

A BRADWELL BROTHERS NOVELLA



PROPERLY KISSED



KASEY STOCKTON

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GOLDEN  OWL
PRESS

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SCOTTISH DIALOGUE GLOSSARY

Bonny — pretty

Canna — cannot

Didna — did not

Dinna — do not

Ken — know

Verra — very

Wasna — was not

Willna — will not

Wouldna — would not

Ye — you

CHAPTER I

I had two objectives for the course of the house party that loomed ahead of me like a heavy, congested rain cloud. First, engage myself to the son of the earl. And second, avoid the Scotsman who unknowingly claimed my affections.

The engagement shouldn't be too difficult. Father had already arranged the marriage before he died. It was up to me to accept the offer. A formality, really.

The second objective would take significantly more effort.

I stood at the top of the curved, enclosed staircase in my archaic gray stone home and battled the rising nerves tormenting my stomach. I pressed my hands down my waist in a futile attempt to force my heart to calm. Laura came to fetch me with news that a carriage had been spotted at the end of the long, gravel drive. It could be one of three families Mama had invited to stay: the earl and his son; the Lennoxes from Scotland; or Aunt and Uncle Thurston with my cousin Felicity.

I hoped it would not be the Lennoxes, not yet. It had been over a year since we had the pleasure of their company during our last house party. But fear of seeing them again—or Ewan, more accurately—kept me perched on the top step of our spiral staircase, my gaze locked on the window that showed part of the drive. I needed more time, more fortifying of the walls around my emotions.

Drawing myself up tall, I breathed in resolve. I'd been raised a lady, and I *would* gain control of my feelings. Emotions were such inconsequential, pitiful things anyway. Duty, family, and honoring my parents—those were truly important.

“Jane, come,” Mama said, passing me on the stairs. The rustle of her skirts swished as she moved swiftly but with grace. “I want you to be standing ready to greet our guests.”

I fell in line behind her and descended the carpeted stone steps. “We’ve never before stood on such ceremony for these house parties.”

Mama turned, spearing me with a quick look. “We’ve never before intended to engage you to be married, either. Things will be different this time. Everything is far more critical.”

We made it to the entryway, the marble floor echoing our steps. Mama reached back and took my hand, squeezing softly. Her dark hair was swept back into a flawless arrangement, her gown impeccable. “You are worthy of the title of countess, Jane, and you will be a splendid leader.”

Splendid *leader*. That word held significance, though I couldn’t imagine what or who I would lead. If I was to marry Lord Hammel, I would manage the house and the servants, but how did that entitle me to lead?

Mama’s straight back and clipped words revealed the stress she was under. It was our first house party since coming out of mourning, and she needed my support, not my snippy rebuttals. I smiled warmly and nodded.

That seemed to satisfy her.

To be a countess was a privilege—one my father had schemed for. But for the last few summers prior to his death, it wasn’t the idea of becoming a countess that had filled my dreams and sent flutters through my belly. Ewan Lennox had stolen my attention in a way I’d been unable to prevent or deny. He had long since had a monopoly on my affections.

And it was my duty to squash those feelings without reprieve.

I had wondered briefly at the cruelty of Mama inviting him to return during the very week I was meant to become engaged to someone else, but Mama likely didn’t know of my feelings. I’d told no one and had done my best to hide my attraction to the man.

The Lennoxes had simply been invited because they’d attended our house parties every summer for as long as I’d been alive.

Mama stole my attention from my musings. “Your brother should be arriving tomorrow.”

I whipped my head around to face her. “He will not be here to greet our guests? This is *his* house.” I smothered the bite of frustration that edged my words.

“No.” Mama’s pinched lips and lined forehead spoke to her displeasure in

Daniel. “So, we must do our best to diminish the slight he offers our guests.”

“Has he provided a good reason?”

“No. He provided no reason at all.” She looked decidedly put out. “I’m certain he does this to vex me.”

Mama was most likely correct. Since Father died, Daniel had not been in residence often, but preferred spending his inheritance freely and carousing about England. He was surly, unpleasant, and very clearly grieving in an inappropriate manner.

Worthlin opened the door, and I passed our butler and followed Mama outside to stand at the top of the stone steps that climbed down onto the gravel drive. The carriage drove straight toward us, plumes of dust building and swirling behind it like an angry storm cloud. My heart hammered against my breastbone, knocking in rapid succession. I smoothed back a lock of raven hair and ran my palms down my pale green gown, unable to keep my unsteady hands still. Mama had spared no expense building a wardrobe fit to flaunt our money—the very reason an earl was considering me for a daughter-in-law to begin with.

Early summer sunlight glinted off the golden seal on the side of the burgundy carriage as it pulled around in front of Arden Castle, and I sucked down my disappointment, stomping it away and forcing a pleasant expression to remain on my face. As much as I wasn’t ready to see Ewan, I still wanted to.

And I certainly was not ready to see Lord Hammel.

Mama had taught me to hide my emotions well, for it was never prudent to reveal one’s true feelings to one’s husband in public. And the man about to step out of the crest-emblazoned carriage was going to one day become my husband.

A bewigged footman hopped down from the back of the carriage and opened the door before leaning over to let down the step. The earl stepped out. His blond hair had faded to a dark gold, his frame had softened, and there was a roundness to his face that he had not possessed when he last traveled to Arden Castle. Soft lines fanned out on his temples and the creases had deepened beneath his eyes.

Lord Hammel—my future husband—stepped down beside his father. He was tall, his blue eyes startling even from this distance. He glanced up, taking in all of Arden Castle’s medieval, gray stone and surrounding topiary gardens just visible over the top of the long hedge. His gaze landed squarely on me

after he surveyed the property, and I waited for his reaction, but he seemed just as schooled in mastering his emotions as I tried to be. Not so much as a flicker of a smile or a pleasant gleam to his eyes.

This was a poor first impression, to be sure.

“Lord Moorington, Lord Hammel, welcome to Arden Castle,” Mama said. She did not step forward but waited for the men to come to her, a show of power, speaking to the position she held in this house—tenuous as it might be. The earl approached first and bent over her hand, quickly followed by his son.

“We are gratified by the invitation. Where is young Mr. Palmer?”

Young Mr. Palmer was five and twenty and believed himself to be very mature. I wondered if that particular word choice was a slight, or if the earl saw his own son as a child as well, for they were of an age.

“He will join us tomorrow,” Mama said deftly.

Lord Moorington seemed to take this in stride. He stepped forward and took my hand in his warm, thick fingers, and I curtsied. His brusque leather circled over my naked skin, and it occurred to me in that moment that I’d forgotten my gloves. My gaze flicked to Mama, but she hadn’t seemed to notice.

The earl did not appear bothered by this break in etiquette. Or perhaps he hadn’t noticed. “My, but you’ve grown up, Miss Palmer.”

He did not voice what they were all likely thinking. I was now almost twenty and past old enough to wed. Father’s death and subsequent mourning had put a hold on marriage arrangements. It was a blessing, according to Mama, that the earl had been willing to wait so long to secure this match. Father had begun negotiations before the apoplexy took him from us.

Lord Hammel, just behind his father, regarded me closely. He replaced the earl, taking my hand and bowing over it. His lips brushed the ridges of my unadorned knuckles, and I suppressed an uncomfortable shiver. I really should not have forgotten my gloves. He looked up at me before rising fully, his dark blond hair curly and styled in a muted brutus. “Miss Palmer,” he murmured.

“My lord.” I dipped in a curtsy. The entire welcome had thrown my heart about my chest in an unpleasant volley, leading me to question the very nature of our plan.

Countess. Mama wanted me to be a countess. And this tall, spiritless man would make me one.

Dirt billowed and grew on the drive, and I looked up to see another carriage approaching. A horse was tied to the back, trotting along, and I knew at once it belonged to Ewan. No other man of my acquaintance loved and admired horses as he did.

“Ah, more guests,” Lord Moorington said jovially. His cheeks were warmly rounded, and he had a pleasantness about his expression that appeared to be genuine.

“That is either my sister and her family or the Lennoxes, my lord,” Mama explained. “I am inclined to believe it is the Lennox family.”

“Ah, Scotsmen, yes? Are they your kin?”

As if family relations would be the only reason to invite a Scottish family to a house party.

Mama smiled benevolently. She was a master at diplomacy. “Mrs. Lennox has been a dear friend of mine since we were children, and her husband quickly became dear to the late Mr. Palmer after we married.”

It was not lost on me that Mama failed to mention the truth: we *were* kin, in a way. Mrs. Lennox was Mama’s cousin, though distantly through my grandparents somehow. The relationship was confusing to me, even.

“Shall I have someone see you inside?” Mama said.

“And miss welcoming the Scots?” the earl asked, an amused gleam in his eyes. “Never.”

Lord Hammel took the position beside me, and I felt inordinately aware of his closeness as Ewan’s carriage bounded toward us. Their servant opened the door and assisted Mrs. Lennox down from the carriage before the men let themselves out.

Ewan stepped onto the gravel, unfolding himself from the tight conveyance and stretching his arms. He was much taller than I recalled. His broad shoulders sat beneath a head of dark hair, and the twinkle in his brown eyes could be discerned from where I stood. He waited for his mother to smooth down her gown and walk toward us before following behind her and his father.

Unlike Lord Hammel, Ewan’s gaze had not left me once since he stepped foot on the grounds. He followed his parents up the steps, his steady eyes pinned to me as if kept there by force, and it took everything in me to keep a passive expression.

I would really much prefer this reunion to *not* claim witnesses, especially not the man standing beside me. Ewan’s warmth was already rolling from his

smile in waves, and he'd yet to speak a word.

I greeted Mr. and Mrs. Lennox with affection and was mildly aware of them stepping past me to meet the earl and his son. Ewan approached, and I gripped my skirts tightly, moving to lower myself in a curtsy. Ewan claimed my hand, and my grip immediately softened under his touch. He brought my knuckles to his lips and laid a gentle kiss over the back of my hand, his dark brown eyes failing to leave mine.

"Jane," he said, his brogue heavy and lulling, the way he spoke my plain name far more musical than my own English tongue could accomplish. "Och, but 'tis been a long time."

"Mr. Lennox," I said, hoping I'd succeeded at brightening my thick voice. "I am pleased to see you again."

His eyebrows lifted. He'd noticed my cooler distance, I could tell. I waited for him to drop my fingers, but he seemed to resist, his grip tightening just the slightest bit. His thumb wiped along my knuckles, and I shivered. He spoke softly. "I ken much has changed, lass. Ye have changed."

I slipped my hand free before he could send another volley of shivers up my arm. "And yet, I am still very much the same."

Ewan dipped his head slightly, his eyes still on me. "I verra much hope that is true. I've missed ye, my friend."

I swallowed. Oh, dear heavens. This was going to be more of a challenge than I'd anticipated. I looked at Lord Hammel, but his attention was on the castle looming above us.

"Shall we proceed inside?" Mama called. "My housekeeper will be happy to show you to your rooms to settle in. We will meet in the drawing room for dinner at seven."

The party filtered into the house. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Hale, led the guests upstairs while servants fetched their trunks and cases from the boots of their carriages.

I stood beside Mama and willed my heart to return to its regular rhythm, but Ewan's voice and his words had left a lasting mark on my emotions. I turned too-bright eyes on Mama and cleared my throat. "Will the Thurstons be here soon? I am eager to see Felicity."

"Not likely. They are never on time for anything." Mama gave an irritated little huff. She started toward the stairs, and I followed. "We will proceed as planned, and they will join us when they arrive. Have you been practicing for this evening?"

“The pianoforte? Yes.” I constantly practiced, whether or not I had an upcoming event, because that was expected of me. But Mama hadn’t questioned whether or not I was ready, not truly. No, she wanted to assure herself that everything was going according to plan.

I wished to reassure her further, but words failed to form on my tongue. I could not erase from my mind Lord Hammel’s cool, lifeless reception.

Instead, I would show Mama how deeply I understood her intent for this party and how committed I was to see it through—lackluster groom or not. I laid a hand on her arm. “I will go run through the piece a few more times. There is plenty of time before I need to change for dinner.”

Mama smiled down at me. “I think that is wise, dear. You can never be too prepared.”

On the contrary, I found myself quite exhausted from preparing, but I pasted a smile on my face and turned down the steps toward the music room.

I twisted the carved, wooden knob and pushed the wide door open, then immediately froze.

Ewan stood at the window just beyond the pianoforte, his hands clasped loosely behind his back while he gazed through the wavy glass panes. A small gasp stuck in my throat, and Ewan glanced at me over his shoulder, his deep brown eyes meeting mine with a sparkle of mischief in their depths.

A satisfied grin stole over his lips. “I thought I’d find ye in here.”

CHAPTER 2

My palm dug into the decorative etching on the doorknob. It was wiser to leave the door open, so I fought the compulsion to close myself away with Ewan as we used to do. We'd been children then . . . now we had no such excuse to be alone.

The way Ewan watched me made me nearly wish to turn around and run for the safety of my bedchamber. But I could not hide from him for the next week, so I ought to face him now. I cleared my throat and released the door. "I need to practice my music before dinner."

A knowing smile lit his eyes. He turned and leaned against the window frame in front of the pianoforte and crossed his arms over his chest. "Aye, ever the dutiful daughter ye are." He spoke as if this was an endearing component of my personality, but I bristled. Of course I was dutiful. What else would I be?

He didn't realize just how duty-bound I was at present.

I swallowed back the immediate irritation—the reminder of my current situation was not pleasant, but neither was Ewan at fault—and crossed to the instrument. The seat was tufted and soft, and I settled myself there before warming my stiff fingers on the keys. My attention on the cool ivory under my fingertips, I addressed Ewan. "Are you a dutiful son, Mr. Lennox?"

"Och, lass." He furrowed his brow and pushed away from the window. "What have I done to deserve such formality from ye?"

The sound of smooth scales bouncing in the small room came to an abrupt stop. I stared at him, my fingers resting motionless on the keys. Surely, he understood that things could no longer be as they always used to be between us. A bit more formality was to be expected. "We are not children

anymore.”

“Nae, we aren’t. But are we still friends?”

“Of course.”

“Then would a friend not still call me Ewan? Mr. Lennox is my father.”

He studied me intently.

“I suppose a friend might, but I’m not certain we are that particular kind of friends any longer.”

He must have sensed a shift in my tone, for he pulled himself up a little and regarded me carefully, his angled jaw cutting a line as he dipped his head to the side. Ewan stepped slowly toward me.

A shiver ran down my spine as he drew near. He stalled just beside my seat, forcing me to crane my neck to look at him. “What has happened between us, Jane?”

“In the time since we’ve last seen one another, you mean?” I tried for flippant nonchalance. “My father died suddenly, my brother inherited nearly everything, and I have trained heartily for my future roles.”

“That is a lot to ask of any person in such a wee period of time.” His voice lacked any thread of flippancy. His compassionate eyes were kind, and I could easily lose myself in them. “I’m sorry I wasna here to lighten yer burdens.”

“You couldn’t have done so anyway.” I’d been thoroughly disarmed, and my voice was equally soft. “But it matters not. I learned a lot. My mother needed to funnel her grief into an activity, and she chose me to serve that purpose. I couldn’t have asked for a better tutor, for now I’m well prepared for the day when I shall run my own household.”

“I remember ye being well prepared for that role when last I visited.”

“Ah, but a girl of eighteen only *thinks* she knows everything,” I said, a bite of humor to my words. “Now, I really do.”

Ewan laughed, the smile breaking over his face and melting the heart in my chest. He stood so close that I wanted to rise, to reach up and cup my hand over his slightly stubbled jaw, but it wouldn’t be appropriate now.

“Ye are a true lady, Miss Palmer.” The name came out foreign and odd in Ewan’s brogue. Silence beat a few tense moments before he smiled at me. “I hope we can still ride together while I am here.”

It had been foolish to believe I would be able to stay away from the man completely while he was at Arden Castle, and there was no harm in such an activity. “Of course we can.”

“And play chess.”

I nodded. “I see no problem with that.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And battle in archery.”

“I will still win.”

“And find ourselves lost in the hedge maze?”

“That will be a trial, for I quite have it memorized now.” Indeed, I had spent many lonely days walking its tall, secluded corridors.

“We must put that to the test.” Ewan grinned, and the sudden prospect of all those activities and all that time spent with Ewan tightened my chest. This was exactly the opposite of avoiding the man.

If I was not careful, Ewan might very well notice how deeply I loved him.

“I will leave ye to yer practice, Miss Palmer,” he murmured.

Ewan bowed and turned for the door when I reached toward him, my fingers grasping empty air. “Wait.”

He stopped immediately and looked over his shoulder. His gaze dipped to my outstretched hand, and I folded my fingers in, hiding them in the folds of my gown.

I cleared my throat, wondering at my own foolishness, but the words were out of my mouth without conscious choice. “I find I do not care for that formality from you, not from someone who feels so much like a . . . brother . . . as you do. Perhaps we can be more informal when no one is around to hear? Like when we were young?”

Ewan looked torn—sorrow mixed with pleasure lighting his eyes. “Of course, Jane. Anything for ye.”

Anything? I daren’t think too long on that. Turning my attention back to the pianoforte, my fingers hit the keys with fervor, and I dove into the song I’d promised Mama I would practice, listening for Ewan’s boot tread to recede.

When the song was nearly over, I glanced over my shoulder to find Ewan still standing near the door, watching me calmly, his eyes like fire on my skin.

My fingers stumbled on the keys but quickly righted themselves. Anxious energy skittered through me, full awareness of his gaze on me running a path down my spine. I’d not seen the man in over a year, and even when he had come for the house party before Father’s death, he had not indicated that he held any special regard for me. As far as I knew, the admiration and love I’d developed for Ewan had been entirely one-sided. He cared for me, I knew

that. He was a good friend, but nothing more. I had spent the entire month of his extended visit last year hoping he would kiss me, and he had not so much as touched my hand in a romantic way.

No, he felt nothing for me beyond friendship, that was abundantly clear. But I could not quell the warmth rising in my chest and cloaking my heart in affection.

Despite avid effort to rid myself of any lingering attraction to Ewan, I was still very much in love with the man. And by the end of this house party, I would be engaged to someone else.

When I finished the song and looked up at Ewan, he gave me an attentive, friendly smile, his dark brown eyes glittering with warmth.

This house party was going to be absolutely miserable.

I sat in the center of our burgundy brocade sofa while dinner guests slowly filtered into the room. The long case clock in the corner chimed to indicate the hour. Mrs. Lennox leaned close and pressed her shoulder lightly against mine. “You must feel quite overwhelmed by the presence of visitors in your home after such a quiet year.”

“It is nice to have our friends with us again.” Though she was correct that it would take some getting used to. I was accustomed to solitude and quiet—unless I was practicing my music, of course—and I’d grown comfortable in the peacefulness of our house.

Lord Hammel hovered at the bookcase behind me while his father stood at the mantel, telling Mr. Lennox of his latest hunting exploits. Their conversation shifted toward horses, but I wasn’t paying them much mind. Mama sat on my other side and entered into a conversation with Mrs. Lennox on the merits of drying tea leaves for reuse. I wanted to disentangle myself from the conversation on the sofa and approach Lord Hammel, if only to discover what sort of reading interested him.

Thus far he had been in my home for half a day and had spared me nothing more than a murmured greeting. The man would one day be my life’s companion. Could he not at least *attempt* a bit more courtesy?

Perhaps these great men had more important things to eat up their time, like horses and bookcases. Wives were silly creatures who could be deposited

in a drawing room and left to their own devices.

My future was looking bright, indeed.

“Ah, here he is,” the earl said jovially from his position beside the fireplace. Mr. Lennox looked toward the door, and I followed his gaze to find Ewan striding in, his black jacket crisp and refined against the clean white cravat at his throat.

I suppressed an irritated groan. *Must* he be so handsome?

Lord Moorington’s voice boomed through the room. “Come, son. I want to hear about your venture with horses. Your father tells me you are well known for your skills in breaking the wild ones.”

“I’ve found success a handful of times,” Ewan said. “I wouldna say I am well regarded for it, however.”

He crossed the room and spared me a glance. I shifted my attention back to his mother but listened to the men’s conversation. Perhaps Lord Hammel had an interest in horses too and would join them.

Mr. Lennox’s chest filled proudly. “Nae, he wouldna say so. I will say it for him.”

“Will you breed them?” the earl asked.

“I’m no’ sure yet, m’lord. For now, I think no’.”

“Race them?”

Ewan’s lips curved into a boyish smile. “Aye, m’lord. That is my plan.”

“Newmarket?”

“Musselburgh,” Ewan responded. “I’m more interested in racing near my own home than carting my horses clear across England, tiring them and then expecting them to perform.”

The earl nodded. “I suppose there is sense in that. You ought to try your luck at Newmarket when you tire of the Scottish races. Go down for the year to acclimate the steeds.”

“I dinna think I’ll ever tire from racing in Scotland, m’lord.”

Lord Moorington let out a booming, jolly laugh. He was good-natured from the spark in his eye to his warm smile and did not appear to hold the Lennoxes’ Scottish blood against them, despite my earlier opinion of the man.

“Jane?”

I tore my gaze away from Ewan and placed it squarely on Mama’s suspicious face. “Forgive me, I was woolgathering.”

