to thoroughly unhappy. But the trouble he had sensed in her had not begun this morning, but when she had received the letter she immediately concealed. He suspected this letter was from this Crosse.

“If she knew this man when she lived in London,” Christopher said slowly, “you would not have met him.”

“That is true,” Mrs. Shelby contributed. “But she never spoke to me of a gentleman named Crosse.”

Perhaps he had heard of the scandal and rejected her. He had come to Cogleton because he was sorry, only to find her married to another. Emotion twisted through Christopher’s gut. Pity for Deborah. And for him. A lifetime of pain.

Whatever had happened to his blithe proposal of each discreetly following their own heart?

“You are thinking she might love this man,” Lucy blurted. “She doesn’t.”

Christopher tried to smile. “I thank you for saying so, but with respect, you cannot know that.”

Lucy waved one dismissive hand. “Of course, I can. She is my sister. I don’t say she never knew him or never liked him, because she never mentioned him in my hearing. But she does not *love* him. Ever since she met *you*, she has loved you. It was clear in her face from the moment she first spoke of you, and it was there in what she said and didn’t say. I know from her words to me about Sir Edmund that she understood love as I did not. And I know she got that understanding from you. I see it in her eyes whenever she looks at you, in her voice when she speaks to you or even about you. Why are men so blind?”

Total silence echoed around the parlor. Everyone stared at Lucy in surprise, no one more so than Christopher.

Lucy smiled wryly. “You think because I am selfish and petulant that I am unobservant?”

“No,” Christopher said. “I think you are like Deborah. There is a great deal more to you than meets the eye.”

“All appearances to the contrary, I want happiness for her. None of this was her fault, from the trouble in London to my broken engagement. It is Deborah who always looks after *us*. Perhaps it is time I returned the favor.”

Christopher reached for his glass and paused. *It is Deborah who always looks after us...* Could she somehow be trying to look after *him*? If Lucy was correct—and God, how he wanted her to be correct in this—Deborah loved only him, and this Crosse fellow was some other trouble from her past.

How many troubles did she have? Was this not most likely to be connected to the scandal? Could Crosse be something to do with the princess? With Barden? Or the other ladies who had been with her that night?

He raised the glass to his lips and drank the rest of it down before glancing at the children. “Did you like this man? Crosse?”

“We never spoke to him,” Giles admitted. “But...”

“No,” Lizzie and Stephen said together.

“No,” Giles agreed. “He was cold and smug, and he made Deborah...as we saw her.”

“His eyes were dead,” Lizzie said.

Christopher’s breath caught. He set down his glass and rose. “I’m glad I came, but I think I need to go home now. Thank you,” he added, encompassing all of them. “You will let me know of anything you might notice?”

“Don’t worry,” Giles said. “We’re keeping an eye on him.”

“Giles!” Their mother frowned.

“Well, we have clearly helped,” Giles argued.

“You have,” Christopher said, “and I’m grateful. But don’t get too close to this man, at least until I see him.”

“Are you going there now?” Giles asked eagerly, as though meaning to accompany him.

Christopher hesitated, torn between competing needs to confront the man who might be threatening his wife and to be with Deborah to protect and reassure her.

“It’s too late to go calling on people, now,” Mrs. Shelby stated.

And Deborah had already been alone in her chamber for the better part of two hours. “I need to go back and speak to Deborah,” he said firmly. “Your Mr. Crosse will keep until morning.”

“Make her speak,” Lucy said unexpectedly, rising to walk with him to the door. “Don’t let her fob you off or change the subject. She is good at that.”

“I rather think she is.” Christopher bowed to Mrs. Shelby and left the parlor.

Lucy accompanied him to the front door.

He glanced at her. “You know, Letchworth is not the only chance you will ever have. You are, in many ways, quite a catch.”

“Neither of us was honest, even to ourselves.”

“Perhaps you should start again. And see if there is something you like. You might be surprised.” He held out his hand, and she gave him hers. “Thank you, Lucy. Good night.”

He retrieved Nightshade from the garden fence to which he was somewhat insecurely tethered and rode back through the quiet village for home.