“Mrs. Lennox wondered if you have any idea of what sort of design you

plan to embroider on your linens.”

Embroider? I had no notion of what linens they referred to, and my puckered brow must have spoken to my confusion.

Mrs. Lennox leaned in and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Will you embroider the title he *now* carries, or the one he shall in the future?”

Oh. My wedding linens. Anxious energy climbed up my stomach and wrapped about my chest. “I imagine I would do our new initials, for they will never change.”

“Jane Palmer Hartley.” Mama lifted her chin as though she could see the name written out before her in the air. “I think it has a dignified sound to it, even if you shall be mostly called *Countess*, or *my lady*.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Lennox agreed. “Very dignified.”

Worthlin stepped into the room and signaled to Mama, and she nodded back to him. She stood and moved to the end of the carpet and clasped her hands lightly before her. “We have long had the tradition of informal dinners during our house parties.” Mama’s quiet, powerful voice commanded the attention of everyone in the room. Even Lord Hammel had ceased searching the bookcase and turned to face her.

Mama bestowed a smile on the earl. “I do hope that is acceptable, my lord. We quite enjoy our informal dining.”

Lord Moorington nodded softly, his pleasant smile unflinching. “It is perfectly acceptable, Mrs. Palmer.”

She gave a nod and turned to indicate that the party could move through the newly opened doors at the rear of the room, straight into the dining room.

Ewan turned to face me expectantly, and I rose from my cushion. Lord Hammel stepped into my line of sight, his plain, placid face replacing Ewan’s before me. A blond tendril hung over his forehead and he brushed it out of his face.

“Miss Palmer, I understand that informality is the order of the evening, but might I still claim the pleasure of leading you in to dinner?” Lord Hammel lifted his elbow expectantly, and I had no choice but to lay my gloved fingers over the bend of his arm.

“I would like that very much.”

For a man with so few words, he was surprisingly eloquent when he deigned to speak. I tried not to look disappointed when we passed Ewan standing beside the fireplace still, his hands resting behind his back and his gaze following me.

Silence followed us from the drawing room and through the doors into the dining hall. Lord Hammel pulled out my chair and helped me sit, then claimed the seat beside mine. Did he intend to speak of our future marriage? Of courtship?

Mama had not prepared me for this part.

I struggled to find something to say to the man and settled on the bland. “Have you visited this part of the country before, my lord?”

“Only to hunt,” he said softly. “And briefly at that.”

Hunting meant riding. Perhaps we had something in common after all. “Do you enjoy it very much?”

“Not in the least. I only do so to please my father.”

We lapsed into silence again as the din in the room grew from the other conversations taking place around us. I was on the end of the row on my side of the table with no partner to my right. I glanced up and caught Ewan’s gaze across from me and immediately regretted that foolish choice. He watched me, his eyebrows knitting as if he was confused. Surely, he did not think I valued Lord Hammel above him. I would certainly have preferred to sit beside my friend.

Oh, dear heavens. I might not wish for Lord Hammel’s company, but someday I *would* wish for it. Someday he would be all I would have for company. It was imperative that I found something we had in common. Something, anything we could discuss.

“Tell me, my lord,” I said, angling myself slightly toward him. “If you care not for hunting, do you enjoy riding?”

“I *can* ride.”

Well, that wasn’t very promising.

He took a drink and set his goblet back on the table. “Though I do prefer to spend my time in other pursuits.”

“Such as?”

“Learning. I quite enjoy reading about that which I do not understand.”

I could not claim the same affection, and my tutors well knew it. There had to be more to this man than that. “Is that all?”

His lips curved into a small smile. “No, I do have more interests than reading. I am not a bluestocking.”

“That would be difficult to claim since you are a man.”

Lord Hammel speared a bite of his hen and chewed, his forehead puckering.

It would appear that he did not catch my jest. “What else do you enjoy?”

“I quite enjoy architecture.”

“Architecture,” I repeated, doing my very best to understand. “Buildings?”

“Oh, indeed.” He leaned just a little closer, dipping his chin. “I must admit that your house has quite fascinated me.”

He liked Arden Castle, and so did I. There, we had something in common. Perhaps I could use this appreciation of old stone and drafty corridors to my advantage. “I would be pleased to give you a tour in the morning.”

“Oh, would you?” Lord Hammel smiled pleasantly for the first time since stepping foot in my home. “I would enjoy that very much.”

“You’ll have the double benefit of learning and enjoying architecture, my lord. Two of your favorite things.”

Lord Hammel did not necessarily beam—no, that emotion seemed reserved for his father alone in his family—but he came as close as I believed him capable. He was excited, I could see that much.

And I was determined. If I could walk the corridors alone with him for a few hours, perhaps the cool exterior he wore could be sloughed away and we could warm up to one another. If this man intended to ask me to be his wife, I would prefer to feel confident that I knew exactly what sort of marriage I was agreeing to.

Satisfaction pooled in my belly, and I cut a bite from my hen, pleased by my own ingenuity. I glanced up and caught Ewan’s scowl, and my smile slipped.

He seemed to correct himself, but the damage was done. He’d been watching me, and he did not appear pleased.

Whatever could that possibly mean?

CHAPTER 3

Lord Hammel and I had appointed to meet at ten o'clock the following morning in the second-floor stairwell, and when I arrived at five minutes after the hour, he was waiting for me.

"Forgive my tardiness," I said, hoping to pull a smile from his severe countenance. "I went to fetch a wrap. Some of these rooms aren't warmed unless we have a particular need for them."

"That is perfectly understandable."

No smile yet. But I was not put off entirely. If anything, Lord Hammel's smiles would be more rewarding for how difficult they were to procure. He could be a handsome man if he looked happier.

I swept my arm toward the corridor. "Shall we?"

"After you."

I led him toward the door near the end of the corridor. Light touched the handle through the window in the stone wall and followed me in when I pushed the door open. The dim bedchamber was in need of a fire and some fresh air. It smelled musty, the air thick with mildew.

Lord Hammel followed me inside and stepped onto the carpet in the center of the room.

"This is our Edward the First bedchamber. It was named for Edward the Proud when he stayed in this room on his way to battle in Scotland."

"Falkirk?"

"Yes." I nodded. "The honor of sleeping in here would typically have gone to your father, but my mother feared it would be too drafty and damp. She gave him a better-appointed chamber. Though not as prestigious, it is prodigiously more comfortable." I paused. Perhaps that had been a little too

honest. “I hope the earl would see a compliment in the way she valued his comfort and not perceive it a slight.”

Lord Hammel shook his head, his eyes tripping over the detailed tapestries lining the walls. “No, no, of course not. Father would understand entirely. I do believe he would be grateful.”

It was comforting to know that I had taken the earl’s character accurately. I crossed the room. “This gothic window is believed to have been designed by Walter of Durham.”

Lord Hammel’s eyes lit. “Truly?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, my lord. He also designed—”

“The coronation throne at Westminster, yes. Very impressive.” Lord Hammel crossed to the window and admired its colored glass that rose to a pointed peak. His eyes trailed back to the tapestries, and I wished I had a story for them, as well. He would have to wait for the next room for that.

“Is this the bed slept in by Edward the First?”

“Yes.”

Lord Hammel nodded approvingly and ran his fingers along the carved dark walnut wood. “Beautiful,” he said quietly, his voice nearly reverent.

I gave him a few more quiet minutes to analyze the moldings on the ceiling and briefly admire the view of the gardens through the glazed window. “Shall we move on?”

He appeared almost surprised by my voice, as if he’d forgotten I was in the room. That was a lowering thought. “Oh, of course.”

We made our way through the other three rooms on that floor that were not currently inhabited by guests or Mama. Lord Hammel’s attention never strayed from the details of the room except to hum in response to my little comments.

“The castle began as a monastery,” I said, leading him toward the small sitting room at the opposite end of the hall. “Though there has been a vast amount of improvements to it over time.”

I opened the door to the sitting room when steps echoed up the stairwell behind me. Lord Hammel paid the intruder no mind and slipped into the room as I held the door. I left it wide open and followed him inside.

Lord Hammel stood on the far side of the room before the massive, carved fireplace and looked up at the ceiling, his hands gripped loosely behind his back. He muttered something softly to himself, and I fought the urge to startle him once more with abrupt facts. It was really very dull to be

so ignored while giving a tour. I provided the interesting tidbits. I was an important part of this experience. Yet my future husband acted very much as if I could slip into the secret room on the other side of the fireplace he stood before, and he would not care one whit.

I was very tempted to do just that.

A deep voice came from the doorway, startling me before I had the opportunity to do so to Lord Hammel. "Am I interrupting?"

Ewan leaned his shoulder against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his broad chest. He wore a navy jacket over a cream-colored waistcoat, and his deep brown eyes glittered in amusement.

What was so amusing? I straightened my back. "I was giving Lord Hammel a tour of Arden Castle."

"Have ye enjoyed it thus far?"

Lord Hammel nodded, though his gaze only rested on Ewan briefly before returning to the ceiling. "It has been most diverting."

Ewan laughed.

Lord Hammel was not laughing.

I widened my eyes at Ewan, lifting my eyebrows, and he realized his mistake, his laughter tumbling swiftly into an awkward cough.

Ewan cleared his throat and seemed to take the measure of the room. "Would ye mind if I joined ye? I have not had the pleasure of a tour before." He avoided my gaze.

The rascal. He knew this castle nearly as well as I did.

"Of course not," Lord Hammel said.

And yet, it stung that I had not inspired Lord Hammel to fight for more alone time with me. Did the man not care to know me better before proposing? He was aloof, distant. He appeared to care far more for gothic windows and timber-planked ceilings than for my company.

"Yes, please join us, Mr. Lennox. You may add your knowledge as well."

Ewan sent me a wink before moving further into the room, and my cheeks warmed with pleasure. I turned abruptly to face the windows.

"These tapestries tell a story, yes?" Lord Hammel asked.

I nodded. "They came from Flanders in the early sixteen hundreds, and they depict various Bible scenes."

"The castle was originally a monastery," Ewan said easily. He recalled Arden's history well, and it surprised me.

"Yes, yes," Lord Hammel nodded absently.

“Though these depictions have nothing to do with that, since they were added nearly five hundred years later.” I sent Ewan a victorious smile, and he did not look the least bit abashed. “That is John the Baptist.” I pointed to a man with curly hair near the corner of the room. “And over here you can see the woman in the temple.”

Lord Hammel walked the length of the room quietly, absorbing the different features and every detail of the tapestries. Ewan made his way toward the center of the room and stood beside me but remained quiet. His presence was both exhilarating and frustrating. His very nearness, the sound of his breathing and the scent of his shaving soap clouded my senses, raising my heartbeat. His close proximity was not good for me, not when I could not have him.

“Shall we move on, my lord?” I asked brightly. “The view from the top of the tower reaches clear into Scotland.”

The men followed me from the room and into the corridor. “Is there anything else besides a view to be seen in the tower?” Lord Hammel asked.

I had the distinct impression that he cared little for such things. “Not up the stairs. If we go down, we can see the dungeon.”

Again, something he did not appear entirely interested in. There wasn’t much architecture of interest in the belly of the castle, I supposed. “Or we can see the chapel.”

“Oh, yes,” Lord Hammel said, his eyes lighting up.

I led the men down to the ground level and toward the back of the house. Our tour of the chapel was quiet and far from brief. Lord Hammel proved an excellent talent for staring overly long at mundane bits of carving or tapestry and had an unaccountable appreciation for varying styles of ceiling. Since Arden Castle had been updated periodically over its eight-hundred-year lifespan, there was a variety of styles for Lord Hammel to appreciate.

We made our way through the long gallery, drawing room, and music room, going so far as to step outside to admire the gothic windows from the other side. The warm sun beamed down over us, and it was too bad we could not open Edward the First’s gothic window to allow some warmth and fresh air into the room. It would likely be fit for visitors if it was not so cold.

“This is magnificent,” Lord Hammel said, looking at the house.

“Verra bonny,” Ewan agreed.

Pride swelled my chest. This castle was beautiful, and when I married it would no longer be my home. What was the Earl of Moorington’s seat like?

Was Lord Hammel's house the architectural marvel he appreciated mine to be? I wanted to inquire, but Ewan's audience forced the words to sit unspoken on my tongue.

"Thank you for the tour, Miss Palmer. It has been fascinating." Lord Hammel bowed to me. He sent a soft bow to Ewan, and then turned for the house and left us outside.

My chin dropped faintly, and I picked it back up when I caught Ewan watching me. "That was . . . an interesting retreat."

Lord Hammel had not even feigned the need to be elsewhere, to respond to correspondence, or to meet with his father. He simply *left*.

I had never felt so used in all my life, and it left me feeling hollow in a way I could not precisely identify.

"He is a different sort of man, isn't he?"

I agreed wholeheartedly, but I could not speak ill of my future intended. Instead, I pulled my wrap tighter over my shoulders.

Ewan tried a different approach. "Did ye consider the implications of being alone with him?"

I looked at him sharply, and the displeasure on his face during dinner the previous night was fresh in my mind. Certainly, he was not jealous. That was absurd.

"I wasn't alone with him for long, Ewan. You joined us near the beginning."

He began walking along the pathway beside the lawn, and I fell in beside him, our steps carrying us away from the castle.

Ewan's dark eyes glittered in the sunlight. "It was a blessed thing I heard ye speaking, or I wouldna found ye."

"It would have been better if you hadn't, actually."

He stopped suddenly. "What do ye mean?"

"Oh, do not look so wounded. I was making progress with Lord Hammel, and your presence cut it clean off. It is dratted difficult to provoke that man into conversation."

I continued to walk, and Ewan caught up. "Why would ye need to? Ye've no' made that effort with me."

"I don't need to make that effort with you. I know you very well." The words were there hovering between us, the reason it was so important for me to know Lord Hammel's character, but I couldn't bring myself to say them. We walked the length of the long lawn and circled the fountain, bypassing

the entrance to the topiary garden in order to return to the house.

“Perhaps I dinna ken ye as well as I thought,” he said softly.

“Whatever do you mean by that?” I was affronted. Of course, he knew me well. We had been friends our entire lives, had written letters in between our visits when we were younger. To say nothing for the fact that I was in love with the man.

“I canna think of a reason ye’d wish to be alone with Lord Hammel, unless . . .” He stopped suddenly, his eyes swinging toward me and raking over my face.

“Can you not?” I waited a moment longer, searching his face as he searched mine.

Silence simmered between us, Ewan’s lips unmoving. I felt pasted in place, my slippers full of lead. I was equally afraid of and interested in Ewan’s reaction to this bit of news. His dark brown eyes bored into me, and I was certain he discerned what I meant.

My voice was small when I spoke. “My father brokered a marriage deal with Lord Moorington before he died, Ewan.” A heavy weight lifted from my shoulders at the admission, but it seemed to only make Ewan’s droop.

“With the earl?”

I laughed, the notion absurd. “Not to marry the earl. To marry his son.”

He didn’t look any happier. “They are so far in debt?”

I bristled. The implication stung no less for the truth it bore. “Yes, I am only worthy of becoming a countess because of the money I can provide.”

“Nae, that is not what I meant—”

“Is it not? What else could you have possibly implied? It is the truth, anyway.”

Ewan’s hands dropped to his sides. “Ye’ve shocked me, Jane.”

His quiet, simple statement reached into my chest and squeezed my heart. I stepped forward, though I kept my hands to myself, despite how dearly I wished to reach and take his hand. “It cannot be spoken of yet, not until he proposes, but I did believe it widely known among the guests here. Your mother asked me last night of my intentions to embroider my wedding linens.”

This seemed to surprise him even further. “And yet, she said nothing to me.”

“Perhaps she was keeping my mother’s confidence. Do not blame her. It is a tenuous situation until I am asked.”

“An understanding between two people in a deal brokered by their fathers sounds anything but tenuous.” Ewan’s low whisper ran shivers down my neck. He swallowed hard. “When will he ask?”

“By the end of the house party, I imagine.” I tried to laugh lightly, to dispel some of the heaviness that choked the air around us like a dense fog. “I have known of this for a long time, but due to our mourning, we could not act on it before now. The earl was very gracious in his willingness to wait.”

“Why did ye invite us, then?”

His question surprised me. “You come to our house parties every year. It would not be the same without your family.”

“But ye dinna get engaged every year. This . . . this is different.”

“You would rather we had not asked you to come?” This hurt me, but I tried to hide it, to appear impassive.

“I’d rather no’ witness . . .” Ewan paused and looked past me toward the house. “It matters little now, lass.”

“Are you not happy for me? I will be a countess, Ewan. Our games are coming to fruition.”

A small gleam entered his eye, and he chuckled softly. We’d often played the knight rescuing the countess from the evil dragon, or the royal king riding in to save the duchess from the Vikings. Our games changed in details, but the bones were always the same. I was a lady of title, and Ewan saved me from something awful. He enjoyed playing the hero, and I very much liked him carrying me to safety.

I could easily have walked myself out of the dangerous dungeons and towers, but then I wouldn’t have had Ewan’s arms around me.

“As long as ye’re happy, lass, so am I.”

But was I happy? “I’m not sure happiness has much to do with it, Ewan. I am doing my duty.”

“Duty and marriage are two words that shouldna be connected.”

“Do not be so naive,” I said, smiling to soften my words. “I am holding my father’s end of a bargain and ensuring my mother is not sued for breach of contract. I will bring prestige to my family’s name in this union and help an old earldom from falling further into disrepair. Think of all the people my father’s money will help, Ewan. You cannot slight my motives.”

“No, I willna slight yer motives, Jane, but I wish it were different.”

“Whatever for?” I couldn’t help but ask it, to dig a little further into the cause for Ewan’s displeasure. If he did not care for me, then he would be

thrilled for me, would he not? But if I could not have Ewan, did I want my suspicions confirmed?

His dark brown gaze poured into my soul, searching for an answer to the question he would not speak aloud, and I knew with immediate certainty that some things were better left a mystery. It would be too hard otherwise.

I tore my attention away from his rugged, handsome face and set it back on the castle. “My brother should be joining us today, as well as my cousin Felicity. You remember her, I’m sure.”

“The bookish creature?” he asked, the teasing tone strained. “I recall when ye begged her to be our dragon, and the lass refused.”

“That was ten years ago, at least, and we convinced Daniel to do the part in her stead. Will you forgive her?”

“We shall see,” he said playfully, and I couldn’t help but smile.

We walked back toward the castle in companionable silence, and I dearly wished to know what Ewan was thinking. He appeared to be deep in thought, but what about?

“The formality of our names,” he said suddenly. “Now I understand.”

“I did not wish to give our guests the wrong impression.”

“What impression is that?”

“That you and I . . .” He waited expectantly, but I refused to voice it aloud. No, that was too cruel.

Ewan saved me from doing so. “That we have an understanding.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, we do.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“And I’d wager our understanding is far older than the likes of anything the earl believes he can claim.”

I laughed, but when I looked at Ewan and caught the unyielding seriousness in his eyes, I choked on my laughter. “You’re not serious.”

“I dinna joke about matters of the heart.”

No. No, no, *no*. He could not honestly intend to strip our relationship to its bones and confess himself to me *now*, directly after I admit to my impending engagement. I clenched my hands tightly, shocked and angered by the notion, my fingernails digging into my palms. “Do not make this more difficult than it already is.”

“Ye admit, then, that he isna yer preference?”

“Good gracious, Ewan, I have just catalogued the reasons for this union.”

“Yes, I heard them. But is he yer *preference*?”

“I refuse to answer that.”

Ewan stepped closer and leaned toward me. The scent of his shaving soap wafted toward me, mixed with the outdoors in a scent that was uniquely him.

“I think that is answer enough.”

I felt helpless, staring into the eyes of the man I loved, the man who clearly felt some regard for me in return, and could do nothing about it. “This does not change the situation.”

“On the contrary, it changes everything.”

“In what way?” I asked.

He leaned even closer, lowering his voice in a way that stalled the breath in my lungs and drew a shiver up my arms. “Because now that I ken the opposition, I can fight for ye.”

CHAPTER 4

I spent the remainder of the day hiding in my room. Hopefully Mama was distracted by Mrs. Lennox's company. I found that Ewan's declaration had greatly altered my ability to speak of inconsequential things for any length of time, and I needed a break from the duties associated with hosting guests while my mind was in such turmoil.

Did Ewan not realize the implications of his confession?

He wanted me. My Ewan *wanted me*. And I could not have him. I wanted to hit him and kiss him at the same time, and the realization of those warring emotions, swathed in uncertainty, sent me running away. Were these feelings he professed new, or had I failed to see his interest in years past?

My maid Laura had come to inform me that my brother Daniel had arrived a few hours before and would be joining us for dinner. I could only hope he would claim some of Ewan's attention and leave me free to gain my bearings. They'd never been really close before, but perhaps growing older had closed the gap between their interests now.

Laura finished pinning up my hair and curled the tendrils resting on my temples.

"Have you heard any word of the Thurstons' arrival?" I asked.

Her pale eyebrows puckered. "Not yet, miss. They've sent no messengers."

Which meant they'd yet to arrive, as well. Mama had spoken of her sister's tardiness, but this was odd, nonetheless.

"Thank you, Laura." I rose, brushing my hands down my pale blue silk skirt. I looked over my appearance one more time before making my way down to the drawing room. I had not been able to think of much else besides

Ewan's pronouncement all day, his words repeating in my mind over and over again. It was a bold thing to say, let alone to act upon.

Surely, he did not mean it the way it had sounded. Whatever would his mother say to this? His intention to fight the lackluster Lord Hammel for my hand? Good gracious, what would *my* Mama say? Or Lord Moorington?

I had a feeling Lord Hammel would say nothing at all.

When I reached the drawing room, I ignored the Lennox family entirely, making my way directly to the unoccupied space on the sofa between Mama and where Lord Moorington sat on the overstuffed wingback chair.

"Good evening, my lord. Mama."

They greeted me in kind. "My son told me of the tour you gave him today, Miss Palmer, and has not ceased talking of it since."

It was difficult to imagine Lord Hammel stringing multiple sentences together. Though, if they were about tapestries and moldings, I could believe it to be possible.

"Who knew you had so much history in these walls," the earl said.

"Or so many fascinating ceilings."

Lord Moorington boomed a laugh. "Oh, well that one is quite obvious." He glanced up and I followed his gaze to the plastered ceiling, the dark exposed beams running along it in a measured pattern. He leaned closer to me, grinning like a child instead of a well-aged earl. "When you come to London you will be quite impressed by our ceilings too, I wager." He winked at me, and I did my best to smile.

Ewan watched me from across the room, and I studiously ignored him, instead focusing my attention on the conversation between Mama and the earl. They seemed very comfortable in one another's presence, and I wondered how old their acquaintance was. Mama had greatly respected the late countess, but how long had she known the earl? By the look of it now, they knew one another quite well.

Daniel swept into the room with a swagger that revealed just how much he drank before deigning to join us. His dark hair was swept up away from his forehead, his pomade gleaming in the candlelight.

"Daniel, darling, come and greet our guests," Mama said, rising from her seat on the sofa.

He crossed the room and came before the earl, bowing low and greeting the man. Mama took Daniel's arm and led him around the room to each guest and made their welcomes, though he did not need her assistance. He knew

every person in the room.

“Your brother looks different,” Lord Moorington said quietly, thoughtfulness puckering his brow.

I startled. I’d been watching Daniel and forgot the earl was so near. Was this itching feeling how Lord Hammel had felt during our tour.

Was the earl referring to the shadows beneath Daniel’s eyes or the thinness to his frame? Grief had descended upon my brother harshly, unrelenting in its grip. I was certain Daniel wasn’t taking care of himself the way he should. I did not blame his sorrow, but I wished he would at least temper his drinking a little. Especially around Mama.

“Has he been this way long?”

“Since my father’s death,” I said softly.

Lord Moorington looked compassionately at Daniel and nodded. “I understand his pain.”

“From losing your father?” I asked.

He smiled. “Yes, and my wife. I have missed her heartily over the last ten years.”

I’d never met the countess, but I’d heard she was a tender soul. Mama liked her wholly, I knew that much. She’d told me more than once that I would be replacing a very wonderful countess.

It was romantic, in a way, that the earl hadn’t remarried.

“I will always miss her heartily, but I do not think I will always be alone.”

The earl gave me a gentle smile, his blue eyes brimming with compassion, and my heart thudded to a stop. Was he implying by his words that he would someday remarry? That he had designs on someone *now*?

Oh, good heavens. He hadn’t meant *me*, had he? I could not gather a full breath, and my fingers trembled. The earl continued to watch me as if searching for something, a softness to his gaze that scared me. I stood quickly.

“I should greet my brother. I have not seen him in months.” I diverted my eyes to the floor and curtsied, then turned for Daniel. He stood near the bookcases at the back of the room near Lord Hammel, and Mama had remained beside Mrs. Lennox.

Surely the earl and my father had not misunderstood one another. I glanced over my shoulder and found Lord Moorington watching me still, and I quickly averted my gaze.

“A storm chased me all the way from London. I do believe it will be upon

us before the hour is up,” Daniel said, lifting a glass of amber liquid to his lips.

Good heavens, where’d he find that? I wanted to take it from his hand and splash it out the window. Or better yet, over his tranquil face.

“Jane,” he said, smiling sloppily, his head bent so far over he was resting it on his shoulder. “You look nice.”

I swallowed a scoff. “You look foxed.”

“Shhhh,” he said, lifting a finger to his mouth. “I do not wish for Mother to overhear you.”

“The entire room is fully aware of the state of your mind right now. You are certainly not fooling Mama.” I suppressed the desire to give him a set down. “Perhaps you ought to take dinner in your room and sleep it off.”

“No, I cannot. I told Mother I would be here for dinner.” He put his arms out as though presenting me with a gift. “And I am.”

“And you can be here for dinner again tomorrow when you will no longer embarrass her,” I whispered harshly. “Come.” I took him by the arm and gave Lord Hammel an apologetic smile.

Daniel leaned in and whispered loudly. “Splendid idea to escape, Janie. Walk very quietly and they will not see us go.”

Every person in the room heard him speak. I tugged harder on his arm, slipping through the door before leading him to the stairwell. Candles sat in the sconces on the walls and fire filled the grates in the center column, warming the cool area. Rain pattered against the window as I directed Daniel upstairs and toward his chamber.

It seemed the storm he predicted was upon us. Given his awareness, however, I assumed the term *storm* was a bit of an exaggeration.

“I didn’t want dinner anyway,” Daniel mumbled, emptying his glass and setting it loudly on the table beside his bed. He fell onto his mattress clumsily and his eyelids fluttered closed. “Thank you for getting me out of that.”

“I did it for Mama, not for you.” I tugged the bell rope beside his fireplace and rested my hands on my hips. “Please be better tomorrow, Daniel. That was not a good impression on our guests.”

A heavy snore lifted from the pillows, and I very much desired to pull one of them out from beneath his head and toss it at him. His valet arrived a few minutes later, and I directed him to wake Daniel and help him ready for bed before I slipped out of the room. Rain thrummed against the window panes harder, and I paused to look at the dark, wavy glass. Water ran down it in

rivulets, and a chill passed over my body.

If Daniel was correct about the storm, then I hoped the Thurston family wasn't caught in it.

It rained all night and into the next morning. I put aside the scarlet riding habit I had hoped to wear and donned a sprigged muslin day dress instead. The sleeves went all the way to my wrists, and I was glad to be so fully covered. Something about the earl's conversation before dinner last night had bothered me and left me feeling uneasy. His comment had been such an unnatural addition to our conversation, spoken so awkwardly, that it must have held a particular meaning.

Based on the way he looked at me, I thought I knew exactly what the meaning was, but I didn't want for that to be the case, so I chose to ignore it, and subsequently, *him* for the remainder of the evening.

It was just my luck that when I stepped into the breakfast room, Lord Moorington and Ewan were the only two people present. Blast.

"Good morning, my lord, Mr. Lennox." I passed the table swiftly and moved to the sideboard to fill my plate.

Ewan stood and followed me to the sideboard, but I did not allow him to take my plate. We'd played a game of cat and mouse since his confession, and I had slipped away following dinner while the men were lingering over their port the night before. Immature, perhaps. But if I didn't speak to him, I wasn't forced to face what he'd said.

If he meant what I believed he meant, I wasn't sure I'd be able to trust myself to stay strong. But I had made a promise, and Father had signed an agreement. I did not have any choice but to hold up my end of the bargain. Lord Moorington's estates needed funds, and I was meant to provide them. He would never let me free of our contract, and I would never send Arden Castle to its ruin by breaching the contract and allowing the man to sue.

"I am perfectly capable of selecting my own breakfast, Mr. Lennox."

His mouth ticked up at that. "And I am only trying to be a gentleman."

"No," I said, lowering my voice. "You are crowding me."

He leaned the slightest bit forward, so infinitesimally that I wondered if I imagined it, but a waft of his uniquely earthy scent hit my nose. "I was in

earnest yesterday, Jane. I will be doing my part to try and win yer hand.”

“I am not the prize at the end of a race, sir,” I whispered. I looked to the earl, but he didn’t appear to be paying us any mind.

“Nae, ye are far better.” Ewan winked and stepped back to the breakfast table.

I was so surprised and confused by his behavior that I paid little attention to what I put on my plate. I plunked a bread roll down on it and selected a stewed tomato, layering kippers and bacon with no restraint. By the time I sat at the table, choosing a seat opposite from both gentlemen, my plate was towering with more than I could eat for an entire day.

Ewan eyed my breakfast and smiled. Lord Moorington paid it no heed.

“I think the rain will bar us from riding this morning,” I said, tearing a chunk from my roll.

“I had hoped to challenge ye in a game of chess, Miss Palmer,” Ewan said smoothly.

Lord Moorington’s eyebrows rose, his eyes lighting up. “Chess? That is a favorite of mine. I did not know you enjoyed the game as well, Miss Palmer.”

He looked at me eagerly and the same reservations that took root the previous night presented themselves once again.

Oh, dear. Was *this* the reason for Lord Hammel’s disinterest? That Papa had been confused and arranged a marriage between me and the earl? That had been Ewan’s first guess as well, and I knew such arrangements were not outside the realm of normalcy.

The roll soured in my stomach, but I managed to maintain an even tone and a calm smile. “I enjoy chess very much, my lord.”

“Might I challenge the winner of your match?”

Challenge the winner? He was not exactly challenging *me*, then. “That would be splendid, my lord.”

I pushed my over-filled plate away and stood from the table. “Mr. Lennox, when you are ready?”

He sipped his tea and glanced up at me with surprise. “Right this moment?”

“Of course. I play best when my mind is fresh.”

“Verra well.” He finished off his tea and set the cup on the table.

I didn’t wait. I turned for the drawing room and made my way to retrieve the chess set packed away in a chest near the window.

I had a game to lose.

CHAPTER 5

It turned out that when I tried the hardest to lose was when fortune seemed to smile upon me. Ewan sat on the ladder-back chair across from me in the empty room, his arms crossed over his broad chest as he watched me debate my next move. I stared at the black and white checked board, the marble carved pieces scattered as though haphazardly placed.

Ewan typically played with great skill, but today seemed to be the exception. I was being reckless in my moves, and I could not discern whether Ewan was aware of that, or if I was merely a recipient of luck. It had been nearly an hour since we began the match, and I still had not lost despite valiant efforts to do so.

“You should not stare at me,” I said, watching my king so closely it was shocking the piece hadn’t yet caught on fire and given itself up.

“Am I making it difficult for ye to concentrate?” His low brogue swept through my blood and made the hair on my arms stand on end.

Yes. I did my best to keep the elegant façade over my features like a veil, hiding my inner turmoil. “Of course not. It is merely rude to stare.”

Silence sat like a thick blanket in the room. It mattered not where I moved my pieces, I could not lose. Usually, I was quite adept at losing.

“Jane.”

I glanced up, my heart tripping over the sound of my name on his tongue. “Yes?”

Ewan’s deep brown gaze was already locked on me, ensnaring me. I could not look away. “Why are ye trying to lose?”

I scoffed, my eyes darting back to the board and then about the empty room. Anywhere but Ewan’s knowing face. I ought to have made sure we

were joined by others before beginning our game. The silence did not help my nerves. It was much too intimate, even with the door propped widely open. “Of course I’m not *trying* to lose. That is ludicrous. You know me, Ewan. I love winning far too much to attempt to give the match to you intentionally.”

“I do ken ye,” he said. “Which is why I canna understand yer motivation for trying to lose.”

“I’m not—” It was no use. He saw through me. He always had. “My reason is unimportant.”

“Ye dinna wish to play against the earl?”

“Yes. Well, no . . . it is not that, exactly.” It was, in fact, exactly that. But when Ewan said so aloud, it felt petty and rude to ill-treat my mother’s guest in that way. And not just any guest, but my future father-in-law. I closed my eyes and dropped my face in my hands. Perhaps I had been overreacting last night, and Lord Moorington had no desire to make me his wife. Surely he would not have brought his son along with him to this house party when Lord Hammel so clearly did not enjoy social activities unless there was a purpose in the man’s presence. A purpose like finalizing our engagement.

When I looked up again, Ewan’s brow had grown serious. His lips pressed together, and he watched me. “What is it, lass? Ye’ve never before tried to keep secrets from me.”

Contrary to what he believed, I was actually rather skilled at it. Our entire relationship had been one long exercise in keeping secrets from Ewan. How I felt, how he affected me, the way my heart hammered whenever he was near. I’d grown proficient at erecting a wall around my true emotions, guarding them close to my chest.

I did trust Ewan in other regards, but I certainly could not tell him this. It was embarrassing that I had believed the earl interested in me, and I could not plant that idea in Ewan’s mind as well. How vain and obnoxious of me to have considered it in the first place.

Surely I had misunderstood Lord Moorington. Mama had clearly stated that I was intended for Lord Hammel.

“I am likely worrying over nothing.” I spread my lips in a bright smile and leaned forward to move a pawn on the board.

Ewan didn’t move to take his turn. Instead he sat back against the seat and watched me. “I canna figure it out, but something is different, Jane. What is it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Ewan narrowed his gaze. “Ye were far friendlier yesterday. Today ye seem . . . bridled.”

I scoffed. “Ewan Lennox, do not tell me that you just compared me to a horse.”

“I didna compare ye to a horse. Not that it would be such an awful—”

I glared.

He smiled. “I said ye seemed bridled. ’Tis verra different.”

“In what way? Do you not bridle your horses?”

“Yes, but I wouldna bridle my wife.”

My breath caught on that word. *Wife*. Such a small thing, but the image it created in my mind was the future I’d long yearned for.

I swallowed against a dry throat, my words scratching as they clawed free. “What does your wife have to do with anything?”

“We are talking about women, are we not? I wouldna bridle my mother, either.”

“I am certain she will be glad to hear it.”

He looked at me expectantly. “Are ye planning to speak in circles all day, or will ye tell me what it is that is bothering ye?”

Could the man honestly not have worked it out for himself already?

He picked up his queen and swung it between his fingertips. “Or I could tell ye what I think it is that is so troubling.” He must have taken my silence for acquiescence and said, “I think ye dinna want to marry that man.”

The earl or his son? Well, it hardly mattered. I wanted to marry neither of them. I couldn’t let Ewan know he was correct, though. What good would that serve?

“That is very presumptuous of you.”

He set the queen down with a quiet thunk. “Do ye ken what is troubling *me*?”

“Not in the least.”

Ewan looked up and set his dark chocolate eyes on me. “I dinna want ye to marry him, either.”

“You mentioned as much,” I said, striving for nonchalance though my tongue felt large and uncooperative. I reached for my knight and pushed him into a new position, and Ewan laid his large hand over mine, stilling it on the chessboard. Tingles pricked my skin, running up my arm and warming a path to my chest. When I looked up, Ewan had fire in his eyes.

“And ye havna responded,” he whispered. “Ye’ve done nothing but avoid me since we spoke outside.”

Ewan’s hand was tight over mine, and I struggled to know what to say. It wouldn’t do either of us any good for me to agree, to admit aloud how dearly I longed to become Ewan’s wife. Every hint dropped from his lips was another nail in my heart, sharp and tortuous. I’d loved the man my whole life and he was implying that he had come to his senses and believed himself interested in me? It was as unfair as it was infuriating.

If that was truly how he’d felt, then why had he not kissed me the last time he was here? Why had he acted as though we were friends, destined for nothing deeper?

A warm fire bloomed within me, growing as I gazed into Ewan’s brown, fathomless eyes. I had all but begged him to kiss me the last time he was here, stepping close, tipping my head back, waiting. But he did nothing. If the man had any feelings for me, he would have done something then.

Now it was too late, and he chose *now* to confuse and fluster me, as if my emotions were a flock of geese and he chose to throw a rock into the fray and watch them scatter. He wanted to shatter my composure, but I wouldn’t let him. I tugged my hand free of his grip, immediately shoving away the loss I felt as cool air rushed in and chilled the skin he’d held.

Standing, I clasped my hands together to keep them from shaking. Anger fueled me. “I am not sure exactly what you think you have worked out, Ewan, but trust me when I tell you that you are far from the mark in regards to my feelings. I am perfectly content with the arrangement my father devised for me, and I would thank you to cease your insinuations at once. If you have something to say to me, come right out and say it.”

Ewan stood slowly, and I craned my head back in order to hold his gaze. His hands remained limp at his side, and he stood far too close to me. My confidence seeped from me the longer his eyes fiercely searched mine, and if I did not end this conversation and leave the room, I would soon be a puddle on the floor.

“I dinna like the idea of ye married to another man, Jane. I dinna wish for ye to marry anyone, unless it is me.”

The words, spoken with so little artifice, such sweet simplicity, were arrows driving into me one at a time in rapid succession. I wanted him, but I couldn’t have him. Why had fate played this cruel trick?

Questions fired through my mind one after the next. How long had Ewan

felt this way? Why had he become so willing to fight so swiftly? Why had he never before indicated that he'd felt anything beyond friendship for me despite knowing one another well our entire lives?

"Why *now*?" I blurted. I closed my eyes and shook my head, lifting my hand to stop him. "No, do not answer that."

"But—"

"No," I repeated, spearing him with a glare. "My father made this arrangement and signed the contract. It is out of my hands. Do you not see that? I have no control over the situation any longer." If I ever did.

I turned to walk away but stopped and looked back at him. "It is cruel of you to say such things when I am not in a position to change my situation, Ewan."

He appeared hurt, dejected, but my words had seemed to spark a glimmer of hope within him. "Then ye do care for me?"

"Of course I care for you. You've been one of my dearest friends for all of my life."

"I do not mean as a friend, Jane." Ewan followed me, slipping his large hand over mine. "I mean as a woman cares for a man."

My breath suspended. I refused to answer such a blatant inquiry.

He did not wait for me to speak to continue, his thumb drawing lazy circles over the back of my hand. "When I said I'd fight for ye, I meant it."

I was tired of speaking in riddles and looping back to the same thing over and over again. I pulled my hand from his grasp and turned away, pressing my lips together to keep from saying something I would most certainly later regret.

I walked from the room with a heavy heart and turned down the corridor and nearly ran directly into Lord Moorington. Mama was on his arm, and I hoped they hadn't overheard my conversation with Ewan.

Lord Moorington's eyes lit up when they rested on me. "Have you concluded your match?"

"We have."

"Who came out the victor?"

"Mr. Lennox did, my lord. It is he who won." It was through my forfeit, of course, but accepting the win was the least Ewan could do after that strained conversation and the turmoil he'd put me through.

Lord Moorington's excitement did not diminish, much to my relief. "Capital! Where might I find him?"

“Just in there, my lord.”

Lord Moorington turned his attention on Mama. “Would you care to watch an old man lose at chess?”

She laughed lightly, her gaze darting toward me. Did she think I would not approve? That I would think her spectating odd? She wanted to make the best impression to secure this match, and I understood that. It also seemed to me a kind thing for her to do as a hostess, although prodigiously boring.

The earl swung his attention to me. “And you, Miss Palmer? Would you care to watch?”

Lord Moorington had a lot of faith in his ability to be an entertaining chess player. I rather assumed it would feel more like watching a dog take a nap. “I would love to.”

I followed them back into the drawing room. Ewan stood at the window and looked outside. He turned his contemplative gaze on us when we entered the room.

“I’ve come to challenge you,” Lord Moorington announced.

Ewan fixed a smile on his face. “Allow me to prepare the board.”

Mama slipped her hand through my arm and walked me toward the sofa. She leaned down and lowered her voice. “Where is Lord Hammel?”

“I’ve yet to see him today.”

Her brow puckered. “For a man intent on marrying you, I have been surprised by his impassive behavior.” She watched the men set up their game, her voice remaining in a whisper. “He has been so very distant. It’s . . . odd.”

Footsteps pounded down the corridor and Worthlin broke inside, searching the room until he landed on Mama. The butler’s typically steady demeanor was drawn, his wrinkled eyes concerned.

“What is it?” Mama asked, evidently reading Worthlin’s distress the same way I had.

“The Thurstons’ carriage was damaged, but they’ve taken refuge in a hunting box near Lederhill.”

“Have they sent a note? Are they uninjured?”

“They sent a postilion but no note, and he believed they are well, if only a little distressed.”

“Whose house is it?” I asked. “Anyone we might be familiar with?”

Worthlin shook his head. “They did not provide a name, ma’am.”

Mama set her mouth in a firm line. “We must retrieve them at once.”

“I want to come,” I said.

Mama looked as though she meant to argue. "I do not think—"

"I am happy to go, as well," Ewan said.

"But the storm is still raging," Mama said, the drumming of rain against the window validating her concern. "It could be dangerous."

"My carriage will seat six and is perfectly capable of traveling through the rain." Ewan's voice was reasonable and calm. "I am happy to go retrieve them."

"Thank you, Ewan, that would be most kind of you."

Lord Moorington nodded. "I will accompany him."

A silent look passed between Mama and the earl. It did not last more than a few seconds but appeared heavy with meaning. Mama looked grateful and almost . . . well, as if she admired the man. Should her immense gratitude not be reserved for Ewan? It was he who first offered to fetch the Thurstons.

"We will hurry back," Lord Moorington said, then nodded to Ewan.

"Do you not think my presence could be something of a comfort to Felicity?" I asked, attempting one last time to finagle my way into attending. I hated the prospect of sitting here and waiting for them to return safely.