It was dark now, and there was little moonlight, so as he reached the outskirts, he urged Nightshade off the road, into the lee of the last cottage, while he fumbled in darkness to light the lantern.

As he found the flint, he heard light footsteps on the road, and in the glow of the passing lantern, he glimpsed a woman wrapped in a cloak. The hood was pulled up over her hair, hiding her face, and the only visible part of her was the hand holding the lantern. He only saw her for an instant, and she could have been anybody, but something in the quiet dignity of her posture

and, in her unconscious grace of movement, caught his attention.

Dropping the flint back in his pocket with the lantern unlit, he urged Nightshade the few paces back to the road. The woman hurried on before him. He could see now that she looked uncharacteristically furtive, as though she were afraid of being recognized.

No wonder. She was his wife.

*

“IT’S LATE,” LUCY said, scowling at Lizzie and Stephen as she closed the front door behind their visitor. “You two should be in bed. So should the rest of us.”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Shelby said. She had extinguished the lamps and candles in the parlor and carried one to light them upstairs. “All of us to bed!”

Obediently, they let her herd them before her and separated into their own chambers with yawns and goodnights.

But as Lucy closed her bedchamber door, she found Lizzie no longer yawning but taking her hand and squeezing it tightly.

“Chris does love her, too, doesn’t he?” Lizzie said in a small voice.

“I think he wouldn’t have troubled to come if he didn’t.”

“I like him,” Lizzie stated.

“So do I,” Lucy allowed.

A faint scratch on the door was the only warning before Giles and Stephen slipped almost silently into the room.

“I’m going to watch the inn,” Giles said. “Just for a couple of hours.”

Lucy stared. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“We knew grownups would say that, which is why we didn’t tell you before,” Lizzie said.

“And why we didn’t tell Chris either,” Giles said. “At least, not in so many words. When I said we would keep an eye on the place, I meant we already were. George and Jack were watching until eleven for us.”

Lucy glared at him. “You told village children our business?”

“Of course not.” Giles glared back. “They only know we’re suspicious of Crosse and want to know what he’s up to. If he went anywhere, Jack would come and let me know.”

“And he hasn’t, so this Crosse is clearly tucked up in his bed,” Lucy retorted. “As you should be in yours.”

“I meant to be there at eleven,” Giles confessed. “But Chris was here. Anyway, things happen at midnight, don’t they? And I should just make it if I hurry.”

“What things?” Lucy demanded. “What exactly do you expect him to do in the middle of the night? Flee without paying his account at the inn?”

“Perhaps,” Giles stubbornly. “I have to know. If nothing moves, I’ll come back in an hour. Or two.”

“No, Giles,” Lucy said firmly. “You can’t.”

“We’re going with him,” Stephen piped up.

“You are not!” Lucy exclaimed.

Lizzie tugged her hand. “Please, Lucy. It might help Deborah.”

Lucy scowled at her. “I don’t see how!”

“Yes, you do,” Lizzie said with a grin. “Don’t tell, Lucy. Giles will look after us.”

“Yes, but who will look after Giles?”

“We will,” Stephen assured her.

Lucy groaned. “Drat you, am I never to see my bed? Come on then, fetch your cloaks. I know I am going to regret this.”

*

NOW THAT THE moment was upon her, Deborah knew she could cope. There was no other choice if she wished to save everyone and maintain the possibility of continued happiness with Christopher.

No one saw her leave Gosmere Hall by the side door, she was sure, and she encountered no one in the long, dark walk to Coggleton. As she hurried through the village, her heart pounded from more than the brisk exercise. She disliked confrontation. She thoroughly disliked Barden. But she would do what she had to.

The houses and other buildings were in darkness, even the inn, where the doors were closed for the night. Her timepiece showed her that it still lacked twenty minutes until midnight, which was all to the good. It gave her time to look around, to become familiar with her surroundings before she confronted

Barden and his extortion.

Shading her lantern with her cloak, she entered the inn gates, which, fortunately, remained open, and crept around the side of the house, keeping close to the walls.

The stables were at the back in a sprawling single story. She doubted any of the ostlers slept there since Coggleton was some distance from the main roads, and no night coaches stopped at the inn. Deborah flitted across the yard.

She passed a bolted door and then came to the corner of the building. Another door was closed but unbolted. She paused and listened. Hearing nothing, not even the breathing of horses or shifting hooves, she pushed open the door, hoping it wouldn't squeak.

It didn't. Holding the lantern in front of her, she stepped inside. It appeared to be a storeroom for hay. An inner door led, presumably into the main part of the stables that she had just walked past. She stepped further into the storeroom.

"Good evening, Mrs. Halland," murmured a bland voice to her right, making her jump. "How punctual you are."

"As are you," she replied, recovering, although she couldn't help being annoyed that he was so early that she couldn't look around for either hidden dangers or advantages she could use. But her plan still stood.

"Does anyone know you are here?" Barden asked, stepping into her lantern light. He laid his own on a shelf beside his head.

"Of course not."

"And you have the money?"

She took a hastily wrapped parcel from inside her cloak.

"Two hundred pounds?" he asked casually, taking it from her.

"One hundred," she replied, returning to her pocket as though for the other parcel. Instead, she brought out Christopher's dueling pistol and pointed it straight at Barden's chest. She was pleased to feel her hand steady.

His eyes widened. "What the devil is that for? For God's sake, point it somewhere else. It probably has a hair-trigger!"

"I believe it does," she said. "So, you had better not upset me. Being a lady on my own, I felt it necessary in order to enforce a fair bargain. Which is that you get one hundred pounds now and the rest when I see the printed retraction. Not just for me but for Lady Sayle, Lady Juliet, and Lady Meg."

He curled his lip, although he kept his gaze warily on the pistol. “Anything else?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yes. That two hundred pounds is all you will ever have of me. Dare to contact me again, and I will simply shoot you.”

“My dear,” he mocked. “Will it benefit your estimable husband to have his wife hanged for murder?”

“It might when I reveal at my trial what an utter scoundrel you are. It will all be revealed, and I shall have many credible and well-born witnesses to your conduct. Then again, I might hire an assassin. I believe they are not expensive in London if you know where to look. Or,” she said as his eyes flickered behind her, and he began to move, “I might just shoot you now and be done with it. No one will look for the strange Mr. Crosse, and we’ll have buried you long before Mrs. Briggs even starts bemoaning her unpaid bill.”

Her voice rose through a heady combination of anger and nerves, but it seemed to work in her favor, for she really did sound mad.

Barden held up his hands, palms outward. She was glad to see they were sweating.

“Now, my dear, do nothing hasty,” he begged. “We can still make a civilized bargain. I will agree to your terms if you just lower the pistol.”

“You can agree just as easily with the pistol aimed. More easily, I daresay.”

And then something cold pressed into the back of her head, and Barden leapt sideways as if she might shoot in accidental reflex. Instead, she stood perfectly still as her blood ran cold. Someone held a pistol to her head, and unlike her own, she knew it would be loaded.

Is this it? Am I about to die without ever telling Christopher I love him?

“The same can be said of you, ma’am,” proclaimed a male voice behind her, one she had never heard before. “Give me the pistol.”

The hairs on her neck stood up. She could only let the stranger’s fingers close around the barrel of Christopher’s pistol, easing it upward and then dragging it from her hand.

“My valet,” Barden said by way of introduction. “He is quite eager to be paid, so he will just remove that other hundred pounds I’m sure you brought with you just in case of necessity.”

The cold barrel of the valet’s pistol left her, but she was still afraid to move as his hand drew back her cloak.

“New bargain,” Barden said smugly. “All the money now, and in return, I will, as I promised, have your name removed from the list of attendees at Connaught Place’s most scandalous soiree. Only yours. And I will contact you when I like for more money. Since a document naming you and your husband will be with my solicitor tomorrow, I really doubt you will add murder to your crimes.”

Meanwhile, the valet’s hand had found the pocket in her cloak. He leaned over her, grinning, and his sour breath filled her senses with revulsion. Then without warning, hand and breath vanished with a massive thud as he flew sprawling across the floor. Another hand entirely yanked her behind him, and Christopher—*Christopher!*—crouched to seize both pistols from the valet.