"I'm not sure—"

"There are only three members of the Thurston family who need conveying, correct?" Lord Moorington asked.

Mama confirmed this.

He gave her a light smile. "I do not see the harm in allowing Miss Palmer to accompany us. We will be home before dinner, I am certain, and she will be warm and dry in the carriage. It could be a comfort to her cousin to have her there."

I shared a look with Ewan. His eyes were bright, conveying the reality that I could depend upon him and, evidently, my soon-to-be father-in-law as well. The men had answered the call for assistance without any provocation, and it was a boon to my spirits.

"I will fetch my cloak straight away." I turned for the door.

"You must take Laura," Mama called after me.

My maid. Of course. "But then we will not have adequate room inside the carriage for the return journey."

Ewan cleared his throat. "I will bring my horse and tether him to the back. I am happy to ride when we return."

He held my gaze, and I gave him a grateful smile before leaving the room.

I passed the Lennoxes in the corridor and stopped to inform them of the situation, but neither Daniel nor Lord Hammel were anywhere to be found.

For a man who'd come to Arden Castle to propose marriage, Lord Hammel was anything but an eager suitor. He was not even a half-interested suitor. Dare I wonder if the man considered himself my suitor at all?

And if he did not, what then could this mean for me?

CHAPTER 6

The Lennox carriage was well sprung, the squabs plush and comfortable. I sat across from Lord Moorington and Ewan with Laura by my side, my hands folded primly in my lap and my gaze pasted to the watery window in the door.

We'd lent the Thurstons' postilion one of my father's old coats for the ride back—his was completely sodden—and took the time to warm bricks before our departure for the carriage, and I was bundled as well as I could be. I'd gone down to the kitchen and asked Cook to help me compile a basket in case the Thurstons were hungry.

We'd been on the road for over an hour now, the silence pure while we all watched out the rainy windows, and I wondered if my request to attend was perhaps accepted a bit hastily. Our wheels slid occasionally in the mud, forcing my breath to stall and my lungs to drop into my stomach. The Lennox carriage might be well-made and warm, but it could slip into a muddy ditch just as easily in this weather as a lesser one.

Ewan's long legs looked cramped in the space, and his knee brushed mine slightly with the motion of the carriage. I wanted to shift to the side a little on the seat, to rest my knee against his, but it wouldn't be appropriate. It was just like our relationship—Ewan often so close, but not mine to claim.

"It has been an age since I've had the opportunity to see your uncle," Lord Moorington said, startling me. I'd been so focused on our legs that I jumped, my kneecap banging into Ewan's shin. He glanced up and caught my gaze, and I looked away quickly.

"Do you know my uncle?" I hoped the strain in my voice was not obvious.

“He was a friend of mine long ago while we were boys at Eton.”

Ewan knocked my knee with his leg again, and I wondered briefly if he was doing so intentionally. It was not clear, as we all bumped and swayed with the motion of the carriage. I avoided meeting his eyes, just in case, and kept my attention on the earl.

I cleared my throat, my heart rate returning to normal. “I’m certain he will be as pleased to see you, my lord.”

His lingering smile left me feeling uneasy, and I toyed with the loose thread on my gloves, hoping he would not further our conversation. Laura sat quietly beside me and watched out the window, and I wondered if she’d noticed Ewan’s knee bumping mine as well.

A stillness sat in the air, marking the decrease of pinging on the roof. I glanced to the window and noted the absence of raindrops. Perhaps we would be blessed with a drier journey on our return home.

The carriage slid again, and I shot out an arm to keep myself from falling to the floor.

“It is not difficult to see how yer aunt and uncle’s carriage ended up in a ditch,” Ewan said, righting himself on his seat across from me.

“I was only just praying that we would not see the same fate.”

The wheels slid once more in a wide arc to the side, and my stomach dropped clear to the bricks at our feet.

“The driver needs to slow,” Lord Moorington said beneath a puckered brow. He rapped his knuckles on the ceiling and proceeded to inform the man who came to the door that we would soon be joining the Thurstons in a ditch if we failed to control our speed.

“We should arrive at our destination shortly,” the groom responded. “According to the Thurstons’ man, we’re but three miles away.”

Relief flooded me. Though, three miles at the speed Lord Moorington commanded could take the better part of an hour.

The following three miles passed in rigid sluggishness. The carriage crawled along at a snail’s pace, and my hands did not unclench until we pulled off the road and into a short, tree-lined drive.

“These poplars look similar to those we have lining the drive at my estate. They give ample shade but are not too tall to block the view.” Lord Moorington directed a kind smile at me. “I think you will enjoy the views there. And the lake is simply lovely, especially in the summertime.”

My stomach twisted into knots, and I struggled to swallow. “I’m certain it

is lovely.” I turned my attention to the window and hoped to shift the topic of conversation. “I am a little worried about the state of the roads on our return.”

The earl’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “I admit that I did not think the roads would be this awful. I spoke with your mother before our departure and asked her not to worry if she does not see us back this evening. I thought it wise to plan for the possibility of a slow return.”

“Surely we can be cautious and still return tonight,” Ewan said.

“Possibly, but we would not make it back to Arden before dark, and that does not seem the wisest course of action.” Lord Moorington looked at the roof of the carriage, his eyebrows puckered. “I think we may go as far as the inn at Lederhill and travel the remaining distance in the morning.”

“Let us find the Thurstons,” I said. The carriage had rolled to a full stop, and I was eager to see Felicity and to make sure she was well. A large, square house came into view, built of gray stone and utterly unremarkable.

Ewan opened the door and hopped down to the sodden ground before turning and extending his hand to me. I clasped it and stepped out, lifting my skirts slightly to keep them dry. My cloak was fur-lined and provided warmth, but the cold air seeped into the exposed cracks and chilled me.

The dreary, gray cloud coverage nearly blended into the stone of the house. Lord Moorington stepped up beside me and offered his elbow, and we squelched across the ground and knocked on the tall oak door, Laura trailing behind us.

I was surprised to see a servant open the door. Lord Moorington made quick work of explaining who we were and who we’d come to see. The house was old and didn’t appear well-kept, its grass and shrubbery overgrown and the paint peeling from the green shutters over the windows.

“Of course,” the man said, stepping aside to allow us entrance into the house. I stepped past the white-haired man, his large, bulbous nose hanging over a temperate smile. The butler offered Laura tea in the kitchen, and a younger maid appeared to lead her away.

We were led into a small sitting room at the end of the corridor, and a wave of heat from the massive fire washed over me as I stepped into the room. “Jane!” Felicity said, surprise mingled with joy.

Aunt Thurston stood beside her, and they crossed the room, meeting me on the carpet in the middle. “Thank you for coming, darling,” Aunt said, pulling me into an embrace. “Our carriage was taken to a man in Lederhill, but it will not be ready for another two days.”

“We were happy to come.” I turned to include my travel partners. “Aunt Thurston, allow me to introduce Lord Moorington, the Earl of Moorington, and you’ll remember my friend, Mr. Lennox.”

“Of course I remember Mr. Lennox,” Aunt said, crossing to him and supplying both men with her hand. She looked like my mother, with the same dark hair and regal bearing.

“Where is Uncle?”

Aunt Thurston’s eyes danced. “Out shooting with our host. The moment the rain ceased, they were gone.”

“Father has made the most of his time here,” Felicity said, holding a book to her chest.

I grinned. “I can see that you’ve done the same.”

Pink tinged her fair cheeks. Her light copper hair was pulled back in the same simple knot she always wore, and her long-sleeved gown of white sprigged muslin complemented her delicate frame well. “Mr. Bradwell has a fantastic library here. I shall be sorry to leave it behind.”

“You may not need to part with your book yet,” Lord Moorington said, stepping forward.

Ewan followed him but paused beside me, so close his shoulder brushed mine.

“What do you mean, my lord?”

“The rain has stopped, and I do believe it might be wiser to wait one day before returning, to allow the roads to dry a little more. So long as your host could be persuaded to allow it. If not, then we must plan to spend the night in Lederhill.”

“He is the kindest of men,” Aunt Thurston said. “I am certain he would be happy to oblige us. But until he returns, would you like to be seated?”

We had barely settled on the worn, leather sofa and burgundy wingback chairs when a door somewhere in the house slammed, the sound of shuffling boots and mild chatter indicating that Uncle Thurston and his host had returned.

“Your host, Mr. Bor . . .”

“Mr. *Bradwell*,” Felicity corrected.

I hadn’t heard the name before. “Ah, yes. He has been kind?”

Felicity’s cheeks bloomed. “Most attentive.”

The men must have been made aware of our presence by the servants, for Uncle came expectantly into the room a few minutes later, a tall, handsome

gentleman close on his heels.

“Welcome to my home,” Mr. Bradwell said.

Aunt Thurston stood at once and made introductions, while Uncle crossed the room toward the earl and heartily greeted his old friend.

“How were the roads?” Mr. Bradwell asked.

“Muddy and wet,” Ewan said. “We were hoping to beg a night’s hospitality from ye, sir.”

Mr. Bradwell nodded. “It would be wise to give the roads a little time to dry. It will surely make for safer passage home.” He looked to Aunt Thurston and smiled. “You and your friends are welcome here as long as you need, as I’ve already mentioned. You are not putting me out, for my brothers are not set to arrive until next week at the earliest.”

The man had brothers? He had such a striking face, I found myself wondering if his brothers looked similar to him or different. Felicity, it seemed, was just as enamored by his handsome smile.

“Splendid,” Ewan said quietly, and I looked to find him grinning.

“Good heavens, what has put you into such a pleasant mood?” I asked.

“The fortune of finding myself in your company for the remainder of the day without any distractions.”

Certainly by distractions, he meant Lord Hammel. Which, if nothing else, was a clever joke, for Lord Hammel could not be called a distraction. He did everything in his power to consistently make himself scarce.

Felicity slid up beside me, and I hoped with everything in my power that she had not overheard Ewan.

“Does he not seem the most handsome of men?” she asked, her gaze pasted to our host where he stood before the fire now speaking to Uncle and the earl.

Ewan straightened, and if I was not mistaken, he leaned a little closer to me.

“He is indeed very handsome,” I said, loud enough for Ewan’s benefit. “Is he as kind as he seems?”

“Kinder,” Felicity said quietly.

I turned to face her, putting my back to Ewan. “Felicity, have you developed a *tendre* for your host?”

“Oh, that matters very little. Nothing will come of it. After we leave tomorrow I’m certain I shall never see him again.”

“Does he not go out in Society?”

“His brothers do, but he mentioned last night at dinner that he would much prefer a quiet evening at home than a loud party full of strangers.”

“He sounds perfect for you,” I whispered, looking again at our handsome host. He nodded softly, listening politely to the earl.

“He would be if I was the sort of woman who threw myself at a man and enticed him to wed me.”

“Perhaps you ought to try.” I laughed at the image of my quiet, bookish cousin doing anything so bold. She smiled, too, but I detected a hint of sorrow in her countenance, and it sobered me swiftly. “Do not tell me you’ve fallen in love with the man. You’ve known him for less than a day.”

“No, not love. Of course not. But I do wish I could see him again.”

“Perhaps your carriage ought to break again on your way home?”

Felicity smiled and nudged my shoulder. She lifted her book. “I am going to see if I can finish this tonight.”

Ewan stepped closer again once Felicity moved away. “I’m beginning to wonder if yer desire to comfort yer cousin was a ploy to spend more time with me.”

“You would be so lucky.”

“I would, indeed,” he whispered, before turning to walk closer to the fire. I watched him go for a moment before following.

I hoped he didn’t realize just how on the mark he was.

CHAPTER 7

I woke in the middle of the night to a repeated banging sound and sat bolt upright in my bed. Felicity breathed deeply beside me, and I knew she was still asleep. Laura had been given a place to sleep among the servants, and I wondered if perhaps she needed me. Though she would not bang her fists so, surely. She would knock softly.

Dropping my stockinged feet onto the cold floor, I padded across the room to the door and opened it a little to Ewan's raised hand holding a candle. I quickly shut it most of the way again—I'd been forced to sleep in my shift with no dressing gown at my disposal, and I couldn't allow him to see me this way.

Poking only my head out, I whispered, "It's late. What do you need?"

The banging started again, and I glanced down to find his hand at his side, his other still holding a small candle.

"If you are not knocking at my door, then—"

"I believe yer shutters have come undone, lass."

I glanced over my shoulder and found him to be correct. The shutters that had appeared closed when Felicity and I went to sleep were now flopping wildly on the other side of the window panes, slamming against the stone on the outside of the house. I shut the door and hurried across the room.

Moonlight poured down through the glass on the clear night and gave my skin an eerily milky glow. The window latch was rusty and the hinges creaky, but I tugged hard and managed to pull the window open. Cold air swept inside and down my bare legs, driving prickles down my exposed skin. The shutter slammed against the wall, and I leaned out to grasp the hook, but it was undulating too far away. I needed longer arms.

Drat.

I could ask Ewan to help, but I didn't have a dressing gown to cover myself, and I'd left my cloak with the butler downstairs. I looked about the room, though it was difficult to see much of anything. Creeping back to the bed, I opened the trunk resting at its foot and pulled out a musty blanket, shaking the moths and dust from it. It didn't smell lovely, but it would cover me. I wrapped it quietly over my shoulders, grateful for Felicity's deep, even breathing to promise that she still slept. Though *how* she managed it with the blasted shutters slamming into the stone wall was anyone's guess.

I knew Ewan would still be waiting precisely where I left him, and I opened the door to his darkened form standing in front of my door. "I cannot reach the shutters."

He smirked. "I thought that might be the case."

"Will you help?"

He handed me his candle and stepped past me, leaving the door all the way open, and had the noisy shutter in his hand in one try. He secured the shutters together and closed the window behind them, casting out the moonlight and leaving us with naught but the small, flickering flame for light. The silence in the room was absolute, broken only by Felicity's heavy breathing.

Ewan crossed back to the door without any hesitation.

"Thank you."

"I am no' entirely selfless, Jane. The sound woke me, as well, and I couldna get back to sleep."

"But you still helped me."

He stood in the open doorway in nothing but his shirt, trousers, and stockinged feet. His jaw was shadowed by a day's growth of beard, and his hair mussed. It was a disheveled look I much appreciated on him, and I bit back the desire to run my hands along his exposed forearms.

Ewan waited to speak until I met his gaze again, and my ears burned from being caught staring. Dipping his chin, he looked at me through a thick set of lashes. "I will always help ye when ye need me."

I knew this as surely as I knew the sun would rise in a few short hours. It was exactly why I'd known that he would not leave the corridor until the problem had been resolved, how I knew I could rely on him. Why was I marrying a man who I did *not* have the same confidence in, where I was unaware whether or not he was reliable, when there was a perfectly

trustworthy man standing opposite me right now? A man who would care for me and take care of me.

Ewan coughed, then sniffed the air. His nose wrinkled. “What is that . . . do ye smell it, too?”

A niggling of discomfort made me squirm. “Smell what, exactly?”

“I dinna ken, but it isna pleasant.” He leaned closer and took another sniff, and his eyes snapped to mine.

Oh, good heavens. It was *me*. Ewan smelled the musty blanket.

He brought his nose to the crook between my shoulder and my neck and inhaled, and I wanted to slink down in between the floorboards and disappear.

But the feeling of his nose nuzzled into my neck kept me perfectly still, hoping it wouldn't end.

“It is ye.”

“It is the blanket, Ewan,” I explained patiently. “It is not *me*.”

He ticked up an eyebrow. “Well, the smell is coming from ye all the same.”

I chuckled softly and swatted his arm away. “Goodnight, Ewan.”

He opened his mouth to speak but drew in a quick breath. “Can I ask ye one thing?”

“If you can borrow my blanket? I'm very sorry, but the answer is no. I'm rather attached to it.” Attached, as in, it was most definitely not leaving my body, regardless of how awful it smelled. Though, he must know I was joking.

Ewan paused, searching my eyes, his gleaming softly in the candlelight. “Do ye think about me as often as I think of ye?”

I froze. “That is impossible to answer. How am I to know how often you think of me?”

“Always, Jane. I think of ye always.” His voice was gruff, and it set my pulse to racing.

Speaking to Ewan like this wasn't wise. Not late at night with my mind hazy and Ewan looking so devilishly handsome and undone. Who knew that forearms could look so *manly*? I smiled softly. “Goodnight, Ewan.”

He reached above me and clasped the door, his gaze never leaving my face. A lopsided smile lifted his lips, and he pulled the door closed. “Goodnight . . .”

Darling. Had I imagined it? Or had he really whispered the endearment

when he closed the door?

My heart did a flip, and I turned around and leaned against the solid wood in the dark room. My heart pounded, and I could feel my pulse in my ears. Thus far my supposed intended had thoroughly ignored me—even while we were alone—and I'd questioned whether or not he was meant to be my husband. How could I fight for an agreement that felt so tenuous and uncertain?

It was time to hold Mama and Lord Moorington accountable and learn for myself exactly where Lord Hammel's mind was. I was tired of holding off Ewan's advances—advances which far from repulsed me—when I lacked a sound reason.

I could recall precisely why I agreed to this in the first place: to honor my father's wishes, to give my mother what she desired, to please the parents who raised me. It was important to me to honor them, and I had been holding strong thus far. But right this moment, my heart beating against my breastbone and Ewan's lingering gaze still drawing shivers over my shoulders, those reasons were fading in importance. The money we'd promised to the Earl of Moorington paled in comparison when faced with a man who I loved.

My mind was a muddled mess of displaced priorities. I didn't know who or what to fight for anymore.

CHAPTER 8

The morning light cut in through the crack in between the shutters and drew a beam of light over the floor as I sat at the dressing table and Felicity tried to put my hair up.

“I’m hopeless at this.”

I turned my head sideways to see the back and had to silently agree, though I would never say so aloud. It was a lopsided arrangement that drooped down over my shoulder. “I look like my mother from that painting that was done when she first married my father.”

Felicity rested both hands on my shoulders and leaned close to see me through the looking glass. Her blue eyes widened. “Drat, you do.” She started removing pins from my hair and giggling. “I suppose if any of the matrons would like their hair done, send them to me. I can help them reminisce with styles from the past.”

I chuckled, taking pins from Felicity and adding them to the growing pile on the dressing table. “Shall I leave my hair down instead?”

“Only if you want Mother to have an absolute fit.”

“You know I can send for Laura. She puts up my hair every day.”

“Which is exactly why I thought it might be fun if we did it ourselves.” She gestured to my hair, which had resembled a bird’s nest more than a coiffure. “Though I clearly do not have a future as a ladies’ maid.”

I twisted my raven hair back and around until it was in a loose knot at the nape of my neck and pinned it in place, using twice as many hair pins as Laura would need. I was not skilled at this either, but I did like my own attempt better than the attempts of my cousin. I did not wish to hurt her feelings by calling on my maid now.

“Allow me to help you with yours?” I asked.

“No, I think I can manage my own hair better than I did yours.” Felicity’s hair was up and secured swiftly in a similar style to mine.

I stared at her. She could have done my hair just as quickly and made it look better than I could have.

Her cheeks grew pink. “I’ve been doing it this way for ages. I never use a maid.”

“If you could accomplish that so easily, why on earth did you try to make me look like a peacock?”

“Because you are not used to such simplistic styles.” Felicity shrugged. “And *I* am not trying to marry a future earl.”

I turned back to face the looking glass. “My supposed intended is not even here.”

“No, but his father is. I assumed you would want to look your absolute best.”

What did I want? My resolve was cracking like an overbaked cake. Surely there were reasons I was marrying a man I didn’t love when a man who professed to love me was asking for my attention. Surely, I had a *good* reason.

Only, I was having trouble recalling what it was at present.

Felicity walked away, and I snapped out of my obnoxious trance. Ah, yes. Money, contracts, and honor.

I turned a wide smile on my cousin. “Did you happen to finish your book?”

She cleared her throat, looking startled. “No, but Mr. Bradwell was very kind and offered to lend it to me.”

My eyebrows rose. “Lend? As in you will be able to see him again and return the book?”

“I will post it to him. It would surely be less costly than purchasing my own copy.”

“He must love the book if he wishes to have it returned to him.”

“Yes. It is his favorite.”

“Which book—”

A knock sounded at the door and Felicity crossed to answer it while I pulled my half-boots on and set to fastening them.

She turned around. “The roads are passable, and the carriage is ready.”

“Have we slept late, or do they wish for an early start?”

“A little of both, I assume,” she said, smiling.

We gathered the remainder of our things and went down to the entryway where the rest of our party was waiting. Uncle Thurston spoke to our host near the door, and I watched as Mr. Bradwell’s eyes trailed past my shoulder and followed Felicity across the room when she went to speak to her mother.

Perhaps I could convince her to write a note to Mr. Bradwell and slip it into his book before she returned it.

Ewan stood at the window, his hands behind his back, and I smiled at him. The memory of the shutters flapping in the wind was fresh and brought warmth to my chest.

I faintly heard Uncle Thurston thanking Mr. Bradwell for his hospitality before opening the door and leading his wife down the steps and toward the carriage. I pulled my fur-lined cloak tight and finished tying the ribbon at my throat. Felicity curtsied to Mr. Bradwell and I followed her, thanking him as well.