Barden’s mouth had fallen open. He began to back away toward the inner door leading to the horses.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Christopher snarled and strode after him.

Barden paused, holding out the parcel of money, almost waving it in Christopher’s face. “Here! Take it, take it! It was her idea to help an old friend, but I—”

Christopher let out a roar of fury. He seized Barden by the collar and then by the seat of his pantaloons and hurled him bodily across the room, where he sprawled next to his groggily rising valet.

“Go, go!” Barden hissed urgently, scrambling to his feet, hauling the servant with him. Together, all but falling over each other, they stumbled toward a third door at the far end of the storeroom, one Deborah had not even had time to notice before.

As they went, Barden swiped something off a shelf. Deborah didn’t care. Her gaze was drawn to Christopher, who walked toward her, still panting with fury. His eyes blazed brighter than the lanterns, yet seemed darker than the deepest night.

“Christopher,” she whispered.

He blinked, and then his gaze flickered to her left, toward Barden’s exit.

“Deborah!” he choked out, launching himself forward, and she jerked her head around to face yet another pistol, this one in Barden’s hold. His face was ugly with determination and fury.

That’s what he hid on the shelf for just this situation. And this time, I am dead...

But a many-headed fury crashed into Barden, and the pistol went off in a

mighty crack just as it was shoved upward. Some unseen force seemed to spin her around into Christopher's arms, and then together, they were rushing toward the fury, which bore the faces of her siblings. A terrible new fear rushed on her, but it seemed Giles held Barden's pistol, Lucy at his side. But they didn't need Christopher's protection. Barden was haring off toward the front of the inn, and a second later, they heard a carriage and horses leap forward at a gallop.

Christopher made a start after them as the children rushed toward Deborah, then he paused, frowning down at her. "Your gown is wet."

She swallowed. "I feel...I feel strange," she said, and then the pain rushed on her, and she fainted against her husband's chest.

*

CONSCIOUSNESS CAME TO her quite fuzzily at first, a jumble of memories of pain and blood and the realization that Barden's shot had hit her. Her brothers and sisters were part of the terrible dream, Giles with tears running down his face and Christopher's voice saying urgently, "It wasn't your fault. In fact, you saved her life by knocking off his aim."

Then Christopher was holding a cup to her lips, and she was weeping, trying to explain to him, to tell him she loved him before she died.

"Don't talk," he said softly. "Just drink this." And he tipped some foul-tasting liquid down her throat. She didn't care because she was so cold, and Christopher's arms and chest were so warm. There was movement, dizzying and painful, and the clop of horses' hooves. And then she barely felt the pain as she slid back into darkness.

There had been disturbing dreams, but they seemed to melt away with the last fringes of sleep. Especially when she saw who sat by her bed. Christopher, in his shirt-sleeves and no necktie, his tousled hair fell forward over his closed eyes. She wanted to smile and weep at the same time.

"Christopher," she croaked.

His eyes flew open, and he leaned forward, clasping her flailing hand. "I'm here."

His voice was low and intense, stabbing straight to her heart as tears welled.

“Oh, Christopher, I am so sorry,” she whispered brokenly. “I thought I could pay him off and keep him away from us, but I couldn’t tell you in case you did something foolish, and he harmed you. But I never wanted to keep things from you. I never will again. And you have to believe me when I say I love you.” She clung desperately to his hand. “I do.”

His smile was meltingly tender. “I know.”

She blinked, wondering if she was still dreaming. “You do?”

“Well, yes, you told me many times as you drifted into sleep. I’m afraid I gave you a pretty stiff dose of Mrs. Briggs’s laudanum for the pain.”

“Then, if I had died, you would have known,” she said pleased.

“Yes, but that’s no reason to die,” he said firmly.

“Oh, no,” she agreed. With her free hand, she sought the source of the nagging pain in her side. “Did he really shoot me?”

“I’m afraid he did. And if your siblings hadn’t deflected his aim, I’m afraid the damage would have been considerably worse.”

“Then they really were there,” she said in wonder. She frowned. “But I don’t understand any of this. Why were they there? Why were *you* there?”

“Ah, well, they were there because they had seen you leave the inn after your morning meeting with Barden, and they could see you were upset, so they decided to find out what he was up to by—er—watching the inn. I understand they involved several friends in a shift system.”

She took that in. “And you? Did you follow me from Gosmere?”

“No. Just from the edge of Coggleton. I was already there visiting your family.”

“Why?” she asked blankly.

“To discover, if I could, the cause of your unhappiness. I was afraid the mysterious stranger was someone from your past, for whom you regretted marrying me.”

“Oh, Christopher, I would never regret that, not even if you hated me.”

He kissed her fingers. “Why the devil would I hate you?”

“Because I kept things from you after saying I would not. Because I didn’t say I loved you when you said those words to me.” She flushed. “Because I wouldn’t let you come to me tonight.”

“Last night,” he said, “It’s midday, now.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean I have slept all that time?”

“Don’t worry,” he said wryly, “Georgianna hasn’t gone to Chester

without you.”

“I never intended to go to Chester.”

“I know. You were only embezzling money from me for Barden.”

“Oh, don’t say it like that!” she cried, distressed.

“There, I am joking,” he said at once, stroking her hair, and leaning forward to kiss her brow, and then her lips. Her mouth clung to his, extending the kiss. “I love you,” he whispered.

The weak tears started to her eyes again. “And I love you. With all my heart.”

*

DR. NAIRN, WHO had apparently dressed her wound in Congleton, before Christopher had brought her home, returned toward the end of the afternoon to change her dressing and have a good sniff at the wound.

“The ball really just grazed you rather than entering your body,” he told her as he bandaged her up once more. “I think you’re doing well.”

“Do you think I shall be fit enough for my garden party on Thursday?”

“If the wound heals cleanly. If you have family and servants to do the running around,” the doctor said wryly, “and don’t play pall mall.”

She smiled. “I think I can comply with that. I hope you and your wife will be there.”

“My wife will insist upon it.”

When Dr. Nairn was shown out, Deborah regarded Christopher, who stood at the window, looking down at the gardens.

“It just struck me,” she said worriedly. “Will I have to speak to magistrates? Did you? What will happen to Barden?”

“I spoke to them already. I’m afraid I was not quite truthful, for a quarrel of this nature at midnight in a public inn would not be good for your reputation. Or that of the other ladies linked to you in this scandal. I said we were walking in the village when a thief attacked us. His pistol went off while I fought back, and he ran away.”

The story kept Giles out of events, and she was grateful for that. “But Mr. and Mrs. Briggs know that is not true. She was in the stable with us at one point. I remember that.”

“And they don’t want it known that a shot was fired on their premises. Bad for business. They will tell the same tale.” He smiled sardonically. “I paid Barden’s account.”

“Then he gets away with it again,” she said, frowning.

Christopher came and sat on the bed. “This time. Not forever. I think you have to write to the other ladies. Barden needs a very public fall. Oh, and speaking of the other ladies, I brought this up to show you.” He picked *The Morning Post* up from the bedside table. It was open at the marriage announcements. “Lady Juliet is married.”

“Well, that is good news,” Deborah said eagerly. “I am glad Mr. Catesby was not deterred by this nonsense.”

“She has not married Catesby, but a Mr. Daniel Stewart.”

“Hmm. We all seem to have married quite unexpected people. Very suddenly, too. I *will* write to them.”

“Tomorrow is time enough,” he said, helping her to sit up. “You must rest that wound till it heals.”

She was more than happy to do nothing if it meant being cradled gently in his arms, his lips among her hair.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he whispered suddenly. “Please don’t ever frighten me like that again.”

“I shall try not to. Do you think I could get up for dinner?”

“No. You have to rest and recover. How else will we hold our party? And travel to Europe via London?”

*

THE DAY OF the party dawned fair and dry. Deborah’s wound was healing, and she could move without pain, providing she did nothing strenuous. It seemed very odd to merely sit and watch while the servants and Georgianna ran around arranging furniture, food, drinks, sunshades, garden games, and so on. At least her family came early to help and were soon roped in to various duties.