We were snug inside the carriage. I sat between Laura and Felicity, across from her parents and the earl. Ewan mounted his horse just outside, and he looked dashing atop the steed, his comfort with the animal clear in his bearing.

I dragged my attention away from Ewan and looked to the man across from me. Lord Moorington gave me a soft nod, his glittering eyes fastened on me, and it made my stomach twist over itself. Why would he look at me that way if I wasn’t *his* intended?

The first thing I planned to do when I returned home was find my mother and discuss the arrangement Father had set forth in great detail. I deserved to know the parameters of the marriage agreement, and furthermore, exactly who I’d agreed to marry.

Felicity pressed her shoulder lightly into mine, and I kept my attention on my hands folded in my lap. With the press of the earl’s gaze on my bent neck like a physical force, I could see it now: this was going to be a very long carriage ride.

Our journey back to Arden Castle was not free of wheel slips and minor sliding on the muddy lanes, but we traveled slowly and arrived in the early

afternoon. Mama was there to greet us, standing at the top of the stairs near the door, ever the regal hostess. If anyone deserved to hold the title of countess, it was her and not me. I understood how badly she wanted this for me, but I wished she would see how little I cared for it.

Her worried eyes trailed over each member of our party as we exited the carriage and made our way toward the house. I stood beside her and waited as she greeted each of the Thurstons before directing them inside where Mrs. Hale was prepared to lead them up to their rooms to rest and rid themselves of the traveling dirt.

Lord Moorington stopped and took Mama's hand, squeezing her fingers. He said nothing, but a look passed between them. He sent me a wink before retreating into the house, and I was unsure if I had fully registered what had just occurred before me.

Surely I misunderstood. Mama loved my father deeply, just as Lord Moorington told me of the affection he had for his wife. But still, the tenderness in their shared gaze was undeniable.

But, no. Father had only died a year ago. Only one year.

I waited until Laura had passed us into the house before I gently cleared my throat. "Mama, have you and Lord Moorington—"

Ewan came up the steps swiftly and bowed to my mother, effectively cutting my question to the hilt. He'd returned his horse to the stables much more quickly than I'd expected. The clouds shifted overhead, and beams of light filtered down to the ground, brightening the green shrubbery and dim stone of the castle, but had no effect on my dark mood.

Ewan smiled pleasantly, unaware of the turmoil within me. It seemed I was doing a decent job of keeping my expression neutral. "It appears as though the storm has passed for good," he said.

"So, we can hope," Mama said.

His gaze swung to me. "Perhaps we can take that ride once the ground dries a little more."

"I look forward to it."

Mama smiled until Ewan walked away. "It would be wise to invite Lord Hammel on that ride, as well. And Felicity, too. I know you and Ewan have always been close, but you wouldn't want to be seen spending time with him and giving our guests the wrong idea."

"We needn't fear giving Lord Hammel the wrong impression. I do not think he would notice if I *kissed* another man directly in front of him. Not

unless I was dressed as a ceiling. Or perhaps a stained-glass window.”

“*Jane*,” Mama scolded. She took my arm and looked over her shoulder before lowering her voice. “What if you were overheard?”

There was no one nearby to have heard. But even if they had, surely my sentiments would have surprised no one. “I need to speak to you about the marriage contract.”

She leaned back a little and swept her eyes over me, seeming to take my measure. One crisp nod, and she had me by the hand and led me inside. “Come, we can speak in the study.”

Once we were safely behind the thick study door and shrouded in the quiet privacy of the room, Mama released my hand and clasped hers before her. Her mouth was pressed in a taut line, and her eyes were severe. “What is it you wish to say?”

Now that I was faced with the possibility of speaking about the state of my true feelings, I was frightened.

She seemed to sense my reticence and took my hand again. “I know Lord Hammel has not been quite as eager of a suitor as we perhaps expected, but that does not mean he is unwilling. I am certain he anticipates this marriage as much as we do.”

We? There was no *we*. I had never been eager for this marriage. I’d never desired to become a countess. That was all my mother. “Are you certain it is Lord Hammel who wishes to marry me and not . . .” I swallowed. “And not his father?”

Mama dropped my hand like a hot brick. “Of course not. What has led you to believe such a thing?”

“Lord Moorington mentioned that he feels ready to marry again. But I . . .” Mama’s wide eyes blinked at me, and I shook my head faintly. “Now that I say so aloud, I am realizing that he was likely only trying to prepare me for *another* wedding that would take much getting used to.”

Mama’s eyes shone brightly, and I accepted the truth of the situation at once. The hazy possibilities that I had tried to deny were too clearly laid before me now. I could no longer pretend not to understand. Of course, Lord Moorington had been hinting these things to me. He wanted to marry my mother.

The looks he’d cast my way must have been of a paternal nature, perhaps a result of him considering me in the light one would a daughter. His twinkling affection must have been familial and nothing more.

“Nothing is decided,” Mama said. “He has asked, but I have not given my answer yet.”

Disloyal. That was all I could think. The word pulsed in my mind like an awful headache, and I had to clench my hands to keep from spitting the word out in accusation.

“How could you?” I asked, stepping back. Anger and sorrow swept through me like a hot blade. “Father has only been gone for a year. You cannot mean to tell me that you’ve forgotten him so easily?”

A male voice permeated our conversation and took me by surprise. “Who has forgotten Father?”

We both looked to the door and found Daniel standing there, his brows drawn together, and his icy stare fixed on Mama. Purple shadows hung beneath his eyes and his skin had a grayish pallor.

“No one has forgotten your father.” Mama pierced me with a warning glare. “And no one intends to.”

“I believe we have different perceptions of what it means to forget him,” I said quietly. “You wish to replace him.”

“No, I do not wish to replace—”

“With whom?” Daniel asked.

His question reverberated from the ceiling and bounced about the quiet room. Mama sucked in a breath. Her mouth remained closed, her eyes wary.

Daniel still did not remove his hand from the doorknob, as though prepared to flee if needs be. “Gads, Mother. It has only been a year. With *whom?*” There was a cutting edge to his tone that worried me. I was upset, yes, but Daniel sounded as though he teetered on the edge of losing himself to a rage, as though he was barely containing his anger.

“There is no agreement. Nothing has happened, Daniel.”

“Yet, I assume?” He scoffed. “I cannot believe this of you, Mother.”

Daniel’s rage had the effect of cooling my anger like a bucket of icy water. He’d been absent or drunk for the better part of the last year, causing pain and heartache to multiply as mother worried about him constantly. The need to defend her against additional pain currently outweighed my own personal feelings on her relationship with Lord Moorington. I spoke in warning. “Do not say anything you will later regret.”

His gaze shifted to me. “You approve of this, then? Who is it, Jane?” He paused, looking to the ceiling. “It cannot be Mr. Lennox or Uncle. So, the earl, is it?” He looked at Mama. “You fancy a title?”

“Enough, Daniel,” I pleaded.

He shook his head, disgust turning his lips down on the ends. Daniel spun on his heel and left the room, slamming the door behind him and causing both my mother and I to flinch. Her shoulders sunk in a rare bit of defeat, and I fought the urge to run as well.

“*No one* is trying to replace your father.”

“Mama,” I said softly, “I cannot discuss this right now. I must clear my head.”

She looked as though she wanted to say something further, but refrained. “Of course,” she said, stepping away. Her action was permission, and I took it and ran.

CHAPTER 9

I wanted to avoid the confines of my bedchamber—the mere thought of remaining closed within those walls made my throat begin to tighten. So, I turned for the front door and ran into the warm sunlight, not pausing until I was down the pathway and to the iron gate that led into the hedge maze. I knew the maze well, and I could walk its narrow corridors for ages, the shrubbery tall and surrounding me like an embrace, but not stifling, as it was open to the sky.

The hinges squeaked, and I clasped the gate closed behind me. I rubbed my arms to stave off my sudden loneliness and wished I would have stopped for my gloves again, but I'd been desperate to get away and hadn't been thinking.

“Jane.”

Ewan's voice carried through the wind, his footsteps crunching gravel and speeding my heart with every step. I looked over my shoulder to find him coming around the corner. He paused at the gate, his broad chest heaved slightly and the worried look in his eyes reached my chest, though the distance that spanned between us felt more significant now than its mere twenty feet. Had he followed me from the house?

“Jane,” he repeated.

I turned to face him fully, doing my best to hide away my bubbling emotions. “Yes?”

He opened the gate, the creak renting the quiet. Sunlight bathed the back of my neck, and I wanted to bend my head forward and let it wash over me. Instead I remained upright, my spine taut and shoulders back, and watched Ewan let himself inside the maze and close the gate behind him.

He regarded me closely, and I expected him to inquire about what had so upset me. But he didn't. Instead, he spoke with ease and calmness. "Shall we try to find the fountain?"

I'd already told him that I had the maze memorized. I knew his intelligence extended to recalling that detail, and right now I was grateful to accept the break from reality he offered. I wanted to forget that my mother was entertaining the idea of remarrying, that my brother was a grief-stricken drunk, that the man I loved wanted to marry me and I could not have him, that the man who I was meant to marry was indifferent to me. It was unfair, and I wanted none of it to exist.

Ewan's eyebrows drew together, and he quietly approached me. I felt myself slipping, felt the emotions I tried so hard to suppress rising and demanding free rein.

"What is it, Jane?" he asked.

The lie that so readily came to my tongue sat unspoken in the face of his compassion. The gate back into reality and the path that led to Arden Castle sat just behind Ewan, taunting me.

I did not know what to say, and Ewan must have sensed that.

He pointed ahead. "Shall I lead the way, then? Ye'll be sure not to cheat and tell me when I've erred, aye?"

A smile formed unbidden on my lips, and I mimicked his accent. "Aye."

Ewan looked at me sharply, my choice of word seeming to catch him off-guard.

He chuckled and rested a hand on the small of my back as he stepped past me in the narrow corridor. His uniquely earthy scent mixed with his shaving soap assaulted my nose. I leaned closer as he stepped ahead of me and inhaled the lingering smell of him.

"Right this way, then."

I followed Ewan through the hedge maze much like when we were younger, the only difference being our reduced speed. We'd always run before, usually from dragons or Daniel—who at the moment *was* something of a dragon—and in more recent years we'd raced one another to see who could find the fountain at the center first.

If we'd raced now, I would have previously thought that I would most certainly win, but Ewan's uncanny ability thus far to select every correct turn was suspicious.

He hesitated at the final turn and looked at me over his shoulder. The

sound of bubbling water revealed the fountain's location, and I sank into the soothing sound.

"You remembered exactly where to go," I challenged.

A guilty smile crept over his lips. "I didna ken if I would be correct on my first attempt."

He gestured for me to precede him toward the fountain, and my shoulder brushed his chest when I walked by. The fountain sat in the center of a rounded section, the hedges tall and perfectly cut. The depiction of a dove taking flight, carved flawlessly in white stone, was a calming presence.

"I spent a good deal of time here after my father died," I said, circling the fountain. "I imagined him flying up to heaven as peacefully as this."

Ewan's eyes softened, and he began following me around the fountain at a slow pace, his gaze never leaving me. "I dinna think yer father would appreciate being compared to such a graceful bird."

I laughed outright, imagining the scowl he would have worn. Good-naturedly, of course. But Ewan was right. "It is his spirit I am referring to, and you well know it."

"Ah, of course. How daft of me."

We continued to circle the fountain, our pacing matched. When Ewan stopped walking, I stopped as well, and we stood across from one another, a shallow pool of water between us.

"What happened, Jane?" he asked quietly.

My resolve broke, and my shoulders slumped. He strode around the white marble pool at once, taking me in his arms and pressing his large hands against my back. Tears pooled in my eyes, threatening to break free, but I repressed them, allowing myself the comfort and solace found in Ewan's warm embrace.

"Have I pushed ye too far?"

"What? No." I pulled away, disentangling myself from his strong arms. He looked empty without me beside him, and I turned and sat on the narrow edge of the fountain.

Ewan sat beside me, and I was grateful for the space. Touching the man was dangerous and clouded my reasoning.

"My mother has seen fit to give her affection to another man."

Ewan lifted his eyebrows, and I hurried to explain. "She is considering marrying again, and it hurts me. It feels much too soon. Daniel walked in on our conversation about the matter, and he was furious. It is all too much."

Ewan drew in a breath. "Is it the earl?"

"How did you know?"

"Because of the way he attends to her. I had wondered . . . but I didna ken for certain."

"You are far more perceptive than I." I closed my eyes and lowered my head. "That is untrue. I noticed little things here and there, but I did not want to believe what I was seeing."

"It is far easier to ignore the truth than face it sometimes." He took my hand, peering at me with compassion. "But face it, ye must."

"So says the man who has been attempting to convince me to renege on my marriage contract."

"That is different," he said, sitting up. "That is a matter of the heart."

"It is also a matter of *money*, and if I fail to marry Lord Hammel, the earl will not have the money he needs to revive his estates. To say nothing of the contract I would break. They would sue for breach of contract, and I fear the repercussions that could have on Daniel and Arden Castle. And think of all the people who will benefit from my dowry, Ewan. Think of everyone who is counting on it, who has counted on it for this last year."

"But if yer mother marries the earl, willna she bring sufficient money to the marriage?"

"No, she does not have it. She never had much, and what is left is not sufficient for this. Daniel would have to gift a large sum to Lord Moorington, and after his reaction earlier, I can promise that he would never agree to such a thing."

Ewan's jaw worked, and his eyes flicked about as if he was working through the problem. "If I could find a way to convince Daniel to give yer mother the money, then she would be free—"

"You forget one thing, Ewan," I said quietly. "I don't wish for my mother to marry anyone. I cannot justify any of this, not when it so quickly erases my father's existence from our lives. How can she even contemplate such a thing? It is disloyal to his memory."

"So ye prefer yer mother to be alone and loyal, perhaps lonely in this castle once ye've gone off and married and left her here, than to find comfort and solace in another's companionship?"

Truth barbed me with each word, the accusations cutting and raw. I couldn't admit to what Ewan asked without sounding the worst sort of person.

I stood abruptly. "Of course I do not wish for her to be lonely. I would love to have my father returned to her if it were at all possible."

"It isna possible, lass." Ewan approached me like I was a wild doe, his hand outstretched and cautious until it made contact with my shoulder. "All I ask is for ye to consider yer mother's position. And consider mine."

His position? "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, lowering his voice and bringing his other hand to rest on my other shoulder. "If ye can find a way to support yer mother's marriage to the earl, then ye might be free to wed whomever ye choose."

Ewan's dark brown eyes implored me. Was he proposing? No, not really, but close. The idea that marrying him could be possible was so tantalizing, my breath suspended in my chest.

His hand lifted, and he brushed a thumb over my cheek. "Ye have a choice, lass. It isna wrong to feel sad. Change is always difficult. But ye have the choice to remain angry or to do yer best to be understanding. Ye can choose compassion, and ye can choose *me*."

I could choose Ewan.

I *wanted* to choose Ewan. But did I want that more than I needed to respect the memory of my father? Or enough to fight Daniel to make it possible for my mother to marry Lord Moorington?

I must have been quiet for too long. Ewan's eyebrows drew together, his chocolate eyes searching mine.

His question shifted, uncertainty clouding his words. "*Do* ye wish to choose—"

Yes. A thousand times yes.

I clutched his cravat and pulled him down until his lips reached mine. If there was anything I was certain of in this world, it was how unequivocally I loved Ewan Lennox. I had waited years for this moment, and the feeling of his lips pressed against mine started a fire in my chest that raged hot and filled me with joy.

He took my answer and reciprocated, cupping my face delicately in his hands and kissing me with a fervor that spoke of the depth of his feelings. When he leaned back, he would not remove his eyes from mine.

My chest heaved, and I could not deny the love pouring from his gaze. "Why now, Ewan? After all these years—"

"I've always loved ye, lass. I've been too afraid to show ye."

"Because I am such a formidable woman?"

“Far from it.” He grinned, then steadied his expression, his eyes serious. “I feared ye wouldna feel the same way, and I would lose ye forever.”

“At the last house party then, when I thought you were going to kiss me?”

“I nearly did, but the possibility that ye wouldna return my feelings, that a kiss had the potential to repulse ye and forever ruin our friendship, made me hesitate. I didna want *just* a kiss, lass. I wanted a wife, but I didna want to lose my friend.” He slid a hand around my waist and pulled me tightly against him, his thumb running over my bottom lip. “But then we left, and we received word of yer father’s death only a few months later, and the year since has been misery. I missed ye, and I vowed to myself that I would tell ye how I felt, regardless of how it frightened me.”

“And then you arrived here to find out that I intended to engage myself to Lord Hammel.”

“Blast Lord Hammel,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “I dinna wish to hear the eejit’s name again.”

I chuckled. “Surely you are not intimidated by him.”

“Intimidated by a man who cannot see the most beautiful woman because he is distracted by exposed beams and sixteenth century carvings?” Ewan chuckled. “Hardly.”

“Good,” I whispered. “Because he has never been in danger of surpassing you in my esteem.”

“Then ye’ve done it? Ye’ve made a choice?”

Had I? It was true that Ewan was who I wanted to spend the rest of my days with, who I wanted to marry and raise children with, but I could not dishonor my father’s contract and negotiations, nor could I besmirch the Palmer name in such a way.

“Honor is important to me,” I said quietly. Ewan’s arms around me tightened as though he was not prepared to let me go. “I will speak to Daniel, and I will speak to my mother, but I cannot make any promises, Ewan. I do not yet know if it will serve.”

“But if ye *choose* me, then can we not find a way to make it work? Ye deserve to marry a man who loves ye fiercely. A man who will kiss ye properly, and care for ye the way ye deserve.”

Indeed, I wanted to marry someone who would kiss me properly, filled with love and mutual affection, and not merely out of obligation. But we did not always receive what we wanted. It was a cruel twist of fate that I had just been properly kissed, that I knew exactly what I would be missing if things

did not work out the way I wished.

“I will try, but that is all I can promise. I want to choose you, but I cannot, in doing so, leave my mother, brother, and my father’s promises in the ditch. They are all important to me as well.”

He smiled sadly down at me. “This is more than I had yesterday. I will help you in whatever way I can.”

“Truly?”

He nodded.

I stepped from his embrace and took his hand, pulling him toward the maze exit to make our way back to the house. “You can start by telling me exactly how you planned to convince Daniel to approve of my mother’s new marriage.”

CHAPTER 10

Daniel was missing from dinner that evening. I planned to go up to his room following the meal to find out if he was ready to talk about what was happening in our family, but it turned out to be unnecessary.

Mama led the procession of women toward the drawing room when dinner ended, and we passed Daniel standing in the corridor, stone faced and languidly leaning against the wall. Mama did not stop to speak to him, likely hoping to avoid making a scene. Her hostess duties were important to her, and currently she needed to entertain the women.

But I had no such concerns. I slowed my step, falling behind the mothers and Felicity, and slowly approached Daniel as the rest of the women slipped into the drawing room. Felicity glanced at me over her shoulder with a questioning gaze, but she must have sensed my need for privacy and closed the drawing room door behind herself.

Daniel pushed away from the wall as I approached.

“You missed dinner.”

He walked past me. “I ate in my room.”

Where was he going? His hands sat lazily in his pockets and his gait was steady and uncaring.

“Daniel?”

He did not stop.

“We must speak about this,” I said.

His posture hardened. He paused just before he reached the door to the dining room, and I feared what he intended to do. Why had he waited in the corridor for the women to leave in order to join the guests? Was he attempting to catch the earl alone? Or to embarrass the man before the other

men who were now gathered, sipping their after-dinner port?

“We needn’t speak about anything,” Daniel said quietly. “Father left me in charge of the family, and it is my duty alone to manage it.”

“Oh, Daniel,” I said softly, shaking my head. “I am saddened and angered by this as well. Why can you not see that we are allies? You needn’t push me away, too.”

He waited, seeming to hesitate, and I jumped on the small progress I’d made. “Can we not sit with Mama and *try* to understand—”

“You are *not* my ally,” he said darkly. “You cannot be if you would even entertain the idea of her remarrying so soon.”

I searched for patience. “I am only suggesting that we listen to Mama and allow her to explain before we jump to conclusions. I am merely proposing that we extend a little grace.”

“No. You are being weak.” He strode toward the dining room and slipped inside before I could say anything further.

My teeth clenched, my jaw aching from the effort to contain the scream bubbling in my chest. I felt ripped in two, my heart understanding Daniel’s opinions and my brain fighting for logic and sense.

Ewan’s pleading words could not be forgotten, either. Did Mama not also deserve companionship? If I was to marry Lord Hammel as planned, I would leave her here alone. She already mentioned that she would not be following me about England in her dotage but intended to live her own life after my marriage. And I did understand that I could not supply the companionship equal to that of a husband.

Though that logic did not make the reality of Mama looking to Lord Moorington in a romantic light hurt any less.

Daniel’s anger was justified, but not his inability to control it. Hearty male laughter floated from the dining room, and I wished to know what they were speaking of and if Daniel had said or done something to embarrass Mama or the earl. But I could not be found eavesdropping. That would likely embarrass Mama just as deeply.

I let myself into the drawing room and sat on the sofa beside Felicity. Mama sat on a chair near the fire, flanked by Aunt Thurston and Mrs. Lennox. Surely, she felt supported in the companionship of her sister and dearest friend, but again, I could not deny how vastly that type of support differed from that of a husband.

I loved and appreciated Felicity’s friendship and companionship, but her

presence did not buoy me in the way Ewan's did. She did not make me feel complete and comforted and whole, nor did she hold my heart in the palm of her hand.

Did Lord Moorington do those things for Mama?

The drawing room door opened, and the men filed into the room. Daniel was decidedly absent, and Ewan's face upon catching my gaze held a severity that gave me pause. Oh, dear. What had Daniel done?

The men approached the chairs near the fire and spread about, sitting beside their wives or standing near the hearth. Lord Hammel surprised me greatly by taking the seat beside me on the sofa, and Ewan's stone expression gave away none of his reaction to this.

"I was hoping"—Lord Hammel coughed, clearing his throat—"that we might take a walk outside? Perhaps just about the garden for a moment."

I tried to temper my surprise. Could he not see what sort of distress I was under? My mother wanted to marry his father.

Or perhaps that was exactly what he wanted to speak about.

"Certainly," I said.

Lord Hammel stood. He offered me his hand, and I tucked my fingers around his, allowing him to help me rise. He sent his father a pregnant look that tightened the knot twisting in my stomach.

I should have avoided Ewan's gaze, but we walked directly past him. His deep brown eyes swept over my hand resting on Lord Hammel's arm and shot back up to my eyes, holding them steadily. He did not look angry or even hurt, though I knew he could not be pleased.

Perhaps he expected me to tell Lord Hammel that our agreement was off.

It was a risky action when I'd not yet come up with a solution to his financial difficulties.

The sun had stolen every bit of warmth from the air when it left the sky, and the starlit night was cool and shadowed. Light from the windows spilled out onto the lawn, and we remained on the walking path, so we might be seen by anyone who chanced a look outside.

It was as private as we could hope while remaining proper, though I knew we were afforded some solitary time as we were meant to become engaged.

"I trust you have discerned the great difficulty I have in conversing with others who are not well known to me," Lord Hammel said softly.

On the contrary, that was not something I'd come to understand. I had wondered if Lord Hammel was shy or if he simply did not care to be around

others. I'd wondered, on occasion, if he resented me and my money—though, he certainly loved my home. When faced with this statement, I could not decide what to say.

I was saved from answering when he continued. "It is a weakness I have fought to overcome, but alas, I am much more at ease when in my own home, or when given ample time to grow comfortable in another's presence." He drew in a heavy breath and ceased walking. Lord Hammel turned his startling blue eyes on me. "Suffice it to say, once we are married, I do promise to make an effort to build a relationship of understanding and companionship. I do not wish for ours to be a lonely marriage."

The knots in my stomach cinched, robbing me of breath and the ability to respond immediately. *I do not wish for ours to be a lonely marriage*. So, Lord Hammel did wish to speak on the discomfort between us, but only to pledge his determination to give more effort. The kiss I shared with Ewan in the hedge maze earlier shot into my mind, and I felt as though I'd betrayed Lord Hammel.

Though this conversation felt like a betrayal to Ewan and to the promise I'd made to choose him if I could.

I swallowed against a scratchy throat, my body tight as though I was being pulled in contrasting directions. "Forgive me. I did not realize . . . I did not know . . ." I stumbled over my words, unsure how to proceed. I was *never* flustered in this way. I'd made a study of guarding my emotions and presently none of it was working. "I certainly do not know how to speak my mind without causing offense."

"Please speak plainly. If there is anything I despise, it is being forced to decipher a woman's meaning behind politeness."

"Then, if I may be so bold . . . I did not realize we were still intended for one another. I mistook your distance for disinterest, I suppose, and it caused me to question our arrangement. Then today I learned of the understanding between our parents."

Lord Hammel nodded slowly and the last ounce of potential that he could be ignorant to the feelings between my mother and his father fled.

"Do you not take issue with it, my lord?" I asked.

"It is not illegal for a father and a son to marry a woman and her daughter. If our parents are to marry, it would not invalidate our marriage, if that is what concerns you."

That was not what concerned me. "Perhaps not, but it is odd,

nonetheless.”

Besides, their marriage would make ours unnecessary, would it not? So long as Daniel agreed to offer the necessary funds. I wanted to ask Lord Hammel if he was not merely marrying me for money, but even a conversation void of artifice could not stoop so low as that. He would surely deem me vulgar and coarse if I spoke of money so plainly.

I tried a different approach. “Do you not find their liaison a little abrupt?”

Lord Hammel’s eyes widened in surprise. “That of my father and your mother? No. I believe they’ve been writing to one another for months.”

“Months.”

“Indeed.” He seemed to consider the dark sky for a moment before directing his attention back to me. “Did you not know of it before now?”

“No. It is entirely news to me.”

“Ah, that does explain—”

I waited for him to continue, but he fiddled with his cravat instead, his nervous fingers dancing around the frothy fabric at his throat.

“What does it explain?”

Lord Hammel shifted his eyes away. “Your brother does not seem well pleased by the arrangement. He joined us this evening for port, but merely sat at the table and glared at my father. I had no inkling why. But now . . .”

“Now you see that he was being childish and throwing a tantrum.”

Lord Hammel had the grace not to reply to my churlish remark. I swallowed my frustration. It was best saved for Daniel, anyway. I glanced to the house and through the windows into the drawing room. Ewan stood by the hearth and faced us. I could not see clearly through the wavy glass panes, but I imagined he was watching me. I slid my hand over Lord Hammel’s arm and tugged him. “Can we walk?”

“Of course.”

We drew away from the drawing room and followed the long path on the lawn. “I will not pretend to be happy about *this situation*. It came as a shock to me this morning, and I am still doing my best to wrap my head around it. My father was very dear to me, you understand.”

“Indeed.”

“In reference to our own . . . understanding . . . I did wonder if it would not be expected to remain intact if our parents were to make a union.”

“This is deuced uncomfortable,” he said.

“Yes, it is.”

“Miss Palmer, do you not wish to marry me?”

How the devil was I meant to answer *that*? I certainly could not offer the truth, that I was in love with another man. What man would wish to hear such a thing?

Lord Hammel stopped and faced me. “You needn’t risk offending me. I asked you to speak plainly.”

“It is not that I do not wish to marry you, *per se*.” It was that I wished to marry someone else.

“No? Then what, may I ask, is it?”

I glanced back to Arden Castle’s stone facade, to where Ewan stood somewhere within its thick walls. “I only wondered if the terms of our engagement could be realized through our parents’ union, and if so, then what that meant for us. Surely you are not eager to marry me?”

I did not speak the remainder of my thought: that the man had hardly shown me an ounce of interest prior to this uncomfortable conversation, shyness aside.

“Eager? Well, that would be difficult to accomplish, for I hardly know you. But of course I wish for our union to proceed as expected.”

He did? “Why?” I asked, before I could control my tongue.

“Well,” he said, a slight shrug to his shoulders. He glanced away and chuckled uncomfortably. “If I am not to marry you, then who would I marry?”

CHAPTER II

There was nothing so lowering as being told that a man intended to marry me simply because he had no other options, and it was with great fortitude that I concluded the conversation with Lord Hammel and returned to the house with a pleasant smile plastered to my face. Turmoil raged within me, however, and I quickly excused myself to retire early.

Mama looked at me with concern, and I shook my head subtly, hoping she would understand that nothing terribly bothered me. "I am tired."

"Of course you are," she said softly. "You had quite the adventurous day."

If only she knew the half of it.

I slipped quietly from the drawing room and around the corner where the circular stairwell sat. I turned onto the carpeted steps and pulled up short. Ewan stood there, waiting.

"You frightened the life from me." I stepped past him and proceeded to climb the stairs. We would not wish to be caught speaking alone in such a confined space.

He fell in step behind me. "I hoped to speak to ye."

"What about?"

Ewan took my hand and tugged me to a stop. He paused a few steps below me, bringing our faces level, his dark eyes fixed on me. "Dinna play games with me, lass," he growled playfully, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. His voice made my stomach flip in a purely pleasant way.

"Forgive me," I whispered, afraid of being overheard. "I don't wish to be discovered alone, and I am tired. If you'll recall, I did not sleep well last night."

“The shutters?”

And the man who came to help me close them, whose soft smile kept me lying awake and imagining a life with him. I blinked the memory away.

“Indeed, the shutters. It was rather difficult to fall asleep after that.”

“For me, as well.” He squeezed my fingers. “Lord Hammel?”

“He does not wish to sever our arrangement.”

Ewan’s body tightened as though he tensed all over. “And?”

“And I do not know what to do. I thought it would be easy to dispel with that proposal, but it seems the man would like to avoid courting. I am a better option to him than starting over.”

“Blast.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Ewan glanced at me. “What will ye do?”

“Speak to my mother. To his father? I do not know.”

Ewan looked away. “It will be more difficult to convince Daniel to supply money for yer mother’s marriage than I expected. He hasna taken any care in hiding his displeasure from the earl. He is bordering on rude.”

“I believe he surpassed rude long ago.”

Ewan’s mouth ticked up in a half smile. “I want to marry ye, lass.”

My heart pulsed, my skin skittering with warmth from his sweet-dripping words. “I want to marry you, too.”

His hand slid up my arm and around my waist. He pulled me tightly against him and I rested my hand on his heart, feeling the increasing pulse. I leaned against Ewan’s strong chest. We breathed in time, our chests rising and falling in rhythm while he held me.

“Want me to speak with the lad?” he asked.

“*The lad* is near your age, Ewan.”

“Well?”

“No.” I breathed in deeply and let it out slowly. “This is something I need to take care of.”

Ewan leaned down, and I thought he was going to kiss me. His lips hovered near mine, so close I could feel his breath’s caress. He lifted his chin and pressed a kiss to my cheek before releasing me and stepping back. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” I said. “I’m not yet engaged.”

“If I have it my way, ye willna be engaged to anyone but me.”

I nodded at him. “You go on up ahead of me. It won’t do to be seen

coming out of the stairwell together.”

He nodded and left, and I leaned my back against the stone wall, looking through the window at the darkness and waiting for his footsteps to recede. What was I going to do?

“What in heaven’s name is happening here?” a small, feminine voice asked, causing me to jump from my skin.

Felicity stepped from around the corner, coming up to rest beside me, her blue eyes wide.

Oh, drat. “How much did you hear?”

“Quite enough,” she said, a smile playing on her lips. “That was Mr. Lennox, yes?”

“Ewan? Yes.”

She paused a beat, her gaze following the steps up into the darkness. “But you are meant to engage yourself to—”

“I know,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her up the steps with me. “Come. If we must discuss this, let us remove ourselves from the stairwell. Who knows who else might catch us.”

Felicity followed, her grin unabashed as I led her toward my bedchamber. We snuck inside, and she sat on the edge of my bed as I paced the room.

“How long has this been going on between you?”

“It hasn’t.”

“So . . . that wasn’t a kiss that I over—”

“Shhh,” I said, turning abruptly to face her. “We could be overheard.”

She ticked up a honey-colored brow. “You were far less worried about that in the stairwell.”

“Yes, well, now I know I should have been.” I stood before her with my hands on my hips.

“Do you love him?” Felicity asked softly.

I hesitated only briefly, reluctant to admit so aloud. “Yes.”

“Then what do you plan to do about Lord Hammel?”

“I’ve yet to figure that out.”

“Well,” Felicity said, rising and taking me by the hand. “Let me know what I can do to assist you.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

She pulled me in for a hug. “Whatever you need, I’m here.”

I spent most of the night lying awake in my bed and running my mind over possible solutions. By the time I awoke the next morning, I'd slept late and missed breakfast completely.

Laura stood at the foot of my bed laying out my scarlet riding habit as mid-morning sunlight slanted through the window and brightened my room.

"Is there a ride scheduled today?"

She looked up. "I took the liberty of preparing the habit because . . . well, look." Laura brought the tray of tea and rolls closer and indicated the folded paper beside it.

I picked up the sheet and read.

The ground has sufficiently dried. Meet me for a ride? I'll await you in the stables.

Yours, E.

I sent my maid a frown. "You read the note?"

"No. But Mr. Lennox hinted that I ought to prepare your habit when he passed the paper to me."

"What cheek."

Laura grinned and helped me from the bed. I dressed quickly and sipped my tea while Laura put my hair up. The scarlet habit, trimmed in black cord and military lapels, looked rather fetching against my raven-colored hair. Laura secured the matching hat over my hair and I bent to fasten my riding boots.

Yours, Ewan. I liked the sound of that. I needed to make certain it became a reality. Once my toilette was complete, I smoothed my hands down my waist and prayed for strength. I needed to find my brother.

A quick search in his bedchamber turned up fruitless. I located Worthlin downstairs and inquired, but he was unaware of Daniel's whereabouts. "Have you looked in the study, miss?"

No, I hadn't thought to. That was my father's domain, and aside from the conversation with my mother the other day, I had not seen anyone go in there except to clean it.

"Thank you, Worthlin, I will look there."

If the butler suggested it, that meant Daniel had been going in the study on occasion. I was unsure why that surprised me, except that Daniel seemed to be taking Father's loss especially hard. I would have assumed that might

make it more difficult for him to be in Father's space. Though, when he'd walked in on my conversation with Mama the other day, it had been in the study. Our voices had been low, and not easily overheard from the corridor. He must have been going in there already when he discovered us.

I opened the heavy oak door and paused, surveying Daniel seated on Father's chair behind the desk, his fingers steepled and chin resting upon them. He sat up and looked to me.

"May I come in?"

Daniel nodded, and I closed the door behind me.

"Forgive me for being such an ogre," Daniel said quietly. His body exuded exhaustion. "I have admittedly been drinking more than I ought."

His quiet apology infused me with hope. I sat opposite him, pulling the long skirt of my habit away from pooling at my feet. "For Mama's sake, I do hope you take greater care in the future."

Daniel scoffed.

So perhaps he was not quite as repentant as I believed. I needed to tread carefully. "Have you spoken to Mama?"

"I have nothing to say to her," he said.

"Not even an apology?"

Daniel looked away. Ah, so he had a conscience still.

I leaned forward, tempering my voice. "We do not have to agree with our mother's choices, but we do still need to respect her. Do you think this is easy for her, either?"

Still he did not speak.

"I am going out for a ride with Ewan. Would you care to join us?"

Daniel sighed. "I suppose so."

"And will you please refrain from glaring at the earl in future?"

"I cannot promise that, but I will try to reserve my frustrations for when he is not nearby."

I rose, gratified by the small progress we'd made. "He is not a villain, you know."

Daniel came around the desk, his hands loosely clasped behind him. "Indeed. Mother is."

I nudged his shoulder with mine. "You know that is untrue." I took hold of his forearm and waited until he met my eyes. "I am unhappy about this as well, but I am making an effort to understand. I cannot imagine the pain Mama felt losing Father, and I cannot imagine the loneliness she now faces.

If she has found someone to offer her comfort in the future, who are we to begrudge her that?"

"We are her children. We are the son and daughter of the man she will erase from this world when she replaces him with a blasted earl." Daniel's low, dangerous tone scraped over me like nails on a rock. "I can be civil, but I do not support her in this."

He brushed past me, and I deflated. "Do you still plan to ride with me?"

"Yes," he said, not turning back.

"I will meet you in the stables," I called to his back.

Lord Hammel stepped from the breakfast room and looked between Daniel and me. I sent him my best smile. "Would you care to come riding, Lord Hammel?" I recalled what he'd mentioned during our first dinner about his ability to ride, but not an affinity for it. Perhaps he would say no.

"I would be glad to accompany you," he said gallantly.

"Wonderful." I clapped my gloved hands together. "I shall await you in the stables, as well."

He bowed lightly and turned for the stairs. A ride with my churlish brother, my hopeful intended, and the love of my life. This ought to be interesting.

CHAPTER 12

Ewan turned a radiant smile on me when I stepped into the dim stables, and I held my skirts up from the mucky ground while I crossed to him.

“Do not be angry, but I’ve invited others to join us.”

His eyebrow ticked up. “Your cousin?”

“No, Felicity is not fond of riding. I invited Daniel—”

“How kind of ye.”

“—and Lord Hammel.”

His nose wrinkled slightly. “How . . . exceedingly kind of ye.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Be polite. He isn’t fond of riding, either.”

“And yet, ye invited *him*.”

“He overheard me speaking of the ride to Daniel. How could I not?”

“It rather sounds like Lord Hammel and yer cousin would make a better match.”

I stilled. “You are correct. They are both quiet, prefer the company of books to people, and barely tolerate riding.” Mr. Bradwell from the hunting lodge came to mind, and I dispelled the notion of pawning Felicity off on Lord Hammel at once. Ewan’s face had taken on a thoughtful quality, as well, and I shot him a wry smile. “It wouldn’t work. Felicity has another man in mind.”

“Deuce take it.”

“Language,” I admonished.

He stepped closer, bending his head to see into my eyes. He lowered his voice. “I had hoped this outing would only be the two of us.”

“I am doing my best to work Daniel over to Mama’s side,” I explained. We stood so close that I could feel Ewan’s greatcoat brush against me with

each inhale. It was difficult to focus in such proximity. I swallowed. “He is much better today, but still nowhere near agreeing to our scheme.”

Ewan nodded. Male voices drew our attention, and I stepped back quickly, but not before Daniel and Lord Hammel came around the corner and saw us talking. Drat my lack of control. I should have made certain there was more space between us. How foolish of me.

Ewan turned a wide smile toward the doorway and moved to greet the men while I spoke to a groom about which horse would best suit Lord Hammel. My attention was engaged in a task, but I could feel the way Lord Hammel watched me. A quarter-hour later, we were all seated in our saddles and riding over the hill away from Arden Castle.

“Does yer estate boast good grounds for riding?” Ewan asked.

Lord Hammel looked flustered, his focus torn between his horse and Ewan. “I’m certain they do, though it is not something I personally partake in.” He looked at me. “You enjoy riding very much, Miss Palmer?”

“I do,” I said.

Ewan had always been horse-mad, and a little of that had rubbed off on me. I looked at him now to find him scowling.

Daniel pulled a little ahead. “Race to the old Miller barn?”

“Only if ye fancy to lose,” Ewan said.

Daniel grinned, and they were off.

Lord Hammel looked a bit taken aback, and I resisted the temptation to gallop behind the others. I did not wish to leave him alone. “Come, I will show you where the Miller barn is so you might participate in the race next time,” I said, feigning a belief that his ignorance was why the activity had not interested him. He likely was uninterested in racing at all.

“Oh, thank you.”

I kicked into a trot, and Lord Hammel followed closely.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Have you known Mr. Lennox long?”

I’d hoped that the relative ease we’d found ourselves in on this ride somehow indicated that Lord Hammel had *not* seen the moment I’d shared earlier with Ewan in the stables. Apparently, I’d only been fooling myself. “Indeed, I’ve known him my entire life.”

He looked thoughtful. “And he is from Scotland?”

“Yes. Mrs. Lennox is my mother’s dearest friend. We have had the fortune of seeing the Lennoxes once or twice a year for the duration of my life. They do come here more often than we go to Scotland, though.”

“And do you . . . do you enjoy it there? In Scotland?”

I could not understand why he was asking these things. Why did he not come out with his concern in a plain manner? “I do. I quite love their little estate. It is tucked into Ayrshire and the autumn colors are a thing to behold. The Lennoxes raise furry cows unlike we have here and visiting them is like stepping into another world.”

“Hmm.” He gave a noncommittal sound.

Had I been too bold? Too honest? I could have tried to hide the depth of my relationship with Ewan, but perhaps we were past that now. In fact, perhaps my attempts at separating and hiding my feelings were dragging out this situation when they could be more helpfully bringing it to a speedy end.

Lord Hammel had mentioned that he wanted to marry me because he had no one else. Would he still want to if he knew that I did have someone else?

I slowed my horse to a walk, and Lord Hammel followed suit.

“Thank you for slowing,” he said with feeling.

“Of course.”

We continued on in silence. I knew what I wanted to say, but not best how to say it.

Lord Hammel pulled his horse to a halt, and I had to circle back. “Are you feeling well?” I asked.

“I do not believe I am entirely feeling well, no.” He looked past me, into the rolling hills that varied in shades of green, partitioned by low, dry stone walls. “Is there an understanding between yourself and Mr. Lennox?”

Was there? I didn’t believe so, no. I told Ewan I wanted to choose him, that I would try to choose him, but I had not promised myself to him. I did not have that luxury until things between Lord Hammel and myself were finished.

I had taken too long to answer. Lord Hammel looked away. “I thought so.”

“No, there is no formal understanding. I have been completely honorable toward you, Lord Hammel, I swear it.”

“But you would *like* for there to be, would you not? Something between you and the Scot.”

I could not lie, but neither could I so blatantly admit my feelings to this man.

“Why did you not tell me so before?” he asked.

“What good would that have served, besides making things incredibly

uncomfortable between us? You wish for a wife. I have agreed to fill that need.”

He scoffed lightly. “I wish for a wife who would like to marry *me*, Miss Palmer. Not a woman who is fulfilling an obligation while in love with another man. It was different when we were both holding up our end of a deal as willing participants.”

I was lost for words. My horse stomped restlessly beneath me, and I redirected her back to face Lord Hammel. “I have been the picture of decorum, Lord Hammel. I have not allowed my feelings to get in the way of our arrangement, and I would not have allowed them to in any way affect our . . . marriage.”