She had hired a trio of musicians from Chester, and they set up under an awning on the terrace.

“Well,” Deborah observed as everyone finally sat down some ten minutes

before the guests were due, “that was a lot easier than I imagined. I shan’t care now if no one comes. We shall have a lovely day.”

“They will come,” Georgianna said confidently. “Being shot by a robber makes you twice as interesting.” She regarded Deborah critically. “You look very well! The gown is ravishing.”

It wasn’t new, but it had been her best day gown for the princess’s more formal days, and Anne had added a delightful lace trim that softened it.

“Where is Dudley?” Georgianna said suddenly.

“In the library with Christopher and his lordship,” Deborah replied. “Christopher’s man in London has found the doctor who attended Rupert’s duel, and he isn’t a doctor at all. They think *he* fired the shot.”

They weren’t quite sure why he had, but although he hadn’t yet admitted it, the doctor had probably been hired by Barden, whom Dudley had secretly paid to “look after Rupert”. It seemed likely that either Barden had misunderstood what Dudley had actually meant, or that the “doctor” had misunderstood Barden. Either way, neither of them had valued the life they had stolen.

Deborah continued, “Also, after the tragedy, the dueling pistols were put away untouched by Mr. Harlow’s family. On examination, both of them are still loaded and unfired. So Rupert never fired the shot.”

Georgianna clapped her hands. “So, he can come home?”

“I imagine they’ll sort all that out in London next week. Listen,” Deborah added nervously. “Is that a carriage on the drive?”

“More than one!” Stephen called from the side of the house. “Two! And another turning in!”

She had tried to convince herself she didn’t fear the humiliation of no one coming. She had not received many replies to her invitations, possibly because of the short notice, but it soon became apparent that everyone had come, from the Letchworths and the Copsleys to Miss Figgis and Dr. Nairn. As they all spilled into her garden, curious, friendly, and festive, Deborah felt a huge surge of gladness, mostly for Christopher’s sake, because his marriage had not disgraced him, at least not locally.

But as the afternoon went on, she found herself quite beguiled by the atmosphere of good cheer. Charming music mingled with the chatter and laughter of her guests, and the tinkling of champagne and punch glasses. Some of the young people were playing pall mall on the lower lawn. Her

siblings were playing tag with other children, for she had let it be known the party was informal and families were welcome.

She had flitted from group to group, making sure everyone was comfortable, performing introductions, and generally doing all that was expected of a hostess. At some point, she realized she was enjoying the company and that people were seeking her out.

Then, as she sat down to rest her dully aching side, she observed Lucy and Sir Edmund walking away together from a game of pall mall. Her heart lifted further, for they were both laughing, and she had never seen them look so natural before.

They parted half way to the terrace as Lucy went off to quiet the children's game, which had become a little too boisterous. Deborah smiled to herself, enjoying her moment of solitude among the pleasant, happy throng.

Lucy sat down beside her. "Your party is a success."

"I believe it might be."

"You deserve it."

"Thank you," Deborah said in surprise, "but in fact, the success is more due to you and Mama and Georgianna while I sat around pretending to be injured."

"You weren't pretending," Lucy said. She swallowed. "I have never been so frightened in my life."

Deborah held her gaze. "I never thanked you for being there. With the children."

"They would have come without me. And I owed you a debt after being so awful at the Letchworths' dinner. And the following day. In fact, ever since you came home."

"You were upset."

"I've always used that as an excuse for ill-behavior. You never do."

"Well, not everyone is as perfect as me," Deborah said flippantly.

Lucy smiled. "You come close."

Rendered speechless by this accolade, Deborah could only gaze at her sister.

Lucy said abruptly, "I do like Edmund. I like getting to know him."

"Do you still want to marry him?"

"I don't know. We're leaving that alone for now. I think we are surprising each other. In a good way."

“Then I’m glad,” Deborah said warmly.

Christopher placed three glasses on the table, presenting one to each lady, and sat down on Deborah’s other side. “Thank you,” he said, raising his glass to Lucy, and then to Deborah.