“I believe you,” he said. He glanced away, and I held my breath. My fate was in his hands, and I desperately wished for him to speak his mind. “The trouble is, we need you. My estate needs you.”

By which he meant: they needed my money. But he did not appear as though he wanted *me* anymore.

I took a risk and spoke my mind. “Would you still need me if my mother was to marry your father under the same conditions?”

Lord Hammel’s eyebrows rose. “Would those conditions include your dowry?”

My dowry. How had I not considered this before? I needn’t get Daniel’s approval if I gave Mama my dowry. But would my mother agree to it?

“I cannot promise it, for I’m unsure if it’s within my power to give. But if I was to manage it—”

“Then you would no longer need to marry me.” Lord Hammel gave me a sad smile. He was likely more sorrowed by the prospect of needing to find another wife than he was of losing me. “I will release you from your obligation, Miss Palmer.”

Dear, sweet hope lifted my chest.

“So long as you can provide the funds that were promised to us by your father.”

Oh. My hope deflated swiftly. Surely Mama would never accept my dowry, and Daniel would never provide her with money of her own.

Daniel and Ewan appeared over the rise, and I shot Lord Hammel a smile. “I will speak to my mother.”

“And I will speak to my father.” He looked perfectly at ease, and I decided that I did not like his mercenary quality. Though, a man more

interested in buildings than people would take a no-nonsense approach to matters of marriage and contracts.

“And then we shall reconvene,” I said.

I could not help but be grateful to the man. He had nearly released me from my obligations, and I was close enough now to freedom that I could hope for a future with Ewan. So long as Ewan could do without my dowry. I could only hope he would remain content with the income he received from his horses.

The men brought their horses closer, and I held Ewan’s gaze, unable to dampen my smile.

CHAPTER 13

“Absolutely not.”

“But Mama—”

“No,” she said, her mouth pinched. “You are not to sacrifice your dowry so that I might marry the earl. It is absurd. I will not allow it.”

I followed her from her dressing table to the wardrobe. “But Mama—”

“There is absolutely nothing you could say that would convince me to change my mind.” She picked up two diamond earrings and put them on.

“But Mama—”

She shook her head, her ear bobs trembling in the movement. “I will not —”

“I am doing it for *me*.”

She turned toward me, her dark eyebrows pulling together. “What do you mean?”

I took her hands in both of mine, my silk gloves soft over hers. “Lord Hammel has released me from our agreement on the grounds that you marry his father under the same terms.”

“Yes, I understood that. He still wants the money.”

“Yes, the money. He doesn’t want me, not *really*. And if you wish to marry Lord Moorington anyway, you could free me from needing to marry Lord Hammel.”

Mama’s face softened. “But . . . do you not wish to become a countess?”

“No.”

My mother looked as though I’d taken her ewer of water from the washstand and splashed its contents in her face. “You have been planning on becoming a countess for the last year.”

“No,” I said, gentling my tone. “You have been planning that for me. I only agreed to make you happy and to fulfill the obligations Father set forth. I am in love with someone else.”

“Good gracious. With whom?”

“Ewan.” I inhaled a ragged breath. “It cannot be a surprise.”

She tugged me toward the edge of her bed and lowered herself on the mattress, pulling me down beside her. “I had suspected a small attachment on your part when you were younger, but nothing came of it. I thought you desired to become a *countess*. You and Ewan played those games so often in your youth. Do you recall those months when you required your father and I to call you Lady Jane? It was in preparation for your future, you said.”

“I was six, Mama.”

“Seven, I believe, but yes, you were young.”

So young, and I’d grown since then. I had wished for a title when I was little, but what little girl did not dream of growing up and becoming a princess or a countess? Mama had failed to see that I outgrew those childish hopes long ago. “And now I have the chance to marry the man I love.”

“Love. Oh, Jane.” Mama leaned forward and pulled me into a hug. “Why did you not tell me before now?”

“And break my commitment? I could not break the contract. I had little choice but to see it through. But now, with you marrying the earl—”

“Actually, that is not necessarily an option any longer.”

“Mama, what happened? Did Lord Moorington not already ask for your hand?”

“He did, but I’ve yet to answer him.” She watched me through shrewd eyes. “I love your father, Jane. I always will.”

“I understand, and I realize I was not as supportive as I ought to have been, but Ewan helped me to see past my own selfish behavior. I do not like it, necessarily, but I understand.”

“But Daniel does not. I could not do something that would so greatly lower myself in his esteem. He has struggled so deeply this last year, and I believe my marriage would throw him over the edge.”

“Oh, deuce take it, Mother.”

“Jane!” Mama scolded, horrified. “Language!”

“Someone ought to say it. Your happiness is important, too. Daniel will come around eventually.”

She smiled sadly. “I care about him too much to wait for *eventually*.”

Besides, it is not an easy thing to change the dowry. It would be a lengthy legal proceeding that would take a good deal of time.”

Disappointment lodged in my chest. “Is it impossible?”

“No, not impossible, but I’m not certain it would be worth the effort.” She smiled wanly. “Though it is irrelevant, for I will not be marrying Lord Moorington.”

“But if you do not accept the earl, then I cannot marry the man I love,” I whispered, defeat edging its way into my tone.

“We will find a way, Jane.”

I pulled my hand from her grip and sighed. “We ought to be downstairs already.”

She looked to the clock on the mantle and nodded. “Indeed. They will all wonder where we are.” Mama stood and helped me up. She looked me in the eye. “I hope we can find a way for you to be with the man you love.”

Dinner was a quiet affair, the room subdued. The clinking of silverware against porcelain plates broke the discomfiting silence. I set my fork down, restless and unable to eat another bite. Ewan sat across from me beside his mother, and I found my gaze drawn to him repeatedly.

He was so close, the ability to marry him within my grasp like a hovering fruit in a branch just out of reach, but I had not yet been able to hold it tightly, and it was wearing on me.

Falling in love had been effortless. Why could matters of marriage not be as simple?

“Have you practiced for the archery tournament?” Lord Moorington asked, making my hands clench beneath the table in surprise. He’d yet to say a word to me all night, and I had assumed he intended for things to remain as such.

I reached for my goblet and took a sip to regain my composure before turning my smile on him. His eyes were kind, his attention riveted on me. What I had mistakenly taken for interest from the earl a few days prior had truly been a genuine desire to know me better. But not in the way I thought. No, the earl was only trying to better know the daughter of the woman he loved.

He *did* love Mama, did he not?

He blinked at me, and I pulled myself back from the line of thought I'd traveled.

"I have not practiced lately, no," I said. "But I do not pretend to believe I have a chance at winning. Daniel has always excelled at archery."

"Has he? Interesting." Lord Moorington chewed a bite of his game hen. "I do not know him well."

No one else at the table seemed to be paying us any mind, but I lowered my voice regardless. "I can imagine how that makes things difficult between my mother and yourself."

Lord Moorington's fork suspended mid-air. He set it down and cleared his throat, bringing his napkin up to dab his lips. "I can see that you will not mince words, so I will refrain from doing so as well."

I nodded in acquiescence. Mama sat at the head of the table between Mr. and Mrs. Lennox and watched us, but we were at the opposite end tonight and far enough away not to be overheard. So long as the earl kept his voice low, I did not believe Aunt Thurston would hear us on his other side as well.

"I did not expect to fall in love with your mother. When she wrote the letter to me detailing your father's death and asking how I would like to proceed with the arrangements we'd made for you and my son, I felt only sympathy for her loss—it was a loss I keenly remembered, the death of a beloved spouse."

I believed him. I recalled his explanation from our conversation in the drawing room days ago, when I'd foolishly believed the earl was staking his interest in me. He had merely been preparing me for the eventuality that he would propose to Mama.

"I wrote a letter to your mother offering my support and condolences, and she wrote back asking again what I would like to do in regard to the marriage agreement. I had been so wrapped up in my sympathy that I had failed to remark upon it in my first note. That was the beginning of an easy discussion between us, and the beginning of my feelings developing. I never believed I would find another woman. Why would I need to remarry? I had the love of my life once, and I have been content in my role since."

"Why, then?"

Lord Moorington's eyes shone, and his cheeks rounded above his soft smile. "Because I fell for your mother, my dear. She was not easy to convince. Indeed, I do not pretend that I have yet convinced her to agree to

become my wife. I do not believe she is as smitten with me as I am with her. But I do believe she values my opinions and conversation, and I should like to be her companion for the rest of our days.”

How could I not swoon at the romance in that pronouncement? I looked down the table where Daniel sat on the other side of Mrs. Lennox and found him watching us intently. His gaze was riveted by the earl, and he lacked the glare he had so often worn over the last few days.

Conversation buzzed low around us, but still Daniel stared. Had he heard the earl?

“I admit that I was not in favor of the union when first I learned of it,” I said, hoping Daniel could hear me as well. “But I know my mother thrives with companionship, and I fear she will be very lonely when I marry and leave her. Daniel is not often in residence, and we are quite out of the way here in Arden.”

Lord Moorington took another bite of his game hen, nodding. “I appreciate the grace you’ve extended her. It was not easy for your mother to face such opposition.”

Opposition like Daniel. Opposition like I had given her initially, too. I’d been properly chastised, and after everything she had done for me in my life, she deserved far better.

He put his fork down. “I know that this could not have been easy for you.”

I cleared my throat. “Have you spoken to your son, my lord?”

“I have.”

I waited for him to say something further, and he continued to chew slowly. He sipped from his goblet and turned to look me in the eye. “I am in favor of love matches when they can be managed.”

When they can be managed. I held his gaze and understood at once. He was not going to force me to hold my end of the bargain regarding his son. He was allowing me my freedom, on the condition that I supplied the money. Well, I was prepared to do so. It was Mama who needed convincing.

“I have already told my mother that she could have the dowry Father set aside for me. Though legally it would take time to untie it.” I swallowed. I still needed to tell Ewan this, that I would enter into our marriage with no money. Surely he would not be too upset. The man I knew cared little for such things as riches. “It is she who refused to accept it.”

“What, then, would you use for a dowry? If you could convince your

mother to accept yours.” So, Mama had not explained that much to him.

“I do not need it.”

He nodded slowly, and I found his gaze dragged toward Ewan. Surely he wondered what sort of man would wed a woman who came with nothing.

My confidence waned momentarily, and I hoped I’d been correct, that I’d gambled with good cause.

I caught Ewan’s warm, brown eyes and relaxed. It was not a gamble when I had the surety of love.

CHAPTER 14

The following morning saw a flurry of activity as servants prepared the back lawn for the archery tournament. I watched them through the library windows until my attention was drawn back to my cousin.

Felicity pouted from the tufted chair opposite me and held the book Mr. Bradwell had lent her on her lap. “Why must I participate when I am so awful at archery and I do not enjoy it?”

“Because you cannot leave me to be the sole woman in the competition. I need your support.”

“But you’ll shine whether or not I am there.”

“And I will enjoy myself far more if you are.”

Felicity scoffed. “Oh, very well. But with Lord Hammel *and* Mr. Lennox in attendance, I doubt very much that you shall notice my presence at all.”

I narrowed my eyes at her until she broke into a wide grin. “You cannot blame me for enjoying this book so much that I wish to remain reading indoors.”

“No, of course not.” My voice turned teasing. “Especially not when your Mr. Bradwell was the last person to touch those pages.”

“He is not *my* Mr. Bradwell.”

“No? Not yet, perhaps.”

Felicity opened her book and lifted it to cover her blush.

I stood and smoothed my hands down my waist, clearing out any wrinkles before they could set. “I will see you outside, yes? The tournament begins in a half-hour.”

“You will see me outside,” Felicity said with resignation, her voice muffled by the book held before it.

Winthrop stood near the door, and I paused near him and pulled on my gloves. “Has Daniel gone out to the lawn already?”

“Not yet, miss.”

“Is he eating breakfast?”

“I believe so.”

“Thank you, Winthrop. Will you ask him to come find me when he is finished? I will be outside.”

“Yes, miss. Of course.”

Winthrop held the door open, and I stepped outside into the balmy, sunny daylight. Rays of warmth caressed my skin, and I lifted my face to them, allowing the radiant beams to wash over me.

“Ye appear as though ye’ve just taken a bite of a bonny chocolate cake and nothing else will ever compare to it.”

The low, Scottish lilt joined the sun in raising my happiness, and I turned a pert smile on Ewan. He leaned his shoulder against the castle door, his arms crossed over his chest. “Were ye planning to stand here all day?”

“No, I wouldn’t wish to gain too many freckles.”

Ewan stepped close and tapped his gloved finger against my porcelain nose. “Ye could stand to gain a few, I think.”

I lifted my eyebrow, but his smile didn’t diminish. “I do think you will run out of flattery someday. And then where will you be?”

“If ye are by my side, I dare say I shall never run out of good things to say.”

My heart pumped, beating steadily, and I turned away from the house, walking toward the archery lawn. Ewan walked beside me, and I imagined us doing much of this in the future, if we could manage it.

If it can be managed. The earl’s words were potent and thick in my thoughts. Ewan offered me his arm, and I slipped my hand over his elbow. I slowed my pace and he matched it.

“There is something I must tell you.”

Ewan gave me his full attention as he always did.

“I have spoken with both Lord Hammel and Lord Moorington, and they’ve agreed to sever our agreement—”

“Och, but that is good news.” Ewan stepped closer, his blinding grin forcing me to smile in kind.

I put my hand up to stop him. “On the condition that they still receive the money my father promised them when my mother marries the earl.”

His grin faltered. "And Daniel willna allow it."

"Not at present, no. But I thought I came up with an alternative. I offered my dowry to my mother instead."

I watched Ewan's expression for any sign of irritation. It was an enormous sacrifice on his part to agree to this. He had his horses to consider, and my dowry was a considerable size.

"If ye mean to scare me off, ye'll be sadly disappointed. I dinna care if ye come to our marriage with naught but a ha'penny, Jane. I only want ye."

Relief swept through me like a swift rain, and I relaxed. I hadn't realized how frightened I'd been of Ewan's reaction to this news, but his easy acceptance of it alleviated the extra tension I'd been holding in my shoulders.

Footsteps on the gravel path drew our attention, and I looked over my shoulder to find Daniel walking toward us.

"Let us hope I can bring more than a ha'penny," I said softly. "I have an idea."

"Winthrop mentioned that you wanted to speak to me," Daniel said.

"Yes, I have a proposition for you."

Daniel raised his eyebrows. He looked to the man beside me, and Ewan lifted his hands in the air. "She didna tell me what she has planned."

"Very well. What is it, Jane?"

"If I win the archery tournament then you will support Mama in her new marriage."

Daniel's expression hardened, his dark eyebrows drawing together. "And if I win?"

"You both speak as though there is no chance that either of you will be beat," Ewan said.

Daniel and I both looked at Ewan. The likelihood of anyone beating Daniel was slim, but I wanted to try. "We won't count anyone else's scores in this competition." I shifted my attention back to my brother. "If I win, you support Mama. If you win, I will no longer bother you about it. Do we have a deal?"

"Explain what you mean by supporting Mother first."

"I meant that you will gift her a portion of money that will free me from my obligations to Lord Hammel, so I am able to wed the man of my choosing."

Daniel paused. He looked from me to Ewan. Was I really that obvious in my desires? How lovely.

Daniel narrowed his gaze. “You are considering marrying someone else?”

“Yes. And *someone else* would like to marry me as well, but Lord Hammel will only let me out of the contract if Mama brings to her marriage a portion large enough to cover what Papa had promised on my behalf. Yet she refuses to even consider marrying the earl if it will put *you* out. So, you must support her. In more than just money, Daniel.”

He did not speak, and my muscles tensed once more, one at a time.

Finally, Daniel looked away, out over the lawn, the hedge maze, and then the castle. When his gaze settled back on me he nodded once. “We have a deal.”

Archery was not my strength, but neither was I entirely hopeless at it. Though still I’d hoped to perform better than I currently was. Daniel and I had beaten out Lord Hammel and Ewan, and now Felicity stood poised to deliver her arrows.

Shoop. Shoop. Shoop. Her arrows all flew past the painted hay bale and lodged themselves firmly in the lawn.

Felicity was out.

We moved forward to collect the stray arrows, and Daniel walked with a self-assuredness that grated on me. What had I been thinking? I’d hoped to appeal to his better judgment, that by sharing my plight he would allow me to win.

I’d thought that this way he could change his mind and save his pride. I hoped I was not wrong in my estimation of his character, that he loved me and my mother enough to sacrifice for us. He had grieved deeply this last year—we all had—but that did not mean he was a bad man or an unreasonable one.

Or so I hoped.

I stepped up to the chalk line and docked my arrow. Daniel caught my gaze and looked back to the target. Mama’s future happiness—*my* future happiness—rested upon my skill and Daniel’s empathy. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, opening them again with renewed confidence.

Shoop. Shoop.

My first two arrows sunk into the hay bale. I docked the third and let it

fly, but it arched too far to the right and scraped the side of the bale before skittering to a stop on the ground. Oh, blast. Now it was *entirely* up to Daniel.

I stepped aside and allowed him to take his position, staring hard at Daniel instead of the target. I was counting on him. Mama was counting on him. I caught Ewan's gaze behind his back, and he offered me a tentative smile.

Even Ewan was counting on him.

Daniel docked his first arrow and let it fly. It arched softly and effortlessly landed directly in the center of the target. The second one landed in a similar fashion, just to the side, and I swallowed hard.

Daniel docked his third arrow and hesitated. I hoped my words were swimming through his mind, affecting his choices now. His gaze flicked to my mother before landing squarely on the target once again. His elbow eased back as he pulled the string taut, then released.

The arrow flew through the air before landing true on the target. Daniel had chosen, and it wasn't me.

CHAPTER 15

Tears threatened, but I suppressed them. I turned away from Daniel quickly and crossed the lawn to retrieve my arrows. Congratulations from the spectators floated through the air, and I heard the din of conversation as our guests moved on from the excitement of the match and turned their attention to the spread of delicacies Cook had prepared for us.

I tore my arrows from the hay bale and marched beyond it to where my other one had stuck into the grass.

“Jane.”

I leaned down and yanked hard, channeling my hurt into frustration so I wouldn't cry in front of my brother. When I felt that my face looked entirely tear-free, I straightened. Did he wish for congratulations? He was not going to get very genuine compliments from me today.

“Yes?”

Daniel looked at the ground, his eyebrows pulling together. “I am sorry that things did not go the way you wanted them to.”

“You have the most skill. That is uncontested.”

He nodded but said nothing further.

A moment passed in silence, and I scoffed. “Do you wish for me to be happy about this?”

“No. But . . . I did not want to throw the match. I cannot fake defeat, Jane. It is not in me.”

“Of course not,” I mumbled. Heaven forbid he loses *once*.

“The other man is Ewan, yes?”

I paused, turning back to more fully face my brother. Why did he wish to know? What good would it do now? Without his support, our mother would

never marry the earl.

“Yes, it’s Ewan.”

Daniel looked at me closely. “He’s asked you to marry him?”

“Repeatedly.”

Daniel chuckled, and it unwound the thread of tension within me, if only just a little.

“He has loved you a long time.”

I stilled. “How do you know that?”

He looked disbelieving. “From watching you both, you dolt. It was not difficult to discern.”

“I had no idea.” I would like to think he was wrong, too. That if our father had known of Ewan’s feelings, he wouldn’t have set up the marriage contract with Lord Hammel. I turned to walk back to the group, but Daniel put a hand on my arm and stopped me.

“I intend to support Mother, Jane. I just wanted you to know.”

I froze. “What do you mean?”

He sighed and looked away like I was greatly inconveniencing him. The opposite was true. He could not speak quickly enough for my taste.

“Tell me, Daniel,” I repeated urgently.

“I mean that I intend to give Mother the money she needs, along with my blessing. And then I intend to pack my things and retire to London for a spell. Or perhaps Shropshire. Fenway has invited me for a house party next week, and I hadn’t decided whether or not to attend yet.”

“Daniel, truly?”

He smiled faintly, and I saw the Daniel I knew and loved shine through that smile. Mostly hidden, but he was still in there. “Yes, truly. But know this,” he said, his voice dropping to a quiet, serious tone. “I am doing this for *you*. You deserve to be happy, and you deserve to marry Ewan. But I will tell Mother that I have had a change of heart and that she may have whatever money she needs, and you can keep your dowry. Heaven knows you’ll need it in Scotland.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll need a whole new wardrobe of warm clothing and significantly more blankets. Do you realize how cold it can get there?”

I laughed. I’d been to visit the Lennoxes during the winter, so yes, I did know. But I did not care. I would have Ewan to keep me warm.

“Thank you, Daniel,” I whispered.

He nodded, smiling softly at me. “Come. I saw that Cook baked lemon tarts.”

I followed Daniel toward the crowd of our guests and looked from Mama to Lord Moorington, then Ewan. He sat beside his father and watched me approach.

“I am sorry ye didna win,” Ewan said when I sat beside him.

“I knew I wouldn’t win, not unless Daniel chose to let me.”

He stared at me. “Yet still, ye wagered?”

“I had hoped to appeal to his better nature. Which I did.”

Ewan looked appropriately confused. “Is that what ye were just speaking about?”

“Yes. He is going to support my mother’s union, and he will give her the money she needs.”

Ewan’s eyebrows rose.

“He is doing it for us,” I explained. “Or, so he said.”

“I always did like Daniel.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Despite his unwillingness to be our dragon?”

“Och, I can forgive him that now.”

“How generous of you,” I murmured.

Ewan’s eyes grew serious, his gaze dropping to my lips. “Then yer free? Ye can marry me?”

“I am free.”

He sat up straighter in his seat. “Come with me, please. I need . . . to see . . . there is a thing.”

His nonsense was endearing, and I stood and followed him toward the house. Mama shot me a confused glance as we passed, but I merely smiled at her. Once we were inside the foyer, Ewan took my hand and pulled me toward my father’s study. We slipped inside, and he closed the door behind me.

His eyes raked over mine, and he did not waste another moment. “Marry me, Jane. Be my wife.”

A grin spread so far over my lips, I thought my cheeks would burst. “I would love to.”

Ewan whispered. “Truly?”

“Yes, truly.”

His expression transformed into one of unmitigated glee. He pulled me tightly against him, his lips finding mine as though they were used to doing

so, and he kissed me with unbridled affection. When he pulled away, he leaned his forehead against mine and grinned.

“I canna wait verra long to make ye my wife, Jane.”

“I wouldn’t dream of making you wait. But we do need to sort things with my mother and the earl first.”

“Then let us do so right away. I want everyone to know our news.”

“As do I.”

Daniel had been true to his word. He spoke with Mama, created and signed a new contract with Lord Moorington, and then packed his trunks with haste. I stood beside Mama at the front door and watched the carriage speedily take Daniel away from us, his trunks tied neatly on the boot as it swayed with the horses’ canter.

Mama sighed, and I wrapped my hands around her back and hugged her to me.

“His change of heart was so sudden, it is difficult to believe he meant it,” Mama said.

He did not mean it, not entirely. But she did not need to know this. I believed Daniel would come around eventually.

I cleared my throat. “He loves you, and I am certain he wants your happiness, even when it does not align with his.”

“Perhaps.”

“It cannot have been an easy thing for him to do. Surely some time to allow himself to grow used to the idea will not be amiss.”

“I am sure you are correct. It will be good for him.”

“For all of us,” I said.

Mama turned to face me, a sly smile falling over her saddened lips. “I did hear a rumor that Mr. Lennox proposed to you.”

“Draatted servants cannot keep anything to themselves,” I said, though my smile belied my words. “Yes, he did.”

“And you told him yes, I assume.”

“I did.”

“Good,” Mama said, hugging me back. “I am glad.”

We stood like that for a long while until Daniel’s carriage turned out of

view.

Mama said, “I only wanted your happiness, darling. Even if I did not entirely understand what it was *you* wanted.”

“I know, Mama.”

She gazed in my eyes until she was satisfied that I’d told her the truth, and then nodded once. “Come, then. I think we have an engagement to announce.”

“I think we have *two*,” I corrected.

A soft blush crept up her cheeks, but she did not dispute it. I slid my hand around her arm and pulled her inside. I was not fully satisfied with her plan to remarry, but like Daniel, I believed I would come to accept it in time.

We slipped into the drawing room, and I caught Ewan’s dark brown gaze. Contentment filled me. At the end of the day, my mother and I only wanted the same thing for each other: happiness. And with Ewan, I knew I’d found it.

EPILOGUE

TEN MONTHS LATER

I sat on the tufted seat at my dressing table and pulled my shawl over my shoulders. A letter from Felicity sat unopened in my hands and I looked at the return direction, confused. She'd written to me from an estate I'd never before heard of.

"What is the matter?" Ewan asked, lying on the bed behind me, a book in his hands.

I glanced over my shoulder. "Nothing yet." I broke the wafer and unfolded the thick paper.

Dearest Jane—

I have news that could not wait another moment. I hope you will forgive me for learning about this after the fact, but I have married. It was a rushed affair, and I know I needn't tell you that the scandals are untrue. But my bookish habits found me in a bind and Mr. Bradwell was kind enough to help see me out of that bind and restore my good name.

I squealed lightly and looked up. "Felicity has married Mr. Bradwell!"

"I'm happy for her."

"Shhh, I need to read more."

Ewan chuckled.

Not the Mr. Bradwell that we met at the hunting box last year, but his older brother, James Bradwell.

I gasped.

"What is it?" Ewan asked, sitting up quickly.

I turned wide eyes on him. "She did not marry the Mr. Bradwell we met last year, but his older brother."

"Indeed?"

“Shhhh!” I continued to read.

You will be pleased to know that my husband is every bit as amiable and kind as his brother, and equally as handsome. He owns a beautiful estate in Cumberland, and it is my pleasure to invite you to come visit. Indeed, I cannot think of anything that would bring me more joy than to see you and Ewan.

I cannot pretend that this sudden change has been easy, but I am managing well enough. You know my quiet disposition, and suddenly being forced into the role of mistress for such a large estate has been taxing. Shall we call it a growing experience? I am being forced to grow in character quite a lot.

I miss you, Jane. Please write to tell me that you are on your way to visit.

All my love,

Felicity Bradwell

I set the paper down on my dressing table and looked up at Ewan. He sat on the edge of the bed now, his brow creased in concern.

“Can you believe it? She’s married to the brother.”

“I’m certain there is good reason for it.” Ewan rose and came to my side. He took my hand and pulled me up before wrapping his arms around me. “Are ye concerned? We can visit her. That way ye might deliver our news in person.”

A smile curved my lips as Ewan tucked his head into my neck. I had intended to write and tell Felicity of our impending babe in my next letter, for it was still early days yet. But Ewan was correct, and I could tell her in person, which would be infinitely more fun.

“She has invited us to her new estate in Cumberland,” I said.

“I’ve always enjoyed visiting the lakes.”

“Have you done so often?”

“Once,” he murmured. “So, I might have been exaggerating. But I would love to go again. Especially with ye.”

“Then it’s done. I will write back and confirm our arrival date.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and leaned against him. “Thank you.”

“Anything for ye, my darlings.”

“Darlings?”

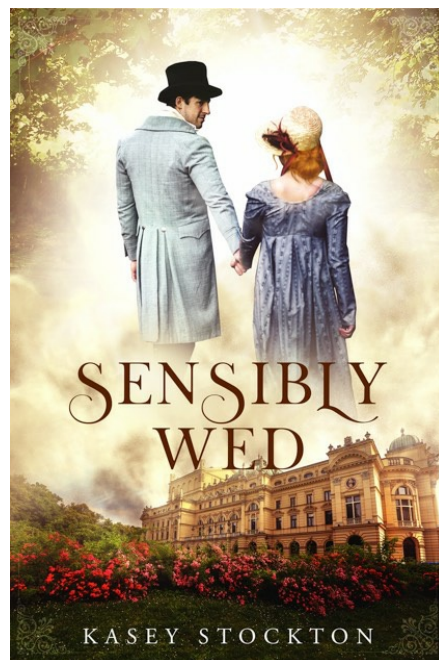
Ewan leaned back, looking me in the eye. He rested a hand against my belly. “There are two of ye now, lass.”

My heart bloomed, warmth filling my chest. “I love you, Ewan.”

He replied with a kiss.

SNEAK PREVIEW OF SENSIBLY WED

When Felicity Thurston is caught alone with a man at a ball, she must marry him to avoid a ruined reputation. What she doesn't know—he's the brother of the man she loves.



SENSIBLY WED

CHAPTER 1

London, 1817

There was nothing in the world less enjoyable than a ball. Well, perhaps almost as awful was an intimate tea with Mama's friends, their shrill voices relaying more gossip than the whole of the *ton* could be depended upon to accurately produce. I surveyed the lively gathering in the Hutton's London townhouse and followed my mother toward a pair of empty chairs beside one of her friends. Apparently I was being punished for my dislike of dancing, for I now had to endure two of my least favorite things: listening to gossip *at* a ball.

Mama lowered herself beside Mrs. Ormiston, and I remained standing, searching for a way out of this stuffy, overheated ballroom. My skin prickled with unease, and my heart ticked up in speed. So many people gathered in such a small space—so many strangers and haughty, discerning eyes—was enough to send me into one of my quiet fits. I swallowed my discomfort and shook the feeling, straightening the fingers of my gloves to give me something to focus on.

I needed to calm my racing heart, for I would not be escaping this room quite yet. The Season was nearing its end, and I had yet to make a match. Mama was unlikely to agree to leave the ball before I had danced twice, which put us at an impasse. For I did not intend on standing up with any of these gentlemen tonight. I would simply have to wait out the evening until it

drew to a blessed close.

Mr. Peel caught my gaze over the top of Mama's quivering feather, and I quickly dropped into the seat beside her. I retracted both of my previous statements; unwanted suitors, *that* was most deplorable of all. For suitors always led to dancing.

"And you say he is here this evening?" Mama leaned against me so she might look out over the gathering for the man she was surely gossiping about with Mrs. Ormiston.

Mrs. Ormiston nodded vigorously. "It is said he has six thousand a *year*."

"Goodness." Mama was breathless.

I craned my neck to peer in the direction Mr. Peel had been standing, hoping to find him inquiring with someone else for a dance, but I could not locate the man from my current position. Drat. If he was making his way toward me, I only had a minute to make myself scarce.

It was not that I deplored Mr. Peel himself. He was a kind enough man. But he smelled extremely strong, and he was not my Mr. Bradwell.

Not that Mr. Bradwell was mine to claim, exactly. But he was the handsome creature who had wiggled his way into my heart last summer. My family had suffered a carriage accident and took refuge in his hunting box, and I had yet to determine how I might find him in polite society to resume our acquaintanceship. Thus far, I had tolerated an entire Season hoping to see him again, but to no avail. The man was not fond of social functions.

Our chance encounter last summer had produced a *tendre* that I had not yet been able to fully snuff out—and might never have the opportunity to grow.

I lifted my reticule and allowed it to rest on my lap, giving my wrist a respite from the heaviness.

"I wish you would not bring that to every ball, Felicity," Mama whispered, her eyes darting to my small, beaded bag.

And be caught without a book? Absurd.

"He is also said to be on the hunt for a wife," Mrs. Ormiston continued.

Mama waved her fan in front of her face and resumed her search of the room. "A man *looking* for a bride, now that is refreshing."

"Indeed." Mrs. Ormiston leaned forward and eyed me behind her looking glass, squinting one wrinkled eye while the other was enlarged. "Shall I find the man and provide an introduction?"

I shrank back, my stomach fluttering unpleasantly. "No. I thank you, Mrs.

Ormiston, but I have no interest in six thousand a year.”

“Of course not,” Mama tittered, shaking her head ruefully. “Unless it was six thousand *books*?”

“Well, yes, that does sound rather enticing.”

Mrs. Ormiston looked at me shrewdly. “His six thousand could purchase you as many books and more, I wager.”

That was an attractive prospect, indeed. I gave the women a patient smile. I needed to move soon, or Mr. Peel would request a dance. And I could not dance. “Mama, this heat is unbearable, and I am feeling rather faint. Can I interest you in a walk on the terrace?”

Mama hesitated. She shared a look with Mrs. Ormiston before letting out a soft sigh. “Very well. Perhaps we will find a willing partner on our way across the room.”

Given the heat, that was a risk I was willing to take. Besides, the only man who consistently sought me out for dances was last seen on the opposite side of the room.

We rose, and Mama took my arm, pulling me close as we navigated through the crowd. “I only want you to find a husband, Lissy. I am not asking you to marry the first man who smiles at you.”

“That is fortuitous. I would certainly be Mrs. Peel already if that was the parameter from which we chose my husband.”

Mama was not amused. She was not fond of Mr. Peel, either, for the man always emitted a ghastly cloud of garlic wherever he went. Truly, did he bathe in it?

“But if you are unwilling to meet *any* men, you will never find someone to love you. I only want you to be as happily cared for and adored as I am, Lissy.”

My heart lurched with longing. I wanted to love and be loved in much the same way, but as of yet, only one man had entered my heart, and he was not in this ballroom tonight. Nay, he was likely up in Northumberland in solitude, reading beside a warm fire. He was so similar to me in tastes and preferences, I could not imagine another in his place. It was not as though I could merely choose a man who would love and understand me, as mother believed. She was also under the impression that I could simply *choose* not to fall into a fit of nerves when placed in the center of attention or forced to dance before crowds of strangers.

If only it were so easy.

We passed the table of refreshments, and I pressed closer to my mother to avoid bumping my shoulder into a man retrieving a drink. He presented the dainty debutante beside him with a glass of lemonade and a startlingly handsome grin, and she giggled.

I refrained from scoffing. That young woman made all of us look ridiculous when she laughed over the sake of a grin. It was preposterous. *What* was so funny about lemonade and a dashing smile? Perhaps I was too practical for romance.

“A refreshing drink for a refreshing young woman,” the man said, his deep voice inciting another round of giggles. He was tall, his shoulders broad and his bearing relaxed but dignified. His brown hair framed a pair of greenish brown eyes that were fastened on the debutante before him, and I suppressed an irritated huff from the sheer insipidity before me.

Mama was unfinished in her campaign. “I want you to find a man who loves you as much as your father loves me.”

I nodded toward the romantic scene we were passing. “I can guarantee that *none* of these men would love me as Papa loves you.”

The man looked up and caught my eye, and I swiftly turned away, tugging Mama’s arm to move us more quickly through the room. Had he heard what I said? I’d been speaking softly, the same as Mama, but the way he’d looked up and held my gaze had dropped a stone into the pit of my stomach. His eyebrows knit and eyes narrowed as though he’d heard my censorious thoughts.

Oh, dear. I needed to remain on the terrace for the remainder of the evening.

Mama released a long-suffering sigh that reached into my chest and filled me with remorse. She wished for a daughter who would enjoy social functions as much as she did, and I wished for nothing more than solitude and the comfort of dear friends. If I could change my innate desires to better fit the daughter she wanted me to be, I would. But as it stood, I could not. My heart raced and my fingers shook anxiously, and I needed to be removed from this overcrowded room immediately.

Mrs. Plumpley stepped into our path, her bright eyes fixed on my mother in a way that spoke volumes to the prime piece of gossip she wanted to share. One look at Mama proved how dearly she would prefer to remain indoors and hear it.

“Cynthia, have you heard?” Mrs. Plumpley asked.

I cleared my throat. “Why don’t you remain here, Mama. I just saw Miss Hutton step outside, and I can join her for a quick reprieve.”

Mama looked at me doubtfully and leaned in so Mrs. Plumpley would not overhear. “I do not want you to sneak away and read for the remainder of the evening, Lissy. You recall what happened last time you did so?”

The book I had brought for that very purpose weighed heavily in my reticule, digging the corded handle into my gloved wrist. That was exactly my goal, but I planned to be more discreet this time so I would not be discovered by a pair of ardent, newly engaged lovers.

It had been a blessing neither of them had wanted to be caught out or I could very well have landed myself in hot water.

Mama’s worried brow needed smoothing, however, so I delivered my most conciliatory smile. “I only intend to ask Miss Hutton to walk in the garden.”

“In view of the servants?”

“In view of everyone,” I said, indicating the open terrace full of people.

Mama held my gaze. “It is my duty to guard your reputation, Lissy. I am not trying to ruin your evening.”

“I must hurry, or I will be unable to find Miss Hutton in that crowd.”

Mama looked unsure, but Mrs. Plumpley stepped in to unknowingly aid me. “Truly, Cynthia, you will never believe what I heard this evening.”

Mama nodded. “Very well. But return quickly.”

“If I have not returned by the end of the set, it is because Mr. Peel has finally cornered me and begged a dance.”

She shook her head, but a small smile formed on her lips. “I suppose that would be better than not dancing at all.”

That was where we disagreed. I slipped away toward the open terrace doors, though I could feel Mama’s gaze hot on the back of my neck. I would need to find Miss Hutton swiftly and pray that she allow me to join her conversation.

The cool, evening air rushed over my warm cheeks, and immediately my lungs took it in. How many more Seasons would I yet be forced to endure before I found the match Mama dreamed for me? It had nearly been a year since I’d met Mr. Bradwell, and the likelihood of seeing him again was growing as slim as my chance of marrying a man possessed of six thousand a year.

My cousin Jane had suggested that I write a letter to Mr. Bradwell and

post it to him with the book I had borrowed. It was a reasonable course of action, but the forwardness of penning a letter to an unmarried man had consistently stopped my quill before I could put ink to paper. When we'd parted ways, I had promised Mr. Bradwell I would return the book he'd lent me, and he had replied with a sparkling smile that he looked forward to it. That alone was the encouragement I'd received, the sole endorsement for believing a match possible—and it was thin.

What if Mr. Bradwell had not felt the same connection I had from our conversations? What if he was uninterested in pursuing a relationship with me, or, worse, had met and married a different woman in the nine months since I'd met him?

All were possible scenarios that blocked me from having the courage to write to him. And as a result, I was still in possession of the book he'd lent me.

Surely, he must believe me a thief by now.

I spotted Miss Hutton on the far end of the terrace and turned in her direction when a motion inside the ballroom caught my eye. Drat! Mr. Peel had found me again. I pretended not to see him and spun the opposite way, edging closer to the house. A potted tree was situated near the wall and behind it was surely my shadowed respite.

I slipped past the tree and could not believe my good fortune. I would not be forced to hide in the foliage, for there were French doors closed to a dark room just beyond it. I glanced through the branches toward the ballroom and found Mr. Peel paused in the center of the terrace doors, looking about for me.

If he found me, I would have to dance, and I would give anything to avoid dancing.

Quietly, I turned the handle on the door, glad to find it unlocked and not at all squeaky. I slipped silently inside and shut the door behind me. The stillness in the dim, empty room was a balm on my anxious nerves. I stepped softly, fearful of anyone following me in here, and moved further into the room.

A low-burning fire smoldered in the hearth, emitting enough light to faintly see the shelves lining the walls, brimming with books. I removed my gloves, giving my damp palms a respite, and tucked them into my reticule. I took a candle from the mantel, lighting it with the hearth's fire. Surely I was not disobeying Mama by looking *at* books. I did not intend to read them or

even remove any from the shelves.

And there were so many wonderful books to look at. The Huttons' ball was officially my favorite of the Season, now that I found myself alone in the library. I truly could not think of a better way to pass the remaining hours of the ball.

I would simply have to beg forgiveness at the end of the night. Mama might be angry with me for a spell, but if it saved me from dancing, I would suffer her—admittedly reasonable—indignation for the next few days.

Minutes passed in quiet bliss as I walked slowly along the shelves, absorbing the different titles and making a note of which ones I would later like to acquire from the lending library. Contrary to what Mr. Bradwell could potentially think of me, I was not a book thief. I did intend to return his novel one day, after all.

I crouched low and brought the candle with me to look at the titles along the lower shelves. Quite a lot of Byron and no Shakespeare thus far. Hmm. I supposed not everyone could be counted upon to have taste.

The door at the far end of the room creaked open, and I blew my candle out, slinking down to hide behind the thick, wooden chair. My heart raced. I peeked through the carved back of the chair to see a man enter the room and close the door behind himself, and I cursed silently.

This was much worse than a pair of ardent lovers—this one would not be as easily distracted.

He crossed the room toward the fire and lowered himself on a plush seat near the hearth. Scrubbing a hand over his face, he let out a long, drawn out sigh. "Lady? She was an absolute *child*," he mumbled.

He looked familiar, and I leaned closer to the back of the chair to better see him. His dark hair gleamed in the soft orange light, and his eyes were closed, but I recognized him at once as the man at the refreshment table earlier—the flirt.

Or perhaps his greater flaw wasn't that he was a flirt as much as he was unoriginal. *A refreshing drink for a refreshing young woman*. Revolting. How unrefreshing of him.

My feet were beginning to fall asleep in my crouched position, and I shifted to find a more comfortable way to sit. Judging by this man's sudden need for a nap, it was safe to assume that I would be hiding here for a while.

I certainly could not try to escape until he had gone from the room first. I would not be found alone again. It could have almost been ruinous last time.

As I shifted, my foot snagged on the underskirt of my gown, and I yanked softly to remove the hindrance. Hot, searing wax dripped over my hand. I yelped, dropping the candle with a clatter on the wooden floor.

The man beside the fire sat up swiftly. "Who goes there?"

I shut my eyes and breathed in, my heart racing from the impending confrontation.

He rose to his feet and repeated himself. "I say, who goes there?"

Sucking in a quiet breath, I reached for the discarded candle and holder and stood. "Forgive the intrusion, sir. I only dropped my candle."

He watched me with a discerning glare, his face impassive. "I suppose I did not mishear you earlier in the ballroom, after all, when you said you would make me love you. Forgive my blunt criticism, but this is a sorry way to entrap a man."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kasey Stockton is a staunch lover of all things romantic. She doesn't discriminate between genres and enjoys a wide variety of happily ever afters. Drawn to the Regency period at a young age when gifted a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* by her grandmother, Kasey initially began writing Regency romances. She has since written in a variety of genres, but all of her titles fall under clean romance. A native of northern California, she now resides in Texas with her own prince charming and their three children. When not reading, writing, or binge-watching chick flicks, she enjoys running, cutting hair, and anything chocolate.