“I think you should employ a nanny for your next party,” Lucy returned, rising to go and negotiate a truce between Stephen and one of the Copsley children.

For a few moments, Deborah and Christopher sat in pleasant silence, watching the happy scene before them. Beneath the table, his hand found hers and clasped. She smiled.

“Well?” he said at last. “Do you think you will like being Mrs. Halland?”

Without caring who saw, she rested her head on his shoulder and answered quite simply. “Yes.”



Epilogue

Two months later...

THERE WAS A faint chill of autumn in the air as their post chaise pulled up at the front door of Gosmere Hall.

“Home,” Deborah said happily. “I thought I would never want to come home again, and yet now I’m so glad to be here!”

As the steps were let down, and Christopher handed her out of the carriage, she reflected that she was really glad to be anywhere by Christopher’s side. The wedding trip had been wonderful, full of beauty and excitement. From Paris to Florence, she had been delighted by art and history and custom, appalled by the poverty she had glimpsed and the signs of devastation left by decades of war. But it had all thrilled her. Travel was everything she had dreamed and more, and Christopher assured her they could do it all again when she wished to go wherever she liked.

Of course, Christopher had been an integral part of the happiness she had found. Those weeks alone with him had brought knowledge and joy and a new closeness she had never imagined. So much so, that she wondered now how she would cope when he went to London.

In the meantime, there was huge pleasure in entering their home together. She only just stopped herself from throwing her arms around Mrs. Dawson, who would probably have given notice if she had.

She found herself rushing up the staircase to her bedchamber, and she sang as she washed and changed from travel-stained garments into something more suitable for tea. Unfortunately, her new gowns were all in the coach behind with the servants and the rest of their luggage. But she felt comfortable in an older gown which she had left behind.

Christopher wandered through the connecting door and obligingly laced up her gown. “You don’t have to stay behind,” he said. “You can come to London with me.”

They had already decided that he would go alone, catch up on parliamentary business, and find them a suitable residence. She would join him in a few weeks.

She thought about it now. “No,” she said at last, only half-reluctantly. “There are things to attend to here, especially now that the school is opened. And I would like to be here for Lucy’s wedding. But I’m afraid I shall write to you every day.”

He laughed, tugging her gently to her feet, “Why afraid?”

“You will be bored with my rambling and feel obliged to write back.”

“I am never bored with you.”

The faint puzzlement in his voice made her smile. She took his arm, and they walked together down to the library, where they had asked for tea to be served.

“You are right, you know,” he said, looking around him in a contented manner when the tea had been cleared away. “This is our best, private room.”

As if to prove it, he threw himself sideways on the sofa and stretched out with his legs across her lap and smiled. “What a convenient wife you are.”

“And ever shall be,” she replied lightly.

She laid her hand on his knee, idly caressing. When her fingers strayed a little further, she heard the catch in his breath that always thrilled her. She glanced up and met his glinting eyes.

“Perhaps this is not quite our best private room,” she said huskily.

His smile was wicked. “Anywhere can be private if one locks the door.” His feet slid to the ground. He sprang up and strode to the door, and her mouth went dry as she watched him deliberately turn the key.

He turned and seemed to prowl back toward her. Her heart drummed in reaction, in sheer anticipation.

“I trust *this* is convenient,” he said, sweeping her into his arms.

“I believe it is,” she said breathlessly, throwing her arms around his neck. “I never imagined a marriage of convenience to be quite like this.”

“I trust you approve.”

“Oh, thoroughly,” she said with fervor, just before her train of thought vanished into sensation.

She was home.

About Mary Lancaster

Mary Lancaster lives in Scotland with her husband, three mostly grown-up kids and a small, crazy dog.

Her first literary love was historical fiction, a genre which she relishes mixing up with romance and adventure in her own writing. Her most recent books are light, fun Regency romances written for Dragonblade Publishing: *The Imperial Season* series set at the Congress of Vienna; and the popular *Blackhaven Brides* series, which is set in a fashionable English spa town frequented by the great and the bad of Regency society.

